Episode 970: The Real George Orwell

Guest: David Ramsay Steele

WOODS: Orwell is such a fascinating figure. I've had my friend Brad Birzer on to talk about him because he's a science fiction fan and he's had a lot to say about Orwell and others. But Orwell's been a bit of a puzzle to a lot of people, because, as you note in the book, on the one hand, he seems to have some socialist sympathies, and on the other hand, he's extremely anti-totalitarian. And this has led to all kinds of scholarly debates about *1984* and his intentions there. *This couldn't be an anti-socialist novel. Why? Well, because we know he had socialist sympathies, so therefore, before even looking at it, we know what it must be about.* Hard to sort out, so you have to look through his novels and through his correspondence and his writings to figure out what exactly he was driving at.

Let me ask you from the beginning: is the George Orwell who has his early novels, let's say before *Animal Farm* — is he the same person ideologically that we see in *1984*?

STEELE: He underwent a conversion to socialism in the middle of 1936 while he was working on *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which appeared in early 1937. So the works he wrote before that were the works of a non-socialist, whereas the works he wrote from *Wigan Pier* on are the works of a committed, dedicated socialist. I mean, I think it would be misleading to say he had socialist sympathies. He was a very dogmatic, ideologically committed socialist from 1936 on. Now, there are continuities in his thinking from his pre-socialist works like *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *Burmese Days*. Many of the themes of his thinking are the same before he was a socialist and after he became a socialist. And when we say he became a socialist in mid-1936, what we mean is that he favored a system of society in which the government owned everything and everybody worked for the government and everybody's incomes were more or less the same. So that's George Orwell. It sounds surprising, but that's what he believed.

WOODS: So we're not just dealing with somebody who believed in like a modern Scandinavian so-called socialism. This is the whole thing.

STEELE: Yeah, I mean, I think it's amazing that in 2015, Bernie Sanders, who as everybody knows calls himself a socialist, when asked to define what socialism was, he pointed to Denmark — which in 2015, according to one authoritative account, was slightly closer to laissez-faire capitalism than the United States. I think in 2016 it went the other way slightly. But they're neck and neck in being a mixture of government involvement and capitalism. And this would have been unthinkable

to Orwell. Orwell's socialism was not of that kind. It didn't encompass welfare state capitalism or anything like that. That was not socialism. And it was not socialism among the 1930s British left. They wouldn't have recognized — If you'd described present-day Denmark to them, they would have said, Oh, that's capitalism, and Orwell would have said exactly the same thing.

WOODS: Now, the key question that occurs to me is: how can you favor a system like that, which is going to mean massive, massive state involvement in the lives of the citizenry on all levels, and then write a dystopian novel about what may happen someday if present trends continue? Well, what would you expect would happen in a regime that has to be intervening — To maintain that level of equality, you'd have to be intervening in almost every single decision a person makes and you would need a static society. You would need to clamp down on ideas. There's no sense that he connected one to the other?

STEELE: Well, I think that one thing that you have to understand about Orwell is that, quite apart from being in favor of socialism or capitalism or anything like that, he was deeply convinced that capitalism was at the end of its rope, that it couldn't last much longer. So he believed that, regardless of what anybody wanted, some kind of collectivism was coming in the very near future and was going to supplant capitalism. So he didn't think that was a matter for choice. He didn't think you had the choice of keeping capitalism. I mean, he didn't want to keep capitalism, but he didn't think that was an option at all. So like most British socialists in the 1930s, he wanted to combine socialism — meaning government ownership and central planning — with democracy and civil liberties. That was a common view. That was not unique to Orwell. That was the general view, I think, among the British left in the 1930s.

Now, as time went on, he began to have doubts about whether that was possible, and as he puts it in one place, he looks at the possibility that economic totalitarianism must lead to political totalitarianism. That becomes a worry of his, and so when he's writing *1984*, the only alternative he can see to that kind of system, which he calls oligarchical collectivism, would be economic collectivism to the same degree but with democracy and civil liberties. And he does doubt that it's possible towards the end, so he thinks that maybe the future is going to be totalitarianism, regardless of what we might do. He shifts his position in very subtle ways, but one point he makes is: we've seen collectivism in the Soviet Union and we've seen it in the Third Reich in Germany, but we don't know what would happen if we had collectivism in a society with a strong liberal tradition, and we'll find out then whether it's possible to have economic collectivism without totalitarianism.

WOODS: I'm looking at your table of contents for this quite interesting book, and each chapter looks at Orwell from a different angle, in effect. So there's a chapter, "The Anti-Imperialist," for example. But you've got one after the other, a chapter called "The Socialist" and a chapter called "The Post-Socialist." Now, for people who have trouble making sense of all of these labels, what's the difference between those?

STEELE: Well, I maintain that — and this is sort of one of the original theses of the book. I maintain that socialism suffered a huge setback in the 1880s and 1890s, such that, in the early 20th century, intellectuals felt that — many intellectuals felt that socialism was discredited, but they felt socialism was discredit because the whole

idea of progress and rationality was discredited. They didn't think, Oh, socialism isn't progress and rationality; therefore, we've got to go to something else. They felt that the whole idea of confidence in human — the optimism, confidence in human progress and human rationality was misplaced.

And this is why you get the strange phenomenon in the 1920s and 1930s. The intellectuals who are politically active are nearly all left-wing, but the great creative artists of the time in the estimation of nearly everybody, like T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence and people like this — you know, Yeats, the Irish poet — they're all right-wing. But they're right-wing in a particular way. They're against progress, essentially. They're reacting against progress.

So my argument is this: that Orwell was a post-socialist before he became a socialist, and when he became a socialist, he remained a post-socialist. In other words, he had these attitudes of disdain for progress and rationality. So in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which is his first book where he is a deeply committed socialist, a lot of the second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier* is taken up with attacking socialists — not attacking socialism, but attacking socialists, because they believe in progress, they believe in economic growth. So that's the post-socialist Orwell making its appearance.

WOODS: In your post-socialist chapter, you also deal with Orwell's views of technology, which I find interesting. He's not easily characterized here. He's not a Luddite, so we don't need to make a parody of him [00:10:53], but he is concerned that there are socialists who have a much too sanguine view of what technology can make possible. And here, I was sort of expecting that his hostility or suspicion would have to do with the ways the state can employ technology to manipulate or control the people, but it's not really that. What is he saying about technology?

STEELE: You know, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, you get this strong anti-technology — I mean, he didn't use the word "anti-technology"; he said "against the machine" or "against mechanical progress," that kind of thing. He is extremely — how can I put it? — disenchanted with the whole idea that the world is going to become a better place through technology, in our language. So he disparages technological innovation and economic growth. Now, after 1936, he gradually and fitfully becomes a bit more pro-technology.

WOODS: I do want to say something of course about not just his ideas in the abstract, but how they manifest themselves in the novels. But the novels that I think I'm familiar with are the ones virtually everybody is familiar with, and that's *Animal Farm* and *1984*. In fact, I'm so exclusively familiar with those that I would have wondered if there was any value in reading his earlier work. What would you say about that?

STEELE: I would say that two of his novels apart from those two are very good and worth reading. *Burmese Days*, which is his first novel — second book, but first novel — is about life in Burma as a British police officer under the British Empire, which he had — you know, that was his experience. It's quite good. I mean, I would say it's the second best novel about the British Empire after *Passage to India* by Forster. The other book that's quite good is *Coming Up for Air*. That would be 1938 or '39, and that's a good novel. There are two other novels, pretty poor, and would only be worth reading

if you have an intense interest in Orwell specifically, and they are *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, although I think *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is a lot better than *A Clergyman's Daughter*. *A Clergyman's Daughter* is a terrible failure as a novel, I think.

WOODS: All right, I wasn't familiar with those, so that's good. I do want to talk about *Animal Farm* for a moment. Let's first thank our sponsor.

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Now, I realize the way you organized your book is not by novel or chronological period necessarily, but as I said, looking at Orwell under different aspects. But nevertheless, I want to conduct this a certain way. I want to talk about *Animal Farm*. I remember reading that as a kid, enjoying it on a surface level and then later putting together what the real message was and enjoying it on a deeper level. I'm curious about what you can tell us about that novel, about what he was setting out to do, given that it clearly is a critique of a socialist society. So I guess we're going to be learning something about his views of the Soviet Union. So what were they and what's going on with this book?

STEELE: Right. Well, *Animal Farm* is definitely an allegory of the Russian Revolution and what became of the Soviet regime, and that's very clear from everything he said about it and it's very clear — you know, it sometimes follows events in the Russian Revolution almost pedantically. So that's what it's about. What happened to Orwell was this: on May 3rd, 1937, while he was fighting in Spain — he went to fight in Spain, like so many left-wingers did, for the Republic against the Nationalists. He was in Barcelona on leave from the front for a short period. He suddenly found himself in the middle of street fighting, and this is street fighting, Barcelona style — in other words, with rifles and grenades [laughing]. It's that kind of street fighting.

And essentially what was happening, although Orwell didn't really understand this, was that the Communist Party was eliminating the left. There was a civil war within the left in Spain as well as the civil war between left and right. And Orwell became a hunted fugitive because he was associated with this group that was to the left of the Communist Party. And he managed to get back to England. He could easily have been caught and killed by the Communist-controlled police, but he managed to get back to England.

And when he got back to England, he found that no one — well, I'm exaggerating the way Orwell did, actually. Few people in respectable positions would listen to his account of what the Communists had done in Spain. Basically, they had butchered the left, everybody to the left of them, and they'd done this of course in pursuit of their own total monopoly power in order to set up a totalitarian regime in Spain.

Now, Orwell was very shocked to find that a completely misleading and inaccurate account of what had happened in this street fighting in Barcelona was being disseminated by the Communists and successfully disseminated in all sorts of non-communist publications as well. And that led him to write the book *Homage to Catalonia*, where he described his experiences in Spain, and it's a very anti-communist book. So his experiences in Spain influenced him to become extremely anti-

communist, so that's basically what — Of course you had to explain how a socialist revolution had led to this horrible phenomenon of the Soviet Union and the communist movement, and that's what led him to eventually write *Animal Farm*.

WOODS: What do you mean by your chapter title, "The Inadvertent Anti-Socialist"?

STEELE: Well, in that chapter, I'm taking issue with a view that's very common about Orwell among people who write about Orwell a lot. Most people who write a lot about Orwell are left-wing, and they very much like Orwell and they often display a lot of indignation that the right appropriates Orwell, in their view. And there is a view that goes like this: Orwell's *1984* couldn't possibly be an anti-socialist work because we can show by chapter and verse that Orwell was a socialist. And of course it's true that Orwell was a socialist and that can be shown by chapter and verse. My argument is that he was inadvertently anti-socialist in the sense that he criticized totalitarianism from the point of view of democratic socialism, but if you take the view that democratic socialism is an impossibility, which I do, then of course his criticism of totalitarianism becomes a criticism of socialism. So that's the argument in that chapter.

WOODS: In a way, I feel like this is an unfair question because I'm asking you to read his mind, but maybe we can speculate on this. On the one hand, you're describing to me a man who believes in socialism, as we might call it, in the classical sense, with collective ownership of the means of production, which in practice always meant state ownership of the means of production.

STEELE: Right.

WOODS: And this also, you're saying, involves controlling people's incomes, a very minute set of controls over the economy. And yet at the same time, he theorizes about the dangers of the state. And you wonder, how does he expect, if the state owns everything, how could anybody resist the totalitarian regimes he's describing? I can't even get — of course maybe he didn't have copy machines in his day, but they had something. How could I get a printing press? How could I release books if the government owns all of those things? There's no way to resist it. If the government owns everything, where could the resistance ever get its own means of production from? How does he confront that? Or does he?

STEELE: Right. You know, I think we have to understand that Orwell's general view on this matter was very typical of 1930s intellectuals in the English-speaking world, especially in Britain. The general view, if you accosted a typical British leftist — let's say a *New Statesman* reader — in the 1930s, and said, "Look at the way things have turned out in Russia," the reply would have been, "Well, that's due to peculiar circumstances in Russia. When it happens here, it will be totally different and there'll be just as much freedom on the personal level, just as much freedom of expression, freedom of thought as there is now or even more, because the capitalist monopolists won't be distorting everything in the press," and so on and so forth. So Orwell's view is a very common view. There's nothing strange about it in the context of 1930s left-wing thinking. The general view was: when we get a socialist system, there will be civil liberties, there will be freedom.

And of course, books like Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* were partly written out of a desire to combat that assumption and to say no, if you do this, you're going to have these consequences. And Orwell reviewed *The Road to Serfdom* by Hayek in 1944 when if came out, and he liked it. He wasn't convinced, but it helped to deepen his fear that maybe socialism was going to lead to a horrific political system.

WOODS: Yeah, now, I actually — It's funny; I was already thinking of *The Road to Serfdom* before you said that, because I think even just from this conversation, I've actually gained a greater appreciation for that book, because now I'm appreciating more the context of it, because you clearly do have people who think you can have what you and I would describe as a totalitarian economic system and not have that spill over into other aspects of life, which today seems so preposterously naive and implausible. It's hard to believe anybody ever believed it. So then what is Orwell really warning against in *1984*? If socialism doesn't have to have politically bad consequences, therefore it's not socialism that he's warning us against. What's he warning us against?

STEELE: He's warning us against giving up on democracy. And when Orwell uses the term "democracy," he's primarily thinking of civil liberties rather than majority vote. And I mean, Orwell's taking the view that collectivism is the only thing that can possibly happen in the near future. There can be no survival of capitalism; there can only be a movement to collectivism. That's a kind of factual proposition he was absolutely convinced of, and he reiterates this throughout his life. He constantly says laissez-faire capitalism is finished, and if you look at the context, he doesn't just mean laissez-faire capitalism; he means any kind of capitalism in the sense of private ownership of the means of production. So he's absolutely convinced the capitalism is at the end of its rope; it can't last much longer.

So in his mind, the choice is between what he calls oligarchical collectivism, which is what he keeps saying is the system in the Soviet Union and in the Third Reich, and democratic socialism, which is a state-owned planned economy but keeping liberal values of free speech, free thought, and so on. So that's his view. You know, Orwell died quite young. He died at the age of 46, and it's easy to imagine that if he'd lived through the '50s, he might have changed his views quite considerably on this whole question, but he didn't unfortunately survive, and so we're stuck with the Orwell who thought that some kind of collectivist economy was absolutely inescapable.

WOODS: All right, you've written a book called *Orwell Your Orwell*, so let's finish up by having you make the case for why Orwell matters.

STEELE: Oh, I think Orwell matters because so many people read him and have a view of his thinking which is often inaccurate and needs a bit of correction. He's a great writer. He's very persuasive. He's the kind of writer who makes you feel that he's on your side and that he really agrees with you, and he has a bewitching, persuasive style, which has led many people to think that he agreed with them on things that he just didn't agree with them on. So there are all kinds of things with Orwell that we haven't mentioned, like his opposition to homosexuality, for example, which is very unfashionable today, even among Orwell's strongest admirers. Another thing would be his opposition to birth control, his view that one of the primary values of any society worth having is what he called philoprogenitiveness — in other words, a high valuation

for having babies. So there are all these things about Orwell's point of view that I bring out in the book, and they're really unnoticed by many admirers of Orwell.

But I think of — okay, let me summarize it by saying this: that a lot of people have the view that Orwell is a great writer because he was so often right where others were wrong. I think that's quite wrong. I think Orwell was wrong nearly all the time, but he's a great writer despite that. He's a great writer for reasons that have nothing to do with that, and I would say he's a great writer in the sense that Jonathan Swift was a great writer. Today we don't know much about the political circumstances when Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels*, but we know that *Gulliver's Travels* is a great work, and I think the same — and by the way, Swift influenced Orwell more than any other writer. Orwell read Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* at the age of seven, and it made a huge impact upon him, and I think things in *Gulliver's Travels* crop up in *1984* in a quite remarkable extent. So I would say that to understand Orwell as a great writer, we have to understand him as a great writer whose views on politics were generally wrong.

WOODS: And not just politics. One thing I like about this book is you describe the views of Orwell, and then you engage with those views and you challenge them and give reasons that we might doubt some of them. So it's an interesting study. But in particular, I guess I do want to ask you one other thing. You also seem skeptical of his portrayal of totalitarianism itself, arguing that it doesn't have to work out precisely the way Orwell does in the somewhat exaggerated fashion of *1984*, so I wonder if you could say a word about that.

STEELE: Yes, here I think we have to guard against the tendency to identify literary criticism with political science. There are all kinds of things in *1984* which make perfect sense artistically. It's a literary creation. It's a work of fiction. It's a satire. So if I say that certain things in *1984* couldn't happen, I'm not criticizing *1984*. As I say in the book, that would be like saying *Gulliver's Travels* is nonsense because you can't have human beings who are only five inches tall. That would be to miss the point. And so on the level of artistic creation, *1984* is a superb work and what I'm just about to say shouldn't be taken as literary criticism. But things that happen in *1984* couldn't really happen and are not the tendency in totalitarian systems, so far as we've been able to analyze them.

The whole idea that you try to destroy the notion of truth, for example, doesn't really make any sense when you think about it, because if you destroy the notion of truth, then why should people care what the party line is if they know that there is no objective truth? So my view is that if you're engaged in telling lies, you don't want your listeners to disbelieve in the notion of absolute and objective truth. No, you want them to keep on believing that but to accept your version of the truth. So this I think is one of the misunderstandings.

I don't think that a lot of the extreme developments in *1984* could come about or have any tendency to come about, and if we look at the actual Soviet Union, which is the closest thing on a major scale that we've seen — I suppose some people would say North Korea today is the closest thing. But if you look at the development of the Soviet Union, you don't see a development towards denying objective truth or doublethink or any of that kind of thing. That's not what happens in real totalitarian

systems. So yeah, I think that as a piece of political science, it wouldn't be all that great. But then it's not a piece of political science.

WOODS: I think there's a bit of a parallel with the political correctness phenomenon, because there a lot of people on the political right think that the politically correct folks are advocating moral relativism, when, to the contrary, they have a very distinct moral sense and they are going to ram it down your throat. They are not saying that you, the bigot, have just as much right to your opinion as I, the enlightened person. That is absolutely the opposite of what they're saying. So it never quite works out that way.

So the book is *Orwell Your Orwell: A Worldview on the Slab*. I'm going to be linking to it at TomWoods.com/970, the show notes page for today. Of course you can get it on Amazon. That's where I'll be linking to it. And I appreciate your time, David Ramsay Steele, and your excellent work on this book.

STEELE: Thank you very much. It's been great to be here.