

Why Socialists Don't Believe In Fun, George Orwell

Annotation

George Orwell's payment book for 20 December 1943 records the sum of pounds 5.5.0 for a special article of 2,000 words for Tribune. This has never been traced in Tribune under Orwell's name but it now seems certain that an essay, entitled "Can Socialists Be Happy?" by "John Freeman" is what is referred to. The name Freeman would have appealed to Orwell as a pseudonym, and the article has many social, political and literary links with Orwell, such as the relation of Lenin to Dickens (the fact that Lenin read A Christmas Carol on his deathbed also appears in the second paragraph of Orwell's 1939 essay, "Charles Dickens"). A "real" John Freeman, later editor of the New Statesman, has confirmed that he did not write the article.

The reason why Orwell chose to write as "John Freeman" he never used this pseudonym again is not clear. It may be that Tribune did not want its literary editor to be seen to be associated with its political pages. Possibly it was a device that allowed Orwell to be paid a special fee. Or it may be that he simply wished to see how far Tribune would let him go with his opinions. In any case, the article appeared in the Christmas issue and provoked much debate in the issues that followed. The "lost essay" is included in the Collected Works and printed here for the first time under Orwell's name.

Why Socialists Don't Believe In Fun

The thought of Christmas raises almost automatically the thought of Charles Dickens, and for two very good reasons. To begin with, Dickens is one of the few English writers who have actually written about Christmas. Christmas is the most popular of English festivals, and yet it has produced astonishingly little literature. There are the carols, mostly medieval in origin; there is a tiny handful of poems by Robert Bridges, T.S. Eliot, and some others, and there is Dickens; but there is very little else. Secondly, Dickens is remarkable, indeed almost unique, among modern writers in being able to give a convincing picture of happiness.

Dickens dealt successfully with Christmas twice in a chapter of *The Pickwick Papers* and in *A Christmas Carol*. The latter story was read to Lenin on his deathbed and according to his wife, he found its "bourgeois sentimentality" completely intolerable. Now in a sense Lenin was right: but if he had been in better health he would perhaps have noticed that the story has interesting sociological implications. To begin with, however thick Dickens may lay on the paint, however disgusting the "pathos" of Tiny Tim may be, the Cratchit family give the impression of enjoying themselves. They sound happy as, for instance, the citizens of William Morris's *News From Nowhere* don't sound happy.

Moreover and Dickens's understanding of this is one of the secrets of his power their happiness derives mainly from contrast. They are in high spirits because for once in a way they have enough to eat. The wolf is at the door, but he is wagging his tail. The steam of the Christmas pudding drifts across a background of pawnshops and sweated labour, and in a double sense the ghost of Scrooge stands beside the dinner table. Bob Cratchit even wants to drink to Scrooge's health, which Mrs Cratchit rightly refuses. The Cratchits are able to enjoy Christmas precisely because it only comes once a year. Their happiness is convincing just because Christmas only comes once a year. Their happiness is convincing just because it is described as incomplete.

All efforts to describe permanent happiness, on the other hand, have been failures. Utopias (incidentally the coined word Utopia doesn't mean "a good place", it means

merely a "non-existent place") have been common in literature of the past three or four hundred years but the "favourable" ones are invariably unappetising, and usually lacking in vitality as well.

By far the best known modern Utopias are those of H.G. Wells. Wells's vision of the future is almost fully expressed in two books written in the early Twenties, *The Dream* and *Men Like Gods*. Here you have a picture of the world as Wells would like to see it or thinks he would like to see it.

It is a world whose keynotes are enlightened hedonism and scientific curiosity. All the evils and miseries we now suffer from have vanished. Ignorance, war, poverty, dirt, disease, frustration, hunger, fear, overwork, superstition all vanished. So expressed, it is impossible to deny that that is the kind of world we all hope for. We all want to abolish the things Wells wants to abolish. But is there anyone who actually wants to live in a Wellsian Utopia? On the contrary, not to live in a world like that, not to wake up in a hygienic garden suburb infested by naked schoolmarm, has actually become a conscious political motive.

A book like *Brave New World* is an expression of the actual fear that modern man feels of the rationalised hedonistic society which it is within his power to create. A Catholic writer said recently that Utopias are now technically feasible and that in consequence how to avoid Utopia had become a serious problem. We cannot write this off as merely a silly remark. For one of the sources of the Fascist movement is the desire to avoid a too-rational and too-comfortable world.

All "favourable" Utopias seem to be alike in postulating perfection while being unable to suggest happiness. *News From Nowhere* is a sort of goody-goody version of the Wellsian Utopia. Everyone is kindly and reasonable, all the upholstery comes from Liberty's, but the impression left behind is of a sort of watery melancholy. But it is more impressive that Jonathan Swift, one of the greatest imaginative writers who have ever lived, is no more successful in constructing a "favourable" Utopia than the others.

The earlier parts of *Gulliver's Travels* are probably the most devastating attack on human society that has ever been written. Every word of them is relevant today; in places they contain quite detailed prophecies of the political horrors of our own time. Where Swift fails, however, is in trying to describe a race of beings whom he admires. In the last part, in contrast with disgusting Yahoos, we are shown the noble Houyhnhnms, intelligent horses who are free from human failings.

Now these horses, for all their high character and unfailing common sense, are remarkably dreary creatures. Like the inhabitants of various other Utopias, they are chiefly concerned with avoiding fuss. They live uneventful, subdued, "reasonable" lives, free not only from quarrels, disorder or insecurity of any kind, but also from "passion", including physical love. They choose their mates on eugenic principles, avoid excesses of affection, and appear somewhat glad to die when their time comes. In the earlier parts of the book Swift has shown where man's folly and scoundrelism lead him: but take away the folly and scoundrelism, and all you are left with, apparently, is a tepid sort of existence, hardly worth leading.

Attempts at describing a definitely other-worldly happiness have been no more successful. Heaven is as great a flop as Utopia though Hell occupies a respectable place in literature, and has often been described most minutely and convincingly.

It is a commonplace that the Christian Heaven, as usually portrayed, would attract nobody. Almost all Christian writers dealing with Heaven either say frankly that it is indescribable or conjure up a vague picture of gold, precious stones, and the endless singing of hymns. This has, it is true, inspired some of the best poems in the world:

Thy walls are of chalcedony,
Thy bulwarks diamonds square,
Thy gates are of right orient pearl
Exceeding rich and rare!

But what it could not do was to describe a condition in which the ordinary human being actively wanted to be. Many a revivalist minister, many a Jesuit priest (see, for instance, the terrific sermon in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*) has frightened his congregation almost out of their skins with his word-pictures of Hell. But as soon as it comes to Heaven, there is a prompt falling-back on words like "ecstasy" and "bliss", with little attempt to say what they consist in. Perhaps the most vital bit of writing on this subject is the famous passage in which Tertullian explains that one of the chief joys of Heaven is watching the tortures of the damned.

The pagan versions of Paradise are little better, if at all. One has the feeling it is always twilight in the Elysian fields. Olympus, where the gods lived, with their nectar and ambrosia, and their nymphs and Hebes, the "immortal tarts" as D.H. Lawrence called them, might be a bit more homelike than the Christian Heaven, but you would not want to spend a long time there. As for the Muslim Paradise, with its 77 houris per man, all presumably clamouring for attention at the same moment, it is just a nightmare. Nor are the spiritualists, though constantly assuring us that "all is bright and beautiful", able to describe any next-world activity which a thinking person would find endurable, let alone attractive.

It is the same with attempted descriptions of perfect happiness which are neither Utopian nor other-worldly, but merely sensual. They always give an impression of emptiness or vulgarity, or both. At the beginning of *La Pucelle* Voltaire describes the life of Charles IX with his mistress, Agnes Sorel. They were "always happy", he says. And what did their happiness consist in? An endless round of feasting, drinking, hunting and love-making. Who would not sicken of such an existence after a few weeks? Rabelais describes the fortunate spirits who have a good time in the next world to console them for having had a bad time in this one.

They sing a song which can be roughly translated: "To leap, to dance, to play tricks, to drink the wine both white and red, and to do nothing all day long except count gold crowns" how boring it sounds, after all! The emptiness of the whole notion of an everlasting "good time" is shown up in Breughel's picture *The Land of the Sluggard*, where the three great lumps of fat lie asleep, head to head, with the boiled eggs and roast legs of pork coming up to be eaten of their own accord.

It would seem that human beings are not able to describe, nor perhaps to imagine, happiness except in terms of contrast. That is why the conception of Heaven or Utopia varies from age to age. In pre-industrial society Heaven was described as a place of endless rest, and as being paved with gold, because the experience of the average human being was overwork and poverty. The houris of the Muslim Paradise reflected a polygamous society where most of the women disappeared into the harems of the rich. But these pictures of "eternal bliss" always failed because as the bliss became eternal (eternity being thought of as endless time), the contrast ceased to operate.

Some of the conventions embedded in our literature first arose from physical conditions which have now ceased to exist. The cult of spring is an example. In the Middle Ages spring did not primarily mean swallows and wild flowers. It meant green vegetables, milk and fresh meat after several months of living on salt pork in smoky windowless huts. The spring songs were gay Do nothing but eat and make good cheer, And thank Heaven for the merry year When flesh is cheap and females dear, And lusty lads roam here and there So merrily, And ever among so merrily! because

there was something to be so gay about. The winter was over, that was the great thing. Christmas itself, a pre-Christian festival, probably started because there had to be an occasional outburst of overeating and drinking to make a break in the unbearable northern winter.

The inability of mankind to imagine happiness except in the form of relief, either from effort or pain, presents Socialists with a serious problem. Dickens can describe a poverty-stricken family tucking into a roast goose, and can make them appear happy; on the other hand, the inhabitants of perfect universes seem to have no spontaneous gaiety and are usually somewhat repulsive into the bargain. But clearly we are not aiming at the kind of world Dickens described, nor, probably, at any world he was capable of imagining.

The Socialist objective is not a society where everything comes right in the end, because kind old gentlemen give away turkeys. What are we aiming at, if not a society in which "charity" would be unnecessary? We want a world where Scrooge, with his dividends, and Tiny Tim, with his tuberculous leg, would both be unthinkable. But does that mean we are aiming at some painless, effortless Utopia?

At the risk of saying something which the editors of Tribune may not endorse, I suggest that the real objective of Socialism is not happiness. Happiness hitherto has been a by-product, and for all we know it may always remain so. The real objective of Socialism is human brotherhood. This is widely felt to be the case, though it is not usually said, or not said loudly enough. Men use up their lives in heart-breaking political struggles, or get themselves killed in civil wars, or tortured in the secret prisons of the Gestapo, not in order to establish some central-heated, air-conditioned, strip-lighted Paradise, but because they want a world in which human beings love one another instead of swindling and murdering one another. And they want that world as a first step. Where they go from there is not so certain, and the attempt to foresee it in detail merely confuses the issue.

Socialist thought has to deal in prediction, but only in broad terms. One often has to aim at objectives which one can only very dimly see. At this moment, for instance, the world is at war and wants peace. Yet the world has no experience of peace, and never has had, unless the Noble Savage once existed. The world wants something which it is dimly aware could exist, but cannot accurately define. This Christmas Day, thousands of men will be bleeding to death in the Russian snows, or drowning in icy waters, or blowing one another to pieces on swampy islands of the Pacific; homeless children will be scrabbling for food among the wreckage of German cities. To make that kind of thing impossible is a good objective. But to say in detail what a peaceful world would be like is a different matter.

Nearly all creators of Utopia have resembled the man who has toothache, and therefore thinks happiness consists in not having toothache. They wanted to produce a perfect society by an endless continuation of something that had only been valuable because it was temporary. The wider course would be to say that there are certain lines along which humanity must move, the grand strategy is mapped out, but detailed prophecy is not our business. Whoever tries to imagine perfection simply reveals his own emptiness. This is the case even with a great writer like Swift, who can flay a bishop or a politician so neatly, but who, when he tries to create a superman, merely leaves one with the impression the very last he can have intended that the stinking Yahoos had in them more possibility of development than the enlightened Houyhnhnms.