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The Road to Wigan Pier

and

The Fascists in Britain

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In The Road to Wigan Pier, George Orwell offers a first-hand account of the ~~impoverished~~ ^{deplorable and miserable} conditions of the working-class in the mining districts of Britain during the 1930s. His book is also an indictment of a system that produced such conditions.

Orwell calls attention to the fact that the miners who dig the coal out of the earth live in a world that nobody wants to know about, but that without their labor society could not function. Yet Orwell also shows that despite the critical importance of their labor, the miners are subject to blatant economic exploitation. Orwell writes that in 1934 "the average gross earnings for all miners throughout Great Britain was only ^{annually} £115 11s. 6d." (page 41), and that after payroll deductions and work stoppages, the average earnings was actually nearer £105. During the same period, however, "the average miner produces 8,400 tons of coal; enough coal to pave Trafalgar Square nearly two feet deep or to supply seven large families with fuel for over a hundred years" (page 43). The exploitation becomes apparent in the fact that while the miners are producing all this coal, they are living in abject poverty.

Orwell describes a whole range of problems endemic to the working class in the mining districts. He talks about the incredibly delapidated and overcrowded housing, families being forced to live in shanty-towns, ^{does this Latin American term apply to England?} homelessness, hunger, the difficult and dangerous nature of work in a mine, and chronic unemployment. Orwell is particularly shocked by conditions in the shantytowns. Orwell writes: "I have never seen comparable squalor except in the Far East. Indeed when I saw them I was

immediately reminded of the filthy kennels in which I have seen Indian coolies living in Burma. But, as a matter of fact, nothing in the East could ever be quite as bad, for in the East you haven't our clammy penetrating cold to contend with, and the sun is a disinfectant" (page 62).

To Orwell, the existence of the working-class is an inevitable outgrowth of industrialization. Orwell writes: "They [the workers and their families] exist in tens of hundreds of thousands; they are one of the characteristic by-products of the modern world. You cannot disregard them if you accept the civilization that produced them. For this is part at least of what industrialism has done for us" (page 17).

Orwell admires the working-class but has contempt for the middle-class. Orwell describes the miners ~~has~~ having "the most noble bodies" with figures "fit for a guardsman" (page 23). In addition, despite being unemployed, men in working-class families have retained their manhood while in the middle-class the men are subservient to women. Orwell writes: "In a working-class home it is the man who is the master and not, as in a middle-class home, the woman or the baby" (page 81). Orwell also portrays the middle-class person as being selfish and unprincipled. Orwell writes: "You cannot have an effective trade-union of middle-class workers, because in times of strikes almost every middle-class wife would be egging her husband on to blackleg and get the other fellow's job" (page 147). As for unemployment, the system is to blame, not the workers. Orwell points out that the middle classes view the unemployed

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as being "lazy idle loafers on the dole" while it was actually the loss of foreign markets which pushed "two million men out of work" (page 85).

Orwell advances a unique theory for why there is class conflict in Britain. According to Orwell, the middle-class is physically repulsed by the working-class because "the lower classes smell" (page 160). Orwell writes that "you cannot have an affection for a man whose breath stinks" (page 160). The middle-class also considers the working-class to be dirty.

Orwell writes: "You watch a tramp taking off his boots in a ditch - ugh!" (page 160). Apparently, to Orwell, class conflict would end if the working-class would simply conform to middle-class tastes.

Orwell is particularly irked by the hypocritical attitude of the Socialists toward the working-class. Orwell points out that while the Socialists are purportedly "champions of the working class" (page 207), in truth they cannot stand the workers. Orwell recalls an ILP branch meeting he attended. He writes: "Every person there, male and female, bore the worse stigmata of sniffish middle-class superiority. If a real working man, a miner dirty from the pit, for instance, had suddenly walked into their midst, they would have been embarrassed, angry, and disgusted; some, I think, would have fled holding their noses" (page 207). To Orwell, the Socialists lack sincerity. Orwell cites "that dreary phenomenon, the middle-class person who is an ardent Socialist at twenty-five and a sniffish Conservative at thirty-five" (page 200). As far as Orwell is

I wonder if Orwell would be this sane

to which they can't because, to the middle-class the workers inhonorably smell (see page 162).

concerned, the Socialists have an unrealistic view of the working-class. Orwell writes: "With loving though slightly patronizing smiles we set out to greet our proletarian brothers - in so far as we understand them - are not asking for our greetings, they are asking us to commit suicide" (page 201).

Some Socialists disagree!

Nonetheless, Orwell is not anti-Socialist. On the contrary, he believes that Socialism is the only force that can save Britain from Fascism, but what is needed is a "more intelligent kind of Socialism to stop alienating possible supporters" (page 254). Orwell also makes the astute observation that "the Socialist movement has got to capture the exploited middle-class before it is too late" (page 258). To Orwell, the choice is clear: Socialism or Fascism.

In conclusion, The Road to Wigan Pier provides insights into the nature of class conflict in Britain in the 1930s. But there is a sense of forboding in this book which is rooted in the book's theme - that Britain is in crisis and in danger

of becoming a Fascist state if the Socialist Party does not correct its shortcomings.

I think he means Socialism per se!

Is there a Socialist Party?

There is a Labour Party.



The Fascists in Britain by Colin Cross describes the rise of the Fascist movement in Britain and how the Fascists emulated the Nazi tactics of violence, hate-mongering and Jew-baiting to promote their program. The person most closely associated with the British fascists is Oswald Mosley, who was the leader of the British Union of Fascists. Mosley is an interesting figure. Cross describes Mosley as being an educated, urbane, aristocrat who was a close associate of Ramsey MacDonald and in fact held the important post of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in MacDonald's 1929 government. However, in a move that "shocked" MacDonald, Mosley resigned from his post after his proposals for dealing with the unemployment problem was rejected by the Cabinet in March 1930 (see page 37). On May 22, 1930 his proposals were rejected by the Parliamentary Labor Party by 210 to 29, "with the ILP voting with him (page 38). According to Cross, this defeat marked the "first step towards [Mosley's] breach with the Labor Party" (page 38). Mosley's "scheme", which was "far-reaching" (page 37), "postulated a form of siege economy not dissimilar to that used by the Churchill Coalition during the Second World War." (page 37). By 1930 the number of unemployed was three million. Cross feels that Mosley's plan "would probably have worked, although at the high cost of State intervention into private industry, the dismantling of foreign trade and mass migrations of workers from one industry to another" (page 36). On May 28, 1930 Mosley "carried his campaign to the floor of the House of Commons" (page 38) and "in the most outstanding speech of his

Parliamentary career ... "pleaded for a program of action" (pages 38, 39). "At the same time Mosley continued to try to convert the Labor Party" (page 40); Mosley was elected to a place on the National Executive. But, according to Cross, Mosley regarded his failure to gain the most votes in the election "as the Labor Party's last word, and straightway began to organize a new and independent movement" (page 41). Thus is the genesis of Mosley's break with the Labor Party and his decision to form a new party. *literally the New Party*

Mosley's "New Party" which came into existence in March 1930, was founded on the principles outlined in the Mosley Manifesto which "called for a Cabinet of five non-departmental ministers ... with sweeping powers to legislate by Order, subject to the veto of the House of Commons. This would bypass the muddles of the 1929 Parliament where ... its Bills were piling into a log jam" (page 43). According to Cross, "after the fall of the Government the Labor Party itself was to adopt somewhat similar proposals for defeating Parliamentary obstruction" (page 43).

In the general election of 1931 the twenty-four New Party candidates fared worse than the communists. "All but four polled under 1,000 votes" (page 52). Cross relates how ~~how~~ Mosley and his associate, Harold Nicolson, then visited Germany and Italy to study the "modern movements" in those countries. In Munich Mosley "studied the Nazi organization and met Nazi leaders" (page 56) and in Italy met Mussolini. According to Cross, Mussolini "certainly seems to have inspired Mosley with the idea that what could be achieved in Italy could also be

achieved in Britain" (page 57). On October 1, 1932 "Mosley formally launched the British Union of Fascists" (page 67). "The foundation members were predominately the remnants of Mosley's Labor Party and ILP following" (page 67). Mosley set himself up as leader of the fascists and organized a uniformed Fascist Defense Forces and "a pattern of violence and counter-violence quickly developed" (page 69).

In the chapter Olympia and the Jews, Cross examines the BUF's policy of Anti-Semitism. Cross brings out that Mosley himself "had shown no tendency towards Anti-Semitism in his pre-Fascist days" (page 119). His personal bodyguard was a Jewish boxer, "Kid" Lewis, and he "had great respect for Harold Laski" (page 119). It seems, however, that Mosley adopted an Anti-Semitic stance out of anger over anti-Fascist counter-demonstrations attributed to the Jews and to enhance his standing in the party. Cross writes that "there could, too, have been a hunger for the applause from the Movement that he knew Anti-Semitism would bring (page 126).

According to Cross, "up to 1934 the Fascist advance was breathtakingly rapid" (page 132). However, the BUF had little popular support. Cross suggests that in the autumn of 1934 the membership in the BUF was 5,200 or 6,200 (see page 131); "from 1938 onwards the membership steeply and precipitously declined" (page 132). In three constituencies in 1937 where the BUF put up candidates, the movement "secured nearly a fifth of the vote" (page 167). Cross points out, however, that these results were from "the three constituencies which

in the whole of Britain offered the best prospect of success" (page 167). Cross writes that in view of the results of these elections, "it would have taken half a century for British Union to come within reaching distance of national power" (Page 167). Cross also writes that "the provincial results were disastrous" (page 168). "British Union put up candidates in Edinburgh, Leeds, Sheffield and Southampton. All came hopelessly at the bottom of the poll" (page 168). Thus, as Cross clearly shows, Fascism was repudiated by the vast majority of the British people.

Why did Fascism fail in Great Britain while Nazism triumphed in Germany? Two reasons become apparent from Cross's book. Firstly, since Britain had been victorious in World War One, there was no widespread anger, discontent and indignation over the Treaty of Versailles, which in Germany was exploited by Adolf Hitler. Secondly, Britain's Parliamentary system was able to survive the economic crisis of the early 1930s and provide a stable government while in Germany the Weimar Republic collapsed. There was a potential for the Fascists to become a major force in Britain, but the political environment did not allow it.

After the war broke out in September 1939, Mosley declared his opposition to the war. During the electoral campaign at Middleton, Lancashire, "Mosley was very nearly lynched" (page 193). "It was his last public appearance as Leader of British Union" (page 193). British Union received one percent of the vote in the election. At this point, according to Cross, "British Fascism ended" (page 195).

Cross writes that "while Mosley had some characteristics in common with both Hitler and Mussolini he was, fundamentally, a different type of man from either" (page 71). This is not entirely correct. There were in fact remarkable similarities between Mosley and Hitler that transcended their obvious differences in class origin and education. Both had come from broken families; both had conflict with their fathers; both had been injured during the war; both were alienated from mainstream politics; both saw their countries as being in crisis; both rejected democracy; both believed in the importance of personal leadership - "the Fascist leader being the embodiment of the people's will" (page 73), both knew the Mitford sisters and both advocated racist policies firmly rooted in Anti-Semitism. Thus Mosley and Hitler were very much alike.

Interesting essay. Strong conclusion.