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Book reviews

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Journalism beyond Orwell: A collection of essays

Richard Lance Keeble
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Richard Lance Keeble's latest book on George Orwell collects together a number of his previously published articles and chapters in order to explore the writer's multi-faceted legacy as a journalist.

The first of its four parts, 'George Orwell: The activist journalist', deals with Orwell directly whilst the others examine his legacy rather more obliquely. Here Keeble stresses the 'vast range of genres' to which Orwell contributed, his 'political activist approach' (p. 2) and his deliberate targeting of his work at left-wing publications. He refers to his 'As I Please' columns for *Tribune* as the work of a 'proto-blogger' (p. 22) in which he attempted to build a 'community of the left' (p. 38) through developing a close relationship with his readers. Orwell argues that although, given the pressures exerted by owners and advertisers on the mainstream owners, 'it is difficult to foresee a radical change ... we do possess juridical liberty of the Press, which makes it possible to utter one's true opinions fearlessly in papers of comparatively small circulation' (p. 27). He particularly liked to write for *Tribune* because:

> ... it is the only existing weekly paper that makes a genuine effort to be both progressive and human – that is, to combine a radical socialist policy with a respect for freedom of speech and a civilised attitude towards literature and the arts (pp 33-34).

On the other hand, given Orwell's work for the BBC, the *Observer* and publishers such as Victor Gollancz and Secker & Warburg, Keeble also quotes Chris Atton's warning in *An alternative internet: Radical media, politics and creativity* (2004) against polarising the mainstream and alternative media spheres and endorses his preference for an approach which 'suggests a complexity of relationships between radical and mainstream the previous binary models have been unable to identify' (p. 29). In this respect he also cites Daniel Hallin's work on US media coverage of Vietnam, *The 'uncensored' war* (1986), where he identifies three different ideological spheres in which the various media have to operate: the sphere of consensus, on topics about which there is generally elite agreement; the sphere of legitimate controversy, on topics about which there are significant elite disagreements; and the sphere of deviance, which is inhabited by issues marginalised or excluded from elite debate. Keeble argues that Orwell's work within the mainstream media fell within the second sphere (p. 221).

Keeble suggests that the breadth of the subjects covered by Orwell in his writings – such as boys' weeklies, women's magazines, seaside postcards, pubs, junk shops and so on – and his close analysis of popular texts such as an entire issue of the *Daily Mirror*, mark him out as a founder figure of cultural studies (p. 3). My own view, however, is that Orwell's attitude to popular culture was close to that later expressed by Richard Hoggart in *The uses of literacy* (1957) and that, had he lived longer, he would have been as hostile to the way in which

study of it developed as Hoggart became, as expressed in particular in *The way we live now* (1996). On the other hand, though, Orwell very clearly understood the political dimensions of popular culture, as Keeble notes via a quotation from Paul Anderson's *Orwell in* Tribune (2006), a notable early analysis of his 'As I Please' columns: 'It would be wrong to suggest that his columns were not political. They were intensely so – even, paradoxically, when they appeared to have nothing to do with politics' (p. 35).

Part II, 'Making journalism an art: Literary journalism today', takes as its text the remark in Orwell's 1946 essay 'Why I write' that: 'What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing an art' (p. 5). Keeble notes that 'in this, he was clearly drawing on the tradition of literary journalism set by Defoe, Hazlitt, Dickens, Steele and Stevenson' (ibid), which Keeble himself had previously explored in the collection *The journalistic imagination: Literary journalists from Defoe to Capote and Carter* (2007), co-edited with Sharon Wheeler. His three contemporary exemplars here are the interviewer Lynn Barber, whom he sees as 'a sort of jester to the contemporary court of celebrity' (p. 71); Lara Pawson, the Africa-based BBC correspondent whose memoir *This is the place to be* (2016) Keeble admires as 'a deliberate debunking (through both content and format) of the myth of the heroic war correspondent' (p. 91) – something of which Orwell would surely have approved; and Keeble's friend and colleague John Tulloch, in whose writings about both journalism and literature he finds many Orwellian traits, such as highly eclectic referencing, wit, evidence of voracious reading and 'a kind of Orwellian ability to use literary criticism as a way of exploring some of the most profound and complex issues facing humanity' (p. 112).

Part III, 'War, peace and the press: Yesterday and today', covers more familiarly 'Orwellian' territory and relates to his writing about war (the Spanish Civil War and World War Two) in chapters on the 2003 Iraq invasion, Operation Moshtarak in Afghanistan in 2010 and the contested terrain of peace journalism, this last relating again to Orwell's huge amount of work for non-mainstream, alternative media. Media, and especially press, coverage of war looms large in this section, and the Iraq chapter, in particular, presages the next part of the book in its stress on the extent to which the mainstream media are deeply enmeshed with the secret state (pp 124-127) and, consequently, find themselves acting as purveyors of propaganda and disinformation, particularly at times of conflict in which the UK is involved – a key Orwellian theme to which we will return below. In this respect Keeble aptly quotes Timothy Garton Ash's prescient remark during the Iraq invasion to the effect that: 'The trend in journalism as in politics, and probably now in the political use of intelligence, is away from the facts and towards a neo- Orwellian world of manufactured reality' (p. 127).

Part IV, 'Scoops and spooks: Journalism in the age of surveillance capitalism', relates to Orwell's conflicted responses to the growth of the secret state, including his own possible links with the security services. Keeble, whose first major work was *Secret state, silent press: New militarism, the Gulf and the modern image of warfare* (1997), has long been one of the major analysts of the extent to which information in the media has its (largely unacknowledged) origins in intelligence sources and, *mutatis mutandis*, a critic of how much information is simply missing from the media courtesy of invisible interventions by those self-same sources.

The chapter entitled ‘Journalists and the secret state’ examines the intertwining of journalism and spookery largely on the domestic level, although it also covers the overseas operations of the Information Research Department (IRD) at the Foreign Office, to which at the very end of his life Orwell sent the infamous annotated list of ‘crypto communists’, as well as Iraq and its fall-out, culminating in the Hutton Inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly. The chapter also examines the Snowden, Assange and Manning revelations, and the increasing surveillance and hounding of journalists deemed to be ‘unfriendly’ by the security services, raising the question of how both journalists and concerned citizens should react to this oppressive and frequently illegal behaviour. ‘Targeting Gaddafi’ covers similar ground to the demonisation of Saddam Hussein explored in the chapter on the Iraq war in the previous section. Finally ‘Secrets and lies: On the ethics of conflict coverage’ argues that ‘too much of the debate over the ethics of conflict coverage is based (either implicitly or explicitly) on conventional notions of professionalism which leads to a prioritising of issues relating to the corporate media’, and that such debate needs to be relocated to ‘the activist, alternative sphere’ (p. 216) to which Orwell was such a key contributor.

Parts III and IV of this collection relate closely to what I regard as the key themes of Part I, namely the propensity of the media to lie and dissimulate, and threats to media freedom, both of which have taken on ever greater urgency since this book and its constituent parts were first published. In terms of Orwell’s concern with media lies, Keeble concentrates in particular on Orwell’s Spanish experiences as related in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and also in the essay ‘Looking back on the Spanish War’. Keeble draws attention to the pages (pp 153-172) in the former in which Orwell, in an exemplary series of detailed textual analyses, shows how the communist and pro-communist press, both in Britain and abroad, comprehensively misreported the actions of the anti-Stalinist POUM militia (with whom Orwell fought). And from the latter he quotes the following damning judgement:

> Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, nor even the relationship which is implied in the ordinary lie ... I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various ‘party lines’ (pp 18- 19).

Although not actually quoted by Keeble, Orwell continued with two passages which horribly prefigure our own ‘post truth’ era. First: ‘This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world’. And second:

> I know it is the fashion to say that most of recorded history is lies anyway. I am willing to believe that history is for the most part inaccurate and biased, but what is peculiar to our own age is the abandonment of the idea that history *could* be truthfully written. In the past people deliberately lied, or they unconsciously coloured what they wrote, or they struggled after the truth, well knowing that they must make many mistakes; but in each case they believed that ‘the facts’ existed and were more or less discoverable.

On the subject of press freedom, Keeble quotes Orwell as stating in his 1947 essay 'The English people' that 'it is a fact that the much boasted freedom of the British press is theoretical rather than actual', something which he attributes partly to the fact that 'the English people as a whole are not sufficiently interested in the printed word to be very vigilant about this aspect of the liberties' (p. 23). He also cites two further reasons for this lack of freedom from Orwell's original preface to *Animal Farm*:

> The British press is extremely centralized and most of it owned by wealthy men who have every motive to be dishonest on certain topics. But the same kind of veiled censorship also operates in books and periodicals, as well as in plays, films and radio (p. 24).

Orwell traces the source of this 'veiled censorship' to the prevailing orthodoxy, 'a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question', and argues that anyone who challenges it 'finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness, A genuinely unfashionable opinion is almost never given a fair hearing, either in the popular press or in highbrow periodicals' (p. 24). He takes as an example of such an orthodoxy what was then the 'uncritical admiration of Soviet Russia', and it was presumably this which caused the preface to be omitted from the original publication. Indeed, it was not until 15 September 1972 that it was actually published – in *The Times Literary Supplement* – although it was later included in the *Complete Works* published by Secker & Warburg in 1998 and can be found in the 2013 Penguin edition of the book. That the preface contains Orwell's remark that 'if liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear' is an irony almost too glaring to contemplate (which is perhaps why Keeble doesn't actually quote it). But he does point out the significance of the fact that 'his reflections on the press culminate in the creation of Winston Smith' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'a media worker at the Ministry of Truth altering the records of *The Times* to conform to the current dogma' (p. 30).

At times in this edited collection – for example in Part II – Orwell does rather recede into the background, and there are moments elsewhere when one wishes for the appropriate Orwellian reference. For example, the passages on the demonisation of both Saddam Hussein (pp 130- 131) and Colonel Gaddafi (pp 203-204, 208-209) irresistibly recall the Two-Minutes Hate and Hate Week in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Similarly, the ways in which in the same book the perpetual but far-distant and little-understood wars in which Oceania is apparently embroiled are represented to the populace bear an uncanny resemblance to the mediatised mystification of the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq invasion of 2003. However, that said, the chapters concerned were never originally intended to be included in a book about Orwell's journalistic legacy and these slight lacunae take nothing away from *Journalism beyond Orwell* as a highly valuable and significant addition to the literature on the author which, hardly surprisingly, given the acute relevance of his work to our deeply troubled 'post truth', authoritarian and war-ravaged era, is ever growing..

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Disrupting the academy with lived experience-led knowledge

Maree Higgins and Caroline Lenette (eds) Policy Press, Bristol, 2024 pp 194
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Expert-knowers write chapters in this work, challenging academic norms, while providing potent examples of lived experience-led research. The epistemic justice framing in which lived experiences are prioritised and honoured, entwines with social justice.

As Estelle Keerthana Ramaswamy notes: 'Authors should declare their positionality in their research and writing to facilitate the readers' understanding as to why an author posits certain opinions in a certain way' (p. 121). Readers need to know where research and storytelling emerge from – a practice I particularly subscribe to as a person with disability working in research and living in a society that still has barriers, practices and attitudes that delimit our full participation and inclusion.

Editors Higgins and Lenette draw on Lorgia García-Peña: 'Academia's power resides precisely in its exclusivity and exclusion' (p. 152). In contrast, this book involves those at the fringes – respectfully relating their different ways of being, knowing and telling. If research is to benefit communities, researchers need to be part of individual communities, tapping into the expert-knowledge within them. This means lived experience leadership, lived experience researchers, lived experience informants, aided by allies who are immersed and invested in communities. Undeniably, truth and authenticity exist in these often marginalised experiences.

There are many acts of resistance, small and large, within this book. Each chapter introduces a marginalised group which relates experience through non-traditional output. One of the major concerns of the text is to promote the decolonisation of language. Chapter Two, 'Examining for the purpose of knowing: Ngaabigi Winhangagigu', tells of the reintroduction and rejuvenation of the Wiradyuri language led by the Elders, teachers and students who become teachers with knowers' perspectives. As Uncle Stan Grant writes: 'Language has the power to draw you in. It locates you, it gives you strength, belonging and connection' (p. 32).

In 'Ethical and decolonial considerations of co-research in refugee studies: What are we missing', Sudanese researcher Atem Dau Atem tells of realising the word 'interview' cannot be used since it is too closely associated with police, interrogations, torture and trauma.

Chapter Five on disability research in Indonesia highlights the issues when local dialects in regional and rural areas differ from the language of the researchers in the capital city. The Pacific islander community's experiences with Covid-19 (Chapter Eight) also underlines the importance of prioritising the information needs of marginalised groups in both disaster relief efforts and in research.

Too often the perspectives of the participants in research are missed. Here, the creative responses of participants/researchers in the Sydney- based Black Dog Institute's 'Under the Radar Project' on suicide

prevention in men, are memorable. One writes a poem, ‘My only friend the end’, about his intense suicidal thoughts and, paradoxically, the comfort they give him (p. 68).

Disrupting the academy necessitates embracing what Higgins and Lenette call the ‘messiness’ of lived experience-led research which can be ambiguous, fluid and shifting. In Chapter Seven, Ramaswamy, a transwoman/transfemme, argues that trans and gender diverse research should be lived experience-led and not undertaken by others ‘however noble their intentions may be’ (p. 129).

This work demonstrates that melding lived experience, lived experience leadership and scholarship, works for knowledge building and community benefit. So live dangerously: read and internalise this work’s premises. Commit an act of resistance by reflecting and challenging your research practices – disrupt the academy.

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