



Portrait of the Fascist in The Road To Wigan Pier: George Orwell and G.K.'s Weekly

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Bonifas Gilbert, « *Portrait of the Fascist in The Road To Wigan Pier: George Orwell and G.K.'s Weekly* », *Cycnos*, vol. 11.2 (Autour d'Orwell), 1994, mis en ligne en juin 2008.
<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/446>

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Cycnos, études anglophones

revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

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Revues électroniques de l'Université Côte d'Azur

Portrait of the Fascist in *The Road To Wigan Pier*:
George Orwell and G.K.'s Weekly

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The Road to Wigan Pier contains Orwell's first interpretation of Fascism. It is somewhat disjointed, but in fact his scattered remarks cohere under three headings: what is Fascism, Fascism and the middle classes, Fascism and the intellectuals. The first two parts are unsurprising given that Orwell had already started moving in radical left-wing circles and was, in particular, strongly influenced by the political ideas of *The Adelphi*, a magazine for which he had been writing occasional pieces since the early thirties and in whose circle he had made good friends.

The members of the *Adelphi* group were basically Marxian, although of a very heterodox kind, and their views were largely shared by Orwell¹. For this reason the latter's interpretation of Fascism is the one found among all extreme-left writers in the mid-thirties. Fascism was seen as the last phase of capitalism in decline, and it was believed that Fascism's recruits were almost exclusively petty bourgeois who disliked the large capital which was ruining them, but who detested the proletariat even more.

An examination of these points in *The Road to Wigan Pier* would not reveal any serious deviation from this left-wing axiom. Once one has established that Orwell's analysis of most topics in *Wigan Pier* is conducted within a Marxist frame of reference, what he says about Fascism becomes largely unoriginal. There is one notable exception, however: the appeal of Fascism for intellectuals. In this case Orwell veers abruptly away from the positions of the Left and supplies us with a fundamentally right-wing explanation.

The Left, even *The Adelphi*, saw the flight of the middle classes towards Fascism as dictated exclusively by social and economic considerations. They pooh-poohed all other factors, even when they suspected that there might be something else. Orwell's interpretation, on the other hand, once he has paid lip-service to economic motives, is solidly cultural:

What about the millions who are not capitalists, who in a material sense have nothing to gain from Fascism and are often aware of it, and who, nevertheless, are Fascists?... They could only be stampeded into Fascism because Communism attacked or seemed to attack certain things (patriotism, religion, etc.) which lay deeper than the economic motive².

Although Orwell is still here speaking of “millions” of potential Fascists, he soon shifts his ground to focus on those most likely to display that disquieting “spiritual recoil from Socialism” (*RWP*, p. 186) — the intellectuals : “I believe that when the pinch comes there is a terrible danger that the main movement of the intelligentsia will be towards Fascism” (*RWP*, p. 210).

According to him, this peril would have a dual origin in the ideological context of England: on the one hand, in the worship of the machine and the flabby hedonistic civilisation it was supposed to bring into being and for which he had nothing but vitriolic contempt: a “fat-bellied version of ‘progress’”, “the paradise of little fat men”, “some frightful subhuman depth of softness and helplessness” (*RWP*, pp. 188, 192, 200); on the other hand, in the assault of the Left on traditional European civilisation and its values:

If you present Socialism in a bad and misleading light — if you let people imagine that it does not mean much more than pouring European civilisation down the sink at the command of Marxist prigs — you risk driving the intellectual into Fascism (*RWP*, p. 211).

¹ See Gilbert Bonifas, *George Orwell, l'engagement* (Paris: Didier Erudition, 1984), pp. 149-253.

² George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), p. 186. Henceforward as *RWP* in brackets within the text.

One could argue that there is no need to look for the intellectual sources of such utterances. They could very well have been prompted by Orwell's taste for the wild outdoors, by his anti-mechanistic turn of mind and by his traditional patriotism and love of Old England, combined with an irritated over-reaction to the naive fascination experienced by many on the Left for the tractors, factories and dams of Russia. Orwell's remarks, however, fall so much in line with some of the things he had been reading since at least the early thirties, that it does not seem wise to dismiss the likelihood of more ideological influences on what he writes about the relationship between the intellectual and Fascism.

Among those influences there was, first and foremost, *G.K.'s Weekly*, the magazine founded in 1925 by G.K. Chesterton and which soon became a forum for the Distributist movement. To use Hilaire Belloc's phrase, Distributism was to be a "third way" between Capitalism and Socialism. As a result there was, among the contributors to the magazine, much curiosity about, and even sympathy for Fascism which claimed exactly the same thing³.

Orwell, for his part, never wrote for *G.K.'s Weekly*, except his first article in English, "A Farthing Newspaper", on 29 December 1928⁴, but in all likelihood he was still reading the magazine in the mid-thirties since, according to his biographer Bernard Crick, he told a girlfriend in 1935 that "what England needed was to follow the kind of policies in Chesterton's *G.K.'s Weekly*"⁵. Crick does not go into the matter more closely, but a study of Orwell's views on Fascism in *The Road to Wigan Pier* certainly confirms that he was a reader of the paper at the time and was taking its contents seriously.

One of the main villains in *G.K.'s Weekly* was "the Utopian" whose purpose was to set up "the Leisure State" through extensive use of the machine⁶. For Chesterton the prototype of that rather vague but diabolic figure was H.G. Wells and this, in itself, is revealing since in *Wigan Pier* too Wells is designated as the supreme Utopian. On several occasions the word itself is used by Orwell from the same standpoint, and indeed as loosely as Chesterton⁷. What precedes is sufficient to link up *G.K.'s Weekly* with Orwell's denunciation of the machine, but not with his interpretation of Fascism. However, among those Utopians *G.K.'s Weekly* also ranked the Socialists — those who in an earlier more optimistic age were fond of imagining mechanistic lands of cockayne, but also their modern-day heirs⁸.

The magazine not only explicitly equated Marxism with the cult of the machine, but also commented with much virulence that people were now sick and tired of industrial civilisation and might well take to flight in the direction of more hospitable ideologies. On 19 September 1935, for instance, W.P. Witcutt (a frequent contributor, usually much more acerbic than Chesterton himself as regards the Leisure State) reviewed John Strachey's *The Nature of Capitalist Crisis* and deplored that for all his intellectual shrewdness Strachey had not understood that men do not necessarily want more industrialization, and that he still thought that more and bigger factories were a sign of expanding progress:

³ Thus Leslie A. Toke: "By the end of the first decade of the new century, the Fabian ideas had won and England has since been in the full stream of collectivist legislation, until the first signs of a reaction have become apparent. That reaction is taking two forms, Fascism and Distributism" ("The Programme", *G.K.'s Weekly*, 14 June 1934, p. 234).

⁴ *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, eds Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 4 vols (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), I, pp. 12-15.

⁵ Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980), p. 175.

⁶ For typical examples see *G.K.'s Weekly* of 24 May 1934, pp. 186-7, 18 April 1935, pp. 88-89, 25 April 1935, p. 104, 11 July 1935, pp. 285-6, 6 February 1936, p. 320.

⁷ *G.K.'s Weekly*, 24 May 1934, 19 July 1934, 18 April 1935, 22 August 1935, 6 February 1936 and *Wigan Pier*, pp. 191, 192, 201, 212. Chapter XII of *Wigan Pier* is of course full of references to Wells, but more specifically, p. 202, Orwell speaks of Wells's "vision of humanity, 'liberated' by the machine".

⁸ Chesterton, "On Leisure. At Leisure", *G.K.'s Weekly*, 18 April 1935, p. 88; Chesterton, "The Leisure State", *G.K.'s Weekly*, 25 April 1935, p. 104.

It is indeed an illustration of the mental blinkers good Communists have to wear. They are forbidden by their sacred writings to go beyond the Industrial system; and therefore we judge their system as irrelevant⁹.

On 27 February 1936, Witcutt returned to the subject with a vengeance, this time essentially to berate the English left-wing writers of the thirties described as still living in the nineteenth-century world of Marx. They had not even realized that men were now reacting against machine-worship:

We are tired of the whole thing. Fed up. Bored. The Marxians offer us still more organisation, still more offices, still more factories; when in our hearts we loathe the things. It is not 1860 any longer, Messrs Auden, McDiarmid, Strachey and Co.¹⁰.

Indeed, so fed up were they, that in desperation they might even think of joining the Fascists, as Chesterton had already pointed out in July 1934 after reading the *Manifesto of the Federation of Progressive Societies* drawn up by Wells and C.E.M. Joad: "I do not think some extreme reformers know how hideously bored we do feel with their Brave New World and the prospect of becoming its citizens"¹¹.

For, according to *G.K.'s Weekly*, some people had understood the perils of the machine and of a civilisation dominated by industry: the Distributists, of course, but also, it seemed, the Fascists who had realized that man did not live by bread alone and that he was waiting for other values to be proposed to him¹². Although he found the Fascists not radical enough in their economic options and much too prompt to copy the "democracies" in their foreign policy, Chesterton, however, regarded them as going in the right direction¹³. That made it easy for the English Fascists to expound their views and to put right certain remarks previously made about them in the paper, usually by means of letters to the editor. Among the points they tried to get across was that they were in revolt against the modern world. On 19 September 1935, Raven Thomson, the Party's chief intellectual, maintained that the Fascists "are in violent moral revolt against the evils of bourgeois society, particularly against its gross materialism"¹⁴. A few weeks earlier he had gone even further and been even clearer: "We repudiate the materialist basis of bourgeois and Marxist philosophy alike. We refuse to worship the steely God of mechanised efficiency"¹⁵. It is difficult not to conclude that Orwell had these and similar pronouncements in mind when he wrote:

With their eyes glued to economic facts, they have proceeded on the assumption that man has no soul, and explicitly or implicitly they have set up the goal of a materialistic Utopia. As a result Fascism has been able to play upon every instinct that revolts against hedonism and a cheap conception of "progress" (*RWP*, p.212).

But not only was Fascism a protest against the excessive mechanization of life. From the pages of *G.K.'s Weekly*, it was quite possible to gather that Fascism could be regarded as Christendom's last bulwark and as a last stand to save European civilisation. Fascism, in fact, was seen as having preserved Europe from the alien soul-destroying doctrine of Bolshevism. On 13 August 1936, in an "open letter to the *News Chronicle*", one Junius Minimus wrote that before the emergence of Fascism, Italy "was in danger of falling into the hands of communists, who would have destroyed all that simple-minded Italians regarded as most

⁹ W. P. Witcutt, "The Irrelevance of Marx", *G.K.'s Weekly*, 19 September 1935, p. 449.

¹⁰ W. P. Witcutt, "A Point Marx Overlooked", *G.K.'s Weekly*, 27 February 1936, p.365.

¹¹ Chesterton, "Queries on Fascism - III", *G.K.'s Weekly*, 19 July 1934, p. 312.

¹² Chesterton, "Queries on Fascism - III", p.312 and "On Leisure. At Leisure", p. 88.

¹³ Fairly hostile at first to all forms of Fascism, the magazine began to take a more benign and sympathetic look at Italian and English Fascisms from mid-1934. So much so that in 1935 Chesterton could refer to "my young friends the Blackshirts" ("First Reply to Fascism", 29 August, 1935, p. 400), to "my Fascist friends" and to the "sympathy" the Distributists could not but feel for them in so corrupt a political regime as that of England ("Further Words on Fascism", *G.K.'s Weekly*, 5 September 1935, p. 6).

¹⁴ *G.K.'s Weekly*, 19 September 1935, p. 454.

¹⁵ A. Raven Thomson, "Symposium Answered - The Fascists", *G.K.'s Weekly*, 8 August 1935, p. 353.

precious in life... religion and the family”¹⁶. A few months earlier, in a letter to the editor, a member of the British Union of Fascists had almost made the same point: “We can only regard as unworthy of serious discussion her (a previous correspondent's) suggestion that German National-Socialism and Bolshevism are brothers, since it is only through the bulwark afforded by the former that the Western world has been saved from the horrors of the latter”¹⁷.

Unquestionably there was enough in *G.K.'s Weekly* to suggest to Orwell that the Fascist could sincerely see himself as “Roland in the pass at Roncevaux, defending Christendom against the barbarian” (*RWP*, p. 212). The words themselves in this quotation reveal the impact of *G.K.'s Weekly* on Orwell. Christendom was a word and a political concept which, of course, had largely fallen into disuse in political parlance¹⁸. But it was abundantly utilized in *G.K.'s Weekly* which, obviously, did not mind if it recalled the Crusades; besides the fight against Communism by the right-wing parties in Europe was often portrayed as a struggle against barbarism¹⁹. Moreover, at the very moment when Orwell was writing *The Road to Wigan Pier*, things were coming to a head with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and such terminology now became more appropriate than ever. For in the fight between self-styled Christian Nationalists and mostly atheistic Republicans, Socialists and Communists, it was easy to see an epitome of the struggle between traditional Christian civilisation and dark malignant forces bent on its destruction. On 7 November 1935 Hoffman Nickerson had already maintained that:

Should the day come when silver-tongued oratory of the Kerensky-Roosevelt type is not enough to guard civilisation from Communist chaos, then the intelligence and virility of Christendom will produce more Fascist dictators. Those dictators and their lieutenants will be far from perfect, for they will be men, not gods... But at least they can give us the stability necessary for the reconstruction of our disordered society²⁰.

A few months later that day had come, or so it seemed to Hilaire Belloc who had taken over the editorship of the paper after Chesterton's death. In Spain, Moscow had at last shown the cloven hoof. Its goal was the destruction of Europe and Christendom²¹ and Fascism was no more than a resistance movement, a “counter-offensive”, as it had already been in Italy, Germany and Hungary²². The struggle was much more than a battle between two ideologies: “fascism v. democracy, Mr Prieto calls them; other people call them civilisation v. barbarism”, the anonymous reviewer of Carlos Prieto's *Spanish Front* proclaimed²³, and another contributor, on 24 September 1936, ranked the Fascists among the people “ready to fight and die for the ancient decencies of life”²⁴. And finally, Belloc's editorial on 10 December 1936 (so possibly not too late for Orwell to have read since he handed his manuscript in just before Christmas) makes it easy to understand why Orwell wonders whether, in his own eyes, the Fascist is not a kind of St. George, the “upholder of the European tradition”, the defender of “Christian belief”, “patriotism” and “the military virtues” (*RWP*, pp. 212-213). Belloc's “The Permanent Peril” was a call to arms to defend “our ancient

¹⁶ Junius Minimus, “Open Letter to the News-Chronicle”, *G.K.'s Weekly*, 13 August 1936, p. 352.

¹⁷ *G.K.'s Weekly*, 24 October 1935, p. 70.

¹⁸ Although, admittedly, in the summer of 1936 there was a revival in the press favourable to the Nationalist cause in Spain, notably in the *Daily Mail* which Orwell also read.

¹⁹ Sporadically Fascism was also seen as the defence of Christendom against the barbarism and paganism of Hitlerism, always violently denounced in *G.K.'s Weekly* (see 21 February 1935, p. 406, 13 July 1935, p. 215, 11 October 1935, p. 80).

²⁰ Hoffman Nickerson, “Property and Tactics”, *G.K.'s Weekly*, 7 November 1935, p. 97.

²¹ Hilaire Belloc, “The Intention of Moscow”, *G.K.'s Weekly*, 15 October 1936, pp. 93-4.

²² Hilaire Belloc, “Moscow”, *G.K.'s Weekly*, 13 August 1936, p. 345.

²³ “Books”, *G.K.'s Weekly*, 26 November 1936, p. 234.

²⁴ W. R. Titterton, “The Two Camps”, *G.K.'s Weekly*, 24 September 1936, p. 47.

civilization” and communism was defined as “a new religion... at issue with the family, property, patriotism, piety, all that we have inherited from immemorial time: all that has made us”. And Belloc concluded that “it is life and death for us as much as for every other province of what once was Christendom”²⁵. After that, it is not difficult to understand why Orwell considers that “it is very easy... to see Fascism as the last line of defence of all that is good in European civilisation” (*RWP*, p. 212).

Thus, by piecing Orwell's remarks together and setting them in their intellectual context, we come to a fuller image of the Fascist. It is the portrait of a traditionalist, of an over-excited High Tory, more than that of a revolutionary — and therefore not quite that of the Fascist as historians would define him today. This is not surprising since *G.K.'s Weekly's* model Fascist, in so far as it was inspired from reality or could be made out from what English sympathizers wrote in the magazine, was Italian, and for all its rhetoric Italian Fascism never made a clean break with authoritarian conservatism²⁶. As very little came from the extreme left at the time to suggest that the Fascist might be anything but an adventurer and the tool of monopoly capitalism²⁷, it was only natural that Orwell should have made *G.K.'s Weekly's* interpretation his own — all the more so as it probably helped him to rationalize his own misgivings about Socialism, for there is no doubt that he was thinking of his own case when he spoke in *Wigan Pier* of “the thinking person, by intellect usually left-wing, but by temperament often right-wing” (*RWP*, p. 209).

Sometime in the late thirties or early forties, he came to realize that the Fascist was not a Conservative, hardly more than he was a pawn of large capital²⁸, but he pointed out, however, that till the mid-thirties it was quite possible to mistake Fascism for a form of Conservatism and that it was probably what intellectuals like Eliot, Wyndham Lewis or Roy Campbell (the very same writers he denounced in *The Road to Wigan Pier* as crypto-fascists) did:

So long as Fascism was on the defensive, or merely struggling for power, it was possible to see it as a kind of enlightened despotism or dynamic conservatism which might save us from the “left-wings orthodoxy” of which Mr Lewis so justly complained²⁹.

Having come, in 1941, to the conclusion that Fascism was to be fully equated with Nazism, “revolutionary” and “malignant”³⁰, and so that it was not possible “for good writers, intelligent, scrupulous men, to make their peace with Fascism”³¹, Orwell had to fall back, as a last resort, on the interpretation of the Fascist as “the man of power”, who only wants “the pleasure of tyrannising people”³². So doing he moved definitively away from the political and cultural considerations of *Wigan Pier*, but came across O'Brien's direct ancestor.

²⁵ Hilaire Belloc, “The Permanent Peril”, *G.K.'s Weekly*, 10 December 1936, pp. 261-2.

²⁶ Chesterton detested German National-Socialism (“Prussianism” as he called it) and denied that it was a variant of Fascism. Indeed it was one of the many enemies of European civilisation which Fascism had to fight. Significantly, Orwell's Fascist bully wields a bottle of castor oil, not a sub-machine-gun.

²⁷ See Orwell's criticism in his “Will Freedom Die with Capitalism?”, *Left News*, April 1941, pp. 1682-5.

²⁸ See “Current Politics — Outside and Inside Views”, *New English Weekly*, 8 June 1939, pp. 128-9 (on Wyndham Lewis's ideological evolution); “Will Freedom Die with Capitalism?”; “Fascism and Democracy” in Victor Gollancz ed., *The Betrayal of the Left* (London: Gollancz, 1941), p. 211; “Culture and Democracy” in G. D. H. Cole ed., *Victory or Vested Interest?* (London: Routledge & Sons, 1942), pp. 95-7.

²⁹ Orwell, “Current Politics — Outside and Inside Views”.

³⁰ Orwell, “Fascism and Democracy”, p. 211.

³¹ Orwell, “Culture and Democracy”, p. 96.

³² Orwell, “Will Freedom Die with Capitalism?”, p. 1684.