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**Animal Farm**

**by The Editor**

**[](http://insidepoliticsdotme.wordpress.com/2012/02/11/animal-farm/bookreviews/)REVIEW:** From time to time *Inside Politics* will seek to review those books central to a liberal understanding of best democratic practice and those things that stand in opposition to it. We start with that classic metaphor for democratic meltdown and the insidious nature of totalitarianism – *Animal Farm*: a book pretty much every political commentator has refered to at some point or other but the full richness of which is seldom given the proper space or attention.

**Animal Farm**  
By George Orwell (1945)  
Reviewed By: Gareth van Onselen

**Introduction**

First published in August 1945, Animal Farm is George Orwell’s best known work and is rightly identified as a literary classic. It sits alongside Fahrenheit 451 (Ray Bradbury), Brave New World (Aldous Huxley), Darkness at Noon (Arthur Koestler), The Trial (Franz Kafka) and Orwell’s own 1984 as one of the great commentaries on totalitarianism and its consequences.

It tells of how the animals of Manor Farm overthrew its cruel, drunken and incompetent farmer, changed its name to Animal Farm and reestablished it as a model community; of how they constructed a moral code, informed by the principles of ‘Animalism’, which prescribed that all animals were equal and identified man as the enemy; of how the pigs – the brightest of the animals – naturally assumed the leadership and Napoleon and Snowball – two of the cleverest – fought each other for control of the revolution; of how Napoleon ousted Snowball, chasing him from the farm, banishing him as a traitor before setting about tarnishing his name and establishing his mastery over the other animals; of how the surrounding farmers reacted, attacking the farm, only for the animals to repel and beat them off; of how economic necessity forced the animals to compromise and to engage with the human world they had rejected; how Napoleon steadily took that compromise to its uneasy conclusion, exploiting the animals and manipulating the humans all the while securing his own personal dictatorship; of the way, with time, the animals came to realise that their dream had been subverted and their principles warped into an aberration, to the extent that their final state of affairs was as bad – if not worse – than their first; how the farm learned that some animals are more equal than others and of how the ruling pigs slowly but steadily became indistinguishable from the humans they had initially set themselves against.

In this way the book – essentially a extended metaphor – mirrors events in the Soviet Union under Stalin, in the era preceding World War II; and it serves as perhaps the quintessential metaphor for demcratic meltdown and the way in which totalitarianism subtly gains a foothold before establishing itself as a regime.

It is worth distinguishing between popular fiction and considered intellectual appraisal because, while popularity does not necessarily lend itself to the complex analysis reality generally necessitates, when used properly in this way it does add another important weapon to its arsenal; that is, an appeal that lifts political commentary from that often inaccessible realm in which much considered academic work is trapped by its own complication and delivers it into the hands of those who seek a far simpler read. And Animal Farm is a metaphorical pool as deep as one is willing to dive. That such a simple narrative has managed to capture such a profound set of ideas in such a powerful way says much about Orwell’s ability to make a political insight resonate both emotionally and intellectually.

It is one of those rare books that can be read and appreciated by both those with an intimate knowledge of that facts to which it alludes and those without; for the book – although arguably more powerful when held up against human history – generates a potent effect regardless and a defining attitude in response to its message. As such, it has had a worldwide appeal to human sentiment rarely matched and, rarer still, surpassed. I first read Animal Farm when it was prescribed by my school to me as a young teenager. The historical context to which it refers was explained to me but it only settled on my mind in a temporary way; certainly, its significance would only be meaningfully impressed upon me later in life. Nevertheless, the moral reasoning implicit in Animal Farm made an immediate and imposing impact and remains with me to this day. No doubt many who read the book in their youth can speak of a similar experience. This character alone makes the book exceptional.

In an article called Why I Write, written a few years after Animal Farm, Orwell provides the rational behind his work: “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism. Animal Farm was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole.” Animal Farm, then, can be read as a warning, as too can 1984, but it is within this warning that many of Orwell’s greatest insights lurk; for, as he suggests, the book is not detached from human experience, indeed, it is grounded in it. Totalitarianism in and of itself is merely an ideological curiosity. It is given life by human behaviour, which often seeks out the path of least democratic resistance, despite our best efforts to shore it up with good intentions, even to build a wall around it. By using an allegory, with animals as the main protagonists, Orwell created the perfect vessel to deliver his message: a set of characters slightly removed from us by appearance but to which we can relate in every other way. They may be stereotypes, incapable of emotional growth or change, but each one, good or bad, represents a particular human trait. And it is in forcing us to identify with those traits that Animal Farm strips away the rhetoric in which political action is so often couched and explained away and lays bare for us to see the deliberate and focused attempt to subvert justice and the rule of law.

Throughout his life, Orwell concerned himself with those people who failed to protest against the world they lived in. His criticism of contemporary American novelist Henry Miller – contained in his famous essay Inside the Whale – was driven by this very consideration. Miller, like Orwell, had written about the downtrodden and destitute but not, Orwell argued, to enact change, rather as an end in and of itself. He wrote that Miller “had performed the essential Jonah act of allowing himself to be swallowed”, remaining passive and accepting. And so it is with Animal Farm, set against the backdrop of Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union and a world enamored with its particular version of socialism it was a warning that, beneath its veneer, human nature was hard at work, tearing down good intentions and establishing a personal dictatorship that, ultimately, would be responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people. Only by recognising those threats, could we act to counter them. In this sense Animal Farm is not a commentary, but a call to action.

Much has been made of Orwell’s metaphor and the extent to which it accurately describes what happened in the Soviet Union – whether it is accurate or, indeed, whether it was designed as a commentary on that at all. It emerged last year, when a selection of his private papers were made public for the first time, that T.S. Eliot – then a director at Faber and Faber – had rejected Orwell’s manuscript when he sent it to him in 1944. The Guardian newspaper describes his letter to Orwell like this:

*In the letter, Eliot argued that Orwell’s “view, which I take to be Trotskyite, is not convincing.” He took particular umbrage with Orwell’s characterisation of the pigs on Animal Farm. Napoleon, a Berkshire boar thought to be based on Stalin, triumphs, despite being the novel’s baddie. He battles with Snowball, a much nicer pig modelled on Leon Trotsky, who genuinely works for the good of the other animals. It is Napoleon’s bully boy tactics which seem to win the day, while Snowball is chased off the farm by dogs. This mirrored Trotsky’s deportation from the Soviet Union after he criticised Stalin. Eliot seems to imply that if Orwell’s intention is to convince the reader of the logic of Trotksyism over Stalinism, the more sensible authorial decision would be to have “more public spirited pigs” – such as Snowball, presumably, rather than more Stalinesque communism in the shape of Napoleon. “I think you split your vote, without getting any compensating strong adhesion from either party – i.e. those who criticise Russian tendencies from the point of view of a purer communism, and those who, from a very different point of view, are alarmed about the fate of small nations,” wrote Eliot.*

One can only imagine how that sentiment must have irked Orwell, not only the distorted reading of the book’s underlying purpose but the nitpicking about particular interpretation. And rightly so, for no metaphor holds up to close examination and to apply this test to Animal Farm is to miss the point of the book. One would do well to remember that it was published in 1945; for a further ten years thereafter Stalin would rule with terror and death; only to be followed in China by Mao, a brutal dictator so shrouded in favourable mystique that only today are we beginning to know full well the extent of the atrocities committed under him.

Orwell could see the bigger picture – those more general patterns of political behaviour which mark democratic decline – Eliot could not. Nor was he alone in this regard. Had Animal Farm been written in, say, the early 1900s, its influence might well have better informed the world’s attitude to what happened in the Soviet Union. And that is its great value, for all those concerned with best democratic practice it is a warning, that good intentions are not enough on their own and the price of democracy is eternal vigilance.

While Orwell might have concerned himself primarily with totalitarianism, he had much to say about nationalism too. His essay Notes on Nationalism remains one of the great works on this particular political ideology and, as with Animal Farm, Orwell’s special skill was to recognise the emotional drivers that underpin nationalist thinking and to translate them into succinct political insight. Totalitarianism differs from other ideologies in that it is a consequence more often than a purpose. In modern history few have set about with the express intent of establishing a totalitarian state; rather one emerges as a consequence of the steady erosion of democracy, to the point where one person, party or faction controls the state in its entirety with the purpose of overseeing every aspect of public and private life. In this sense, any political ideology which does not show the proper respect for the basic tenets of democracy – the rule of law, a separation of powers – serves as fertile ground from which an authoritarian regime might grow. Nationalism is such an ideology and Orwell was acutely aware of this fact.

**Closer to Home**

The African National Congress is a nationalist organisation and much of what is wrong in its approach to South Africa’s constitutional state – the warning signs which mark a threat to democracy – are reflected in Animal Farm: The steady erosion and warping of the basic principles that define our constitution (over time, the pigs literally rewrite the seven commandments initially agreed upon, eventually reducing them down to the simple maxim: ‘All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others’); The consolidation of power in the hands of an elite few; The use of rhetoric and propaganda – illogical and contradictory in its own right – to explain away undemocratic practice and distort history; even the celebration of pomp and ceremony as the elite basks in its own glory; all of them resonate with our current political condition. Even the narrative in its broadest sense, the undermining of a dream made real, rings true.

But Orwell does not reserve is pen for damning only those responsible for this perversion, he offers too a number of powerful insights into the attitude of the victims. Benjamin, the sardonic donkey, perhaps deserves particular mention. Unlike the other animals Benjamin is clever, able to read as well as the pigs, and yet he is a victim; never raising his voice; never celebrating triumph or bemoaning despair, only to say when asked, “Donkeys live a long time. None of you has ever seen a dead donkey.” In South Africa there are many people one could attach such a label to; that silent majority that quietly damns any state of affairs by their inaction, only to see their own conditions deteriorate; the pessimists who constantly redefine their own vicious circle.

Likewise, the sheep, whom the pigs train to bleat meaninglessly at any given interval ‘Four legs good, two legs bad’, without any consideration for the merits of the situation or the ever-increasing weakness of their particular belief, despite their fate being intricately linked to the fate of those they address. Their vacuous nature is finally revealed in the closing chapter, where they are taken aside by the pigs and re-educated, emerging to bleat mindlessly ‘Four legs good, two legs better’ as the pigs suddenly start walking upright. There are many political analysts today, who produce much of the commentary we read and hear, who are unable to separate reality from ideology and bleat repeatedly, ‘Apartheid bad, ANC good’, without due consideration for their own circumstance or, indeed, the veracity of their claim.

But perhaps the most powerful parallel lies not with a particular character or even the nature of the narrative; but with its purpose. It was only with the death of Stalin and Mao that the full horror of the particular piece of history which Animal Farm seeks to illuminate became known in no uncertain terms. South Africa is not on the verge of becoming a totalitarian state in the sense the Soviet Union was but, under the ANC, the dream has been eroded away and there are significant warning signs that all is not well. The challenge then is to use what we know to effect change. So, when this period of our history is written up sometime in the future, we have a duty, Orwell would argue, to make sure we have done what we can to ensure it is the best possible history and that involves first, understanding what is happening, second, acting to counter it and third, convincing others of that purpose.

**A Favourite Quote**

*“‘Comrades!’ he cried. ‘You do not imagine, I hope, that we pigs are doing this in a spirit of selfishness and privilege? Many of us actually dislike milk and apples. I dislike them myself. Our sole object in taking these things is to preserve our health. Milk and apples (this has been proved by Science, comrades) contain substances absolutely necessary to the well-being of a pig. We pigs are brainworkers. The whole management and organisation of this farm depend on us. Day and night we are watching over your welfare. It is for your sake that we drink that milk and eat those apples. Do you know what would happen if we pigs failed in our duty? Jones would come back! Surely, comrades,’ cried Squealer almost pleadingly, skipping from side to side and whisking his tail, ‘surely there is no one among you who wants to see Jones come back?’”*

This quote represents, in many respects, a turning point in the farm’s fortunes. It occurs relatively early in the book and concerns the first meaningful act of personal indulgence and bias on the part of the pigs; perhaps significantly, before Snowball has been chased out of the farm by Napoleon’s dogs. Squealer, identified from the start as the most gifted propagandist among the pigs, with the possible exception of Snowball, has been dispatched to explain away to the animals the executive decision – the first of its kind – to remove the apples and milk from the general diet and reserve it solely for the pigs.

It is regarded by the animals, at the time, as a fairly innocuous decision, and Squealer’s explanation accepted as perfectly rational. Nevertheless, it was undertaken undemocratically and the explanation, on proper examination, illogical (if anything their could be an equally plausible case to be made that the animals, not educated to the degree the pigs were, were the ones in special need of the apples and milk and not the pigs). But the rule was bent and a precedent set, not just in terms of the warping of values but the pattern of behaviour that would define all such decisions in the future: an arbitrary rule, violently enforced and subsequently explained away.

Consider, by way of illustration, the various justifications proffered by members of the national executive, in defence of the enormous sums being spent in their names on ministerial vehicles, hotels and such. Blade Nzimande, not long after he had ironically lamented about the greed and callousness of capitalism in his capacity as general secretary of the SA Communist Party, spent R1.1 million on a new BMW. At the time[**his spokesperson said**](http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/Nzimande-needs-R11m-BMW-20090902), “Minister Nzimande does not condone wasteful expenditure under any circumstances and stands firm in his condemnation of greed, corruption and selfishness in society” and also, that he stands “opposed to any form of unnecessary extravagance”. A short while later and he would spend R40 000 on 15 days at the Mount Nelson Hotel. But perhaps an even better example is the former Communications Minister Siphiwe Nyanda, who said that the purchase of ministry’s two BMWs were “tools” to help him “deliver on his mandate”. ANC spokesperson Jackson Mthembu went yet [**one step further**](http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/article557246.ece/ANC-hits-out-on-luxury-hotel-stays), offering up the following defence of Minister’s luxury hotel expenditure: “No luxury can be derived in staying and working from a hotel environment, where you do not have the privacy you would enjoy staying in a proper home.” Why might well re-phrase: “You do not imagine, I hope, that we are doing this in a spirit of selfishness and privilege, many of us actually dislike hotels and cars.”

This sort of thing happens all the time in South Africa and we are at the forefront of that battle; each tiny encroachment must be recognised for what it is and countered, because one thing leads to another and any undemocratic precedent, no matter how small in practical terms, has far bigger implications for the principles and values that underpin it.

In conclusion, you will note that, as a final persuasion, Squealer asks the question ‘surely there is no one among you who wants to see Jones come back?’ (Jones being the cruel and incompetent farmer the animals chased away at the start). There is a strong case to be made that Jones is to the pigs as apartheid is to the ANC – an irrational fear promoted and propagated amongst the citizenry to justify undemocratic behaviour. That trait is common to nationalist thinking which, because it defines itself against something – the other, the past – constantly requires the nationalist to juxtapose the present with another time and place, simultaneously invoking the fear implicit with it. Certainly Orwell had their number and to see it captured so cleverly, reduced to its simplest form, gives those concerned with these kinds of things a sense of satisfaction, that they are not alone in their interpretation.

*Gareth van Onselen is employed by the DA as a Director of Political Analysis and Development.*