



Research Article

Modes of Production and the Betrayal of Revolution: Historical Materialism in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

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Abstract

This article reads George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) through Marxist historical materialism and argues that the novel applies a materialist logic of ownership and control to explain why its revolution fails. Instead of treating Marx's account of history as a fixed sequence of stages, the study works with the concepts of mode of production, relations of production, base and superstructure, and ideology, drawing on Marx directly and on Althusser's account of ideological state apparatuses. It reads Manor Farm as a proprietorial economy in which animal labour is appropriated for the market, the Rebellion as a declared transfer of ownership, and Napoleon's regime as a new ruling group that controls production and its surplus without dissolving the asymmetry between those who direct work and those who perform it. The analysis covers the windmill, the commandments, the ideological apparatuses, the executions, and the farm's trade with its neighbours. The article proposes that the novel is better described as a materialist diagnosis of revolutionary failure than as a refutation of Marxism, and offers this as an interpretation of the text, not as a claim about Orwell's intentions.

Keywords

Historical materialism, *Animal Farm*, Marxism, modes of production, ideology

1. Introduction

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) is usually read as an allegory of the Russian Revolution and of Stalin's rise to power. That reading is well supported by the text. It is also incomplete if the novel's events are treated only as stand-ins for historical figures. The animals' Rebellion succeeds in driving out Mr. Jones, yet it does not change who decides how the

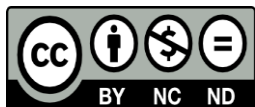
farm's product is made, stored and shared. The narrative keeps returning to questions that belong to the analysis of production: who works, who plans, who consumes, and who explains the arrangement afterwards. This article reads those episodes through Marxist historical materialism.

The central claim is that the novel applies a materialist logic

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of ownership and control to explain why its revolution fails. Collective ownership is declared, but the pigs keep the function of directing production and disposing of its surplus. A change in the declared form of ownership therefore leaves the relations of production largely intact, and the commandments, songs and speeches are rewritten to fit what the pigs have already done. The claim is interpretive. It concerns what the text shows when read in these terms, and it makes no assertion about what Orwell intended. Orwell described himself as a democratic socialist and presented his fable as a blow against the Soviet myth for the sake of socialism (Orwell, "Preface"; Orwell, "Why I Write"). The argument here is that the story can be read productively in the vocabulary of historical materialism, whatever Orwell's own view of Marxist doctrine.

A note on terms is needed at the outset. Marx's view of history is often summarised through the triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Marx did not use that triad to describe historical stages, and in *The Poverty of Philosophy* he criticised its use as a method (Marx, *Poverty*, ch. 2). The analysis below therefore does not rest on it. It uses categories that Marx does employ: mode of production, relations of production, base and superstructure, and ideology.

2. Literature Review

Criticism of *Animal Farm* has developed along several lines. The most familiar treats the book as anti-Stalinist allegory and traces its correspondences with figures and events of the Russian Revolution. Crick's biography established much of the political and biographical context for this approach (Crick 452–58), and Taylor's more recent reader's guide to Orwell recounts how the book was written and how several publishers turned it down (Taylor 154, 159). Newsinger's *Orwell's Politics* reads the novel as a product of Orwell's socialist commitments and not as a repudiation of socialism, which resists its use as a Cold War text (Newsinger 110–35). Senn examines how the Office of Policy Coordination of the Central Intelligence Agency adopted both *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in a wider anti-Soviet campaign, which is the Cold War use that Newsinger's reading resists.

A second line of criticism concerns form. Meyers discusses the fable tradition and argues that the apparent simplicity of the form carries political weight (Meyers). Williams, writing from a cultural materialist position, locates the book's deepest concern in the relation between language, power and material conditions (Williams 72). A further line of criticism, drawn from political philosophy, is Dwan's argument that the pigs' closing paradox, that some animals are more equal than others, exposes the false egalitarianism of a particular regime and also raises questions about the coherence and viability of equality as a principle.

A third body of writing is not about Orwell at all but

supplies the analysis that readers often bring to the novel. Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed* argued that the Soviet bureaucracy had become the sole privileged and commanding stratum in a state founded on nationalised property, although he stopped short of calling it a class (Trotsky 249). Djilas, in *The New Class*, argued that the Communist bureaucracy formed a new class whose power rested on its administration and control of nationalised property, since ownership amounts to the right of profit and control (Djilas 35). Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* proposed that real control over production was passing from owners to managers, and argued that ownership in any meaningful sense is control (Burnham, "The Theory of the Managerial Revolution"), and Orwell's essay on Burnham shows that he knew the argument and examined it critically (Orwell, "Second Thoughts"). Orwell's own preface to the Ukrainian edition describes the Soviet Union as a hierarchical society whose rulers have no more reason to give up power than any other ruling class (Orwell, "Preface"). The claim that the pigs form a new ruling group is thus an established one, and this article does not offer it as a discovery.

What the present study adds is limited. It traces the argument about control and ownership through the episodes of the novel that concern labour, planning, ideology and trade, and it does so with Marx's own categories, so that the reading can be tested against the text and against Marx. The places where the reading strains are noted as they arise.

3. Methodology

The study applies Marxist materialist criticism to a single primary text, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), read in full in the edition listed in the Works Cited. The approach treats the text as a cultural production that stands in a determinate but not mechanical relation to the material and ideological conditions of its moment. The aim is to read the narrative as a structured account of production, authority and justification, and to ask what that account implies about the failure of a revolution.

The theoretical framework is drawn first from Marx and Engels: the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *Capital*, and *The German Ideology*. Althusser's essay on ideological state apparatuses supplies the vocabulary for the analysis of Squealer, the sheep, Moses and the education of the young pigs. Eagleton and Giddens serve as secondary guides to Marxist literary criticism and to historical materialism as a theory of power. Orwell scholarship is reviewed in Section 2.

The analytical categories are mode of production, the relation between those who direct production and those who perform it, the relation between base and superstructure, and the function of ideology and coercion in securing a given arrangement. The novel is read in narrative order, with chapter

references given for each episode. The windmill project and the farm's trade with its neighbours receive separate sections because they bear most directly on production and exchange.

The study is textual and interpretive. It conducts no archival or empirical research. Its claims concern what close reading of the text, supported by the framework above, can sustain; they are not claims about Orwell's intentions or about the historical accuracy of the allegory.

4. Theoretical Framework

Historical materialism holds that the way a society organises the production and distribution of its material needs shapes its political and intellectual life. Marx's best-known statement of the view is the 1859 Preface, which says that the mode of production of material life "conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life" (Marx, Preface; Choat 59). Shimp summarises the theory as resting on "the primacy of economic forces" (35), and Althusser describes historical materialism as the "Marxist science of the development of social formations" (Althusser, *For Marx* 168). In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels extend the point to ideas: the ruling ideas of an age are those of the class that holds material power, because that class also controls the means of mental production (Marx and Engels 64). Choat cautions that the Preface condenses the materialist conception of history so far that it can mislead, and that its formulations should be used with reservation (59). This article therefore treats the Preface as a statement of categories and not as a complete theory.

The Preface also matters for a distinction on which the argument depends. Marx treats property relations as the legal expression of the relations of production (Marx, Preface). Declared ownership and actual relations of production can therefore diverge: a society may change its property forms in law or by proclamation while the real division between those who direct production and those who perform it persists. Marx's own list of epochs in 1859 names the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production (Marx, Preface; Choat 60). The familiar four-stage sequence that begins with primitive communism and ends with communism is a later simplification, and the analysis below does not depend on it.

Marx does not treat the movement between modes of production as automatic. It is driven by conflict between the developing forces of production and the existing relations of production, which opens what Marx calls an era of social revolution (Marx, Preface; Choat 59). The Preface never uses the word class, and in *The German Ideology* the same conflict is tied to class struggle (Choat 60). Giddens notes that Marx's theory functions simultaneously as "a theory of power, as a theory of history, and as an account of socialism" (98), a description that suits a novel concerned with the corruption of a socialist programme. The framework therefore allows a

question that the later analysis puts to the text: what happens when the forces of production develop, as with the windmill, under relations of production that do not change?

Ideology is treated here with Althusser's help. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser argues that a ruling group secures the reproduction of the relations of production through two kinds of apparatus: repressive ones, such as the army and the police, which work mainly by force, and ideological ones, such as religion, schooling and the media, which work mainly by ideology (Althusser, "Ideology" 143, 145). The distinction is applied below. Napoleon's dogs belong to the first kind; Squealer, the sheep, Moses and the schooling of the young pigs belong to the second. Eagleton's account of ideology as the process by which historically contingent arrangements come to seem permanent and natural supplies the other element of the analysis (4).

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Manor Farm: Property, Market and Appropriated Labour (Chapters 1–2)

The Manor Farm of the first two chapters is a proprietorial economy. Mr. Jones owns the land, the buildings and the animals, directs the work, and appropriates its product. Old Major's speech in Chapter 1 lists the forms this takes: the eggs that are sold, the milk that is taken from the cows, the young that are removed, and the horse that goes to the knacker when his strength fails. The animals have no legal standing and no claim on what they make. Old Major presents the arrangement as structural and not natural: the animals produce, and the product is consumed by someone who contributes nothing to it.

It is tempting to call Manor Farm feudal because Jones corresponds to the Tsar, but that is an allegorical match and not an analysis of production. Jones sells what the farm produces, employs men, and treats the animals as assets that can be sold, which makes the farm closer to agrarian capitalism than to a feudal manor. The animals are also not wage labourers. They are owned, and their labour is unpaid in the strictest sense. Manor Farm therefore does not fit neatly into any one of the modes in Marx's 1859 list, and the argument does not depend on the label. What matters is the structure that Old Major describes: one party owns the means of production, controls the work and disposes of the surplus, and the producers have no claim on it.

Old Major's account resembles Marx's account of surplus value in *Capital*, where the worker produces more than is returned in wages and the difference is appropriated by the owner of the means of production (Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3). The resemblance is loose, since Marx's argument concerns wage labour and the animals receive no wage, only maintenance. The shared logic is clear all the same: value produced by one

group accrues to another because of the second group's control of land and tools. Old Major's speech is the moment at which this relation becomes visible to those who live within it, and it supplies the standard by which the later sections judge the Rebellion.

5.2 The Rebellion and the Declared Transfer of Ownership (Chapters 2–3, 9)

After the Rebellion, Animalism replaces Jones's order with a programme of common ownership. In the allegory it stands for the Bolshevik programme, and the Seven Commandments write its principles into the constitution of the renamed Animal Farm. For a short time the text appears to confirm what a hopeful reader of Marx might expect: the old proprietor has gone, and the animals share the harvest and the work.

The text qualifies this at once. The milk disappears into the pigs' mash at the end of Chapter 2, and the windfall apples are reserved for the pigs in Chapter 3. Squealer's explanation is that the pigs are brainworkers whose labour requires extra food. In accepting it, the other animals accept a division of the product that follows a division of function and not of need. Eagleton's account of ideology, set out in Section 4, applies directly: Squealer presents a particular interest as a general necessity, and the arrangement begins to look natural. The overthrow of Jones has not altered the relation between those who direct production and those who perform it. It has changed the persons who occupy the directing position.

Boxer concentrates the dynamic. His mottoes, "I will work harder" and "Napoleon is always right," make him the novel's fullest figure of what Marxist theory calls alienated labour: he raises his output while remaining excluded from the decisions that govern production and from any benefit proportionate to his work. His sale to the knacker in Chapter 9 fulfils the warning Old Major gave him in Chapter 1, and the case of whisky that reaches the farmhouse soon afterwards suggests who profits from it. The loyalty that secures his compliance, and his belief that harder work serves the common good, are the superstructural expression of a base whose basic asymmetry has not changed.

5.3 Planning and Industrialisation: The Windmill (Chapters 5–6, 8–10)

The windmill is the novel's main investment in productive forces, and the dispute over it is the clearest planning decision in the story. In Chapter 5 Snowball proposes a windmill that would generate electricity, and he presents it as a means of reducing the animals' work. Napoleon opposes the plan, and when the debate threatens to go against him his dogs drive Snowball off the farm. Napoleon then announces that the windmill will be built after all. In the allegory the episode corresponds to the Soviet debates over industrialisation and the Five-Year Plans. In terms of production, what matters is that the decision to invest, the pace of the work and the distribution

of its costs now rest with Napoleon and the pigs.

The costs fall on the animals. In Chapter 6 they work a sixty-hour week, and Sunday-afternoon work, voluntary in name, is enforced by the threat of reduced rations. A storm wrecks the windmill, which Napoleon blames on Snowball, and in Chapter 8 Frederick's men blow it up. It is rebuilt, and in Chapter 9 rations are cut while Squealer reads out figures showing that production has risen. By Chapter 10 the windmill has been completed and is used to mill corn for money, and a second windmill is under construction, while the stalls with electric light and the shorter working week that Snowball had promised are no longer mentioned, because Napoleon has denounced such ideas as at odds with the spirit of Animalism. The machine that was to lighten the animals' work now brings a profit to the pigs.

The sequence illustrates a central point of historical materialism: the forces of production can develop without liberating those who operate them if the relations of production stay as they were (Marx, Preface; Choat 60). The windmill increases the farm's productive capacity, but because the pigs control the plan and the surplus, the gain goes to them. The episode also shows why the question of who directs production cannot be separated from the question of what is produced and for whom, since the plan that would have reduced labour left the farm with Snowball and was replaced by one that increased it.

5.4 Ideological Apparatuses: Squealer, the Sheep, Moses and the Young (Chapters 2–3, 5, 9–10)

Althusser's distinction helps to separate the means by which the pigs secure the arrangement. The dogs are a repressive apparatus and are discussed in Section 5.6. The ideological apparatuses are more varied (Althusser, "Ideology" 143).

Squealer is the farm's press and ministry of information. He explains the milk and apples in Chapter 3, reinterprets the commandments after each change (Chapters 6 and 8), and in Chapter 5 persuades the animals that the windmill was Napoleon's idea from the beginning and that Snowball stole it. His method is not argument from principle but the adjustment of the record, so that whatever the pigs have done appears always to have been what Animalism required. Amir P. et al., reading the novel through Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, identify oral and written discourse as its two instruments of symbolic violence, which fits Squealer's speeches and the revised commandments; the present reading differs in treating these as ideological apparatuses in Althusser's sense.

The sheep show how doctrine is reduced to a form that can be repeated without thought. In Chapter 3 Snowball condenses the commandments into the maxim "Four legs good, two legs bad" for the benefit of the animals who cannot remember them. In Chapter 5 the sheep's bleating drowns the debate on the windmill, and in Chapter 10 the maxim becomes "Four legs good, two legs better" as the pigs begin to walk upright. The slogan serves whoever controls its meaning, and the sheep

repeat it without examining it.

Moses the raven supplies religion as ideology. In Chapter 2 he preaches the existence of Sugarcandy Mountain, a place of rest beyond death, and the pigs work to discredit his stories as lies. In Chapter 9 he returns and is tolerated and rewarded with a daily allowance of beer. The change in the pigs' attitude suggests a change in function: a doctrine that promises reward after death for patient labour is useful to a regime that wants more labour and offers less in return.

The education of the young completes the list. In Chapter 3 Napoleon takes the puppies from their mothers to educate them, and they later appear as his dogs. In Chapter 9 a school-room is ordered for the young pigs, who are taught apart and are given precedence over the other animals. Through schooling the ruling group reproduces itself and the beliefs that support it, which is the role that Althusser assigns to the school (Althusser, "Ideology" 154–55).

5.5 The Commandments and the Closing Scene (Chapters 6–8, 10)

The revision of the Seven Commandments is the clearest case of the superstructure being adjusted to fit the base. The pigs move into the farmhouse and sleep in beds, and the commandment against beds acquires the words "with sheets" (Chapter 6). The executions follow, and the commandment against killing is amended to forbid killing "without cause" (Chapter 7). The pigs drink whisky, and the prohibition on alcohol is qualified by the words "to excess" (Chapter 8). By Chapter 10 the commandments have been replaced by a single sentence, "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell, *Animal Farm* 88). In each case the change in practice comes first and the textual revision follows. The commandments do not constrain the pigs. They record and legitimise what the pigs have already done, which illustrates the point in *The German Ideology* that ruling ideas express the position of the group that holds material power (Marx and Engels 64). Dwan reads this final maxim as exposing a regime's false egalitarianism; the materialist reading adds that the falsity lies in the unchanged relation between those who direct production and those who perform it.

The same change explains the ending. In the farmhouse in Chapter 10 the pigs entertain the neighbouring farmers, and when the watching animals look from pig to man and back again they find it "impossible to say which was which" (Orwell, *Animal Farm* 92). Napoleon does not simply become Jones, as a cyclical reading might suggest. The pigs now occupy Jones's structural position: they direct the work, trade with the neighbouring owners, and dispose of the surplus. What has changed is the declared form of ownership, which is common in name, and not the position the pigs hold in the relations of production. The point is close to the arguments of Burnham and Djilas, discussed in Section 2, that control of production can sustain a ruling group without private

ownership in the legal sense.

5.6 Coercion and the Executions (Chapters 3, 5, 7)

The dogs are the regime's repressive apparatus. Napoleon raises them from puppies (Chapter 3), uses them to expel Snowball (Chapter 5), and sets them on the animals who confess in Chapter 7. There the animals confess to collaboration with Snowball, to sabotage and to other offences, and they are killed in public. The text presents these charges as political treason, and a materialist reading should not reduce them to economic motives that the text does not state.

What the materialist reading can add is a question about what political authority is for in this story. After Snowball's expulsion Napoleon controls the plan, the surplus and the trade with the neighbours. Terror protects that control by making dissent unthinkable, and the confessions are a performance of submission to it. In the Marxist tradition the state is understood as the means by which a ruling group secures the conditions of its rule (Marx and Engels), and the dogs illustrate the claim in its plainest form. Williams's view that the novel is concerned with language, power and material conditions is borne out in the same scene, since the confessions are language placed wholly at the service of material power (Williams 72).

5.7 Trade and the Neighbouring Farms (Chapters 4, 6, 8, 10)

The neighbouring farms show how the pigs' regime relates to the wider economy. In Chapter 4 Pilkington and Frederick are hostile to Animal Farm, and the song "Beasts of England" spreads to their farms, where the animals caught singing it are punished. The farmers then attack in the Battle of the Cowshed. The reaction suggests that the owners regard the example of the farm as a threat to their own property.

Napoleon's decision in Chapter 6 to trade with the neighbouring farms, through the solicitor Whymper, reverses an early resolution that the animals should have no dealings with humans or with money. From this point the farm produces for exchange, and the pigs act as its proprietors in negotiations with other owners. In Chapter 8 Napoleon sells timber to Frederick, who pays with forged banknotes and then attacks the farm; Napoleon is cheated according to the rules of a market that the pigs have chosen to enter. By Chapter 10 the relations have settled. Pilkington's toast at the farmhouse table observes that the lower animals on Animal Farm do more work and receive less food than any animals in the county.

These episodes complete the argument of Section 5.5. A farm that trades with human owners on commercial terms, and whose rulers are welcomed to their table, has accommodated itself to the surrounding system of property. Pilkington's remark about the lower animals identifies the interest that the pigs and the owners share: the extraction of more labour for less return. The farm has not been absorbed into the surrounding economy by force. It has joined it, and the pigs have joined

as owners. Orwell's preface to the Ukrainian edition supports this reading of the neighbouring farms: it says that, in the story, the struggle that counts is between animals and humans, because the humans unite against the animals whenever exploitation is at stake (Orwell, "Preface").

6. Conclusion

Read through the categories of historical materialism, *Animal Farm* presents the failure of a revolution as a failure to change the relations of production. The Rebellion removes the owner and proclaims common ownership, but the pigs keep the function of directing work and disposing of the surplus. The sections above have traced the consequences through the novel's episodes: the pigs' claim on the milk and apples, Boxer's labour, the windmill, the commandments and the ideological apparatuses that support them, the executions, and the farm's trade with its neighbours. In each case the formal change in ownership leaves the underlying asymmetry intact.

The article therefore proposes that the novel is better described as a materialist diagnosis of revolutionary failure than as a refutation of Marxism. It does not show that historical materialism is false, and it does not show that it is confirmed. What it shows is that the novel's account of failure can be stated in Marx's terms, and that the difference between declared ownership and actual control, which Marx himself recognises in the relation between property and production, is the point on which the story turns. This claim concerns the text. Orwell's position as a democratic socialist, and his hostility to the Soviet myth, may explain why the book takes this shape, but the evidence for that belongs to a different kind of study.

The reading has limits. The allegory does not fit the analysis in every detail: Manor Farm combines features of more than one mode of production, the confessions are presented as political, and the neighbouring farms stand for foreign powers as well as for owners. A reading that attends to production is one of several that the book supports. Future work might extend the analysis to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the control of language and of the historical record can be examined as an ideological apparatus in Althusser's sense, or might place Orwell's text more fully alongside the Marxist critiques of Stalinism reviewed in Section 2.

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