

Some Interpretations on Misinterpreting George Orwell's Animal Farm

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Abstract

George Orwell's slim little novel, *Animal Farm*, has been a staple of American schools and culture since it was published. It has become a cultural touchstone around which misinformation has dominated. The novel has grown far past its original context to take on new meanings and interpretations. Beginning in the classroom, many students are given flawed information about the novel and the author's intention. This narrative around *Animal Farm* has extended to its use in the political arena. George Orwell's slim little novel, *Animal Farm*, has been a staple of American schools and culture since it was published. *Animal Farm*, a political allegory by George Orwell,¹ remains one of the most widely read and influential books in our culture, in part because it is a staple of the high-school English class. *Animal Farm* was written for a specific time and place: expressly as an allegory for the formation of the Soviet Union. And yet, the novel has captured our cultural imagination far beyond that pocket of history. References to *Animal Farm* can be found across decades and mediums of art, from comics to Pink Floyd. It has become a cultural touchstone around which misinformation has dominated. The novel has grown far past its original context to take on new meanings and interpretations. Beginning in the classroom, many students are given flawed information about the novel and the author's intention. This narrative around *Animal Farm* has extended to its use in the political arena. Parallels have been drawn, for example, between the novel and an eclectic collection of issues, from Obamacare to the 1%. These disparate connections demonstrate the novel's peculiar vulnerability to appropriation. The social context in which any book is read changes the reader's perception of its meaning, but *Animal Farm* seems more flexible than other works. It has been misused by many political movements, but I will examine three of particular interest: western propagandists from the Cold-War era, neoconservatives from the 1960s who were opposed to communist ideals, and the modern left who support elements of democratic socialism. Finally, after examining these three movements in relationship to *Animal Farm*, I will posit that *Animal Farm* is vulnerable to this kind of appropriation because it is an allegory, a form that is predisposed to misinterpretation, and because it only provides negative political commentary. By this I mean that it does not offer any solutions or constructive insight. This is a peculiarity of the book, not necessarily a flaw.

KEY WORDS: *Animal Farm*, cultural touchstone, interpretations, movements, Political Allegory, propagandists.

Introduction:

In the decades since *Animal Farm*'s publication, many political groups, often with conflicting ideologies, have latched onto it. In his essay, "The Dual Purpose of *Animal Farm*" Paul Kirschner examines a timeline of abuse that exemplifies the variety of interpretations this novel has gone through. Sure enough, English communists attacked *Animal Farm* as anti-Soviet, while a conservative chided Orwell for forgetting that private property is a prerequisite for personal freedom. Western propagandists hijacked the book after Orwell's death, but twenty years later George Woodcock found it showed the identity of governing-class interests everywhere, by 1980 Bernard Crick had to caution against reading it as a case for revolution. In 1998 critics were still debating whether *Animal Farm* implied 'that revolution always ends badly for the underdog, hence to hell with it and hail the status quo.' The confusion...came not only from the readers' prejudices, but also from the story itself.

Kirschner goes into interpretations even beyond the limitations of this article that illustrate the many confusions surrounding the book. As Kirschner discusses, *Animal Farm* has been read as both advocating for and cautioning against revolution. There is a case for both it being specific to the Soviet Union and it condemning all governing classes. *Animal Farm* exists in a cloud of contradiction and ambiguity, but I will explore which form of government and economy these different political groups have read *Animal Farm* as supporting. The first political group to make a positive reading of *Animal Farm* as advocating for a particular form of government are the western propagandists Kirschner mentions, who projected onto *Animal Farm* their own capitalist agendas.

Cold War era propagandists and British and American intelligence agencies were the first to co-opt this book, turning Orwell's politically dissident parable into capitalist propaganda. In 1950, around the beginning of the Cold War, George Orwell died of tuberculosis, and almost immediately after, intelligence agencies became interested in the novel because of its seemingly anti-communist stance. CIA operative Everette Howard Hunt obtained the film rights to the book. Using copies of the book and a film adaption that simplified and intensified the anti-communist message, western intelligence agencies turned Orwell's story into a kind of war propaganda and disseminated it both in the west and abroad (Menand). In his article for *The Journal of Comparative Poetics*, Andrew Rubin discusses the distribution of *Animal Farm* as propaganda. According to Rubin, the CIA smuggled the novel into the Soviet Union and provided funding to translate the book into a host of languages including Farsi, Telugu, Malaysian, Greek, Vietnamese, and Arabic (82). These translations were meant to target "at-risk" areas like India and Vietnam, and were considered to have "excellent propaganda value and wide popular appeal in the middle east" (Rubin 82). It is difficult to assess the success of the dissemination of *Animal Farm* abroad, but it was an effective rallying point for anti-communist sentiment in the west. On a similar note, in his *New Yorker* article, "Honest, Decent, Wrong." Louis Menand claims that "the great enemy of propaganda was subjected, after his death, to the deceptions and evasions of propaganda—and by the very people, American Cold Warriors, who would canonize him as the great enemy of propaganda." Menand is explaining the irony of the Cold War perspective on *Animal Farm*. During this period, the American government and anti-communist political thinkers held up this book as a bastion of free speech while at the same time distributing it as capitalist propaganda. The still prominent perception of *Animal Farm* as wholly anti-communist was consciously manufactured by Cold War propagandists.

The neoconservative interpretation of *Animal Farm* followed logically from the misinformation spread by the intelligence agencies, but is more specific to U.S. politics. Furthermore, instead of being used as a weapon against the Russians, neoconservatives deployed *Animal Farm* against American liberalism. Neo-conservatism as a political ideology formed from left-leaning politicians in the 1960s whose strong anti-communist views precipitated an evolution toward modern conservatism. They were typified by a glorification of democracy and have become the new face of the right, peaking during the Bush administration. As a direct result of the CIA turning the book into a bastion of democracy, neoconservatives started claiming Orwell as one of their own a few decades out from the writer's death, and many conservatives still consider Orwell a hero. They latch onto *Animal Farm*'s anti-authoritarianism, claiming it supports small government. *Animal Farm* is often used in conservative political cartoons and rhetoric (Senn). This started in Norman Podhoretz's essay, "If Orwell Were Alive Today," in which he rebrands Orwell as a conservative. On *Animal Farm* in particular Podhoretz writes, "[Orwell] produced a satire on the Russian Revolution so unsparing that it could be and usually was interpreted as a repudiation of all hopes of a benevolent socialist revolution" (Podhoretz 32). According to Podhoretz and his contemporaries, *Animal Farm* was a condemnation of socialism and socialist revolutions. This view ignored Orwell's own claims about his controversial little novel and much of what is known about Orwell's political thought. The final political interpretation seems to be closer to what Orwell may have intended.

Socialists and liberals have also had an affinity for Orwell for decades. Orwell has always called himself a socialist, and these interpreters tend to draw on his own words. Admittedly, the writer could be quite critical of his allies. For example, he once called his fellow British socialists a "dreary tribe of high-minded women and sandal-wearers and bearded fruit-juice drinkers who come flocking toward the smell of 'progress' like bluebottles to a dead cat". His politics were complicated and contradictory, but socialist is as accurate of a title

for him as can be found, especially considering he also wrote, “every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it”. The caveat “as I understand it” is an accurate marker for Orwell’s discomfort with the predominant theories of socialism and his status as an outsider. In the same vein, Orwell touches on what he hopes for his novel in the preface of the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*:

Even if I had the power, I would not wish to interfere in Soviet domestic affairs: I would not condemn Stalin and his associates merely for their barbaric and undemocratic methods. It is quite possible that, even with the best intentions, they could not have acted otherwise under the conditions prevailing there... But since 1930 I had seen little evidence that the USSR was progressing towards anything that one could truly call Socialism... And so for the past ten years I have been convinced that the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if we wanted a revival of the Socialist movement.

His goal was not to meddle in foreign affairs, but to prevent the British Labor Party from idolizing the Soviet Union. Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* in a pro-Russian political atmosphere brought about by World War II. He was concerned that by holding up the Soviets as a model of communism, British socialists would be led astray. It was pure irony that only a few years later, western sympathies toward the soviets would entirely reverse. This quote illustrates two points: the propaganda-like use of *Animal Farm* was against Orwell’s intentions, and Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* with a pro-socialist agenda in mind. That socialist agenda certainly casts some doubt on Podhoretz’s earlier claim that *Animal Farm* condemns all hope for a socialist revolution. Modern readers who interpret *Animal Farm* as supporting a more socialist political paradigm abound.

One such reader is MSNBC’s Krystal Ball, who said: “*Animal Farm*. Isn’t that Orwell’s political parable of farm animals where a bunch of pigs hog up all the economic resources, tell the animals they need the food because they’re the makers and then scare up a prospect of a phony boogie man every time their greed is challenged?” (qtd. in Encinitas). In other words, Ball believes that the events in the novel are analogous to corporate America. This comment applies *Animal Farm* to a new social context without taking into account its historically understood meaning, which is not dissimilar from what Podhoretz did when he applied *Animal Farm* to liberalism and what the CIA did when it applied *Animal Farm* to fostering anti-communist sentiment during the Cold War. Simply put, all of these examples, both liberal and conservative, have one thing in common: they have little to do with the Russian Revolution and the original context of the novel, and they all show how easy *Animal Farm* is to appropriate.

These interpretations demonstrate that, out of context, *Animal Farm* can stand for just about any ideology. Now it is time to discuss why *Animal Farm* is so easy to appropriate. There are many possible ways of thinking about this question. For example, thinking about the particular time and place in which each interpretation occurred might provide insight into why the interpretations are so different. But I believe that line of thinking will only get one so far. After all, neoconservatives and liberals with socialist leanings read *Animal Farm* in the same political climate and came up with two diametrically opposed interpretations. Instead, I want to discuss what elements of the text make it so strangely mutable. *Animal Farm* is primed for appropriation because of its allegorical form and tendency toward negation.

Animal Farm is often taught in schools as an example of allegory. Allegories in general are inclined toward ambiguity. University of Manchester professor Jeremy Tambling examines the ambiguity and duality of allegory in his article “For and Against Allegory.” Tambling claims that, among other things, allegories are conservative and strict, yet open-ended. They are revealing and yet they conceal. They are ambivalent yet highly structured (Tambling). No wonder this form has led to such confusion. The allegory of *Animal Farm* has made the book what it is—powerful, persuasive, uniquely creative—and yet has also contributed to its misinterpretation.

There are two aspects of allegory in particular that incline them toward ambiguity: their elemental, boiled-down nature, and their connection to morality tales. Both these aspects are at work in *Animal Farm*. Allegories are relatable, easy to understand stories that boil down complex realities to their essentials. CUNY

professor Morris Dickstein in his essay “Animal Farm: History as Fable” claims that: “The elemental character of the story makes its own case for plain decency and the need to face up to simple truths.” Animal Farm is “elemental” in part because allegory condenses complexities down to their basic elements. For example, the book reduces the complexities of Soviet policies to commandments painted on a barnyard wall. Animal Farm is elemental, allegorical, and figurative. The comparisons in the novel have a universal appeal. Anyone can relate the simple setting of a farm; there is no need to be informed of the Soviet Union to process the book. Because of this, the basic allegory of Animal Farm can be applied to many different political issues, as long as they have some element of authoritarianism. A book about Stalin will always be a book about Stalin, but a novel about rebellious pigs is endlessly applicable. Going back to Krystal Ball’s analysis, it is striking how apt the allegory of the novel applies to 21st century corporate America. The reductive metaphors on which the allegory is based seem to be endlessly renewable.

The other problematic trait of allegory is the expectation of a moral. Orwell subtitled Animal Farm “a fairy story,” and fairy tales and allegories go hand in hand. Orwell was inspired by morality tales and beast fables like Aesop’s fables when he wrote Animal Farm. Readers often pick up on the second aspect of allegory, Animal Farm’s similarity to other, morality oriented beast fables. Because Animal Farm’s allegorical structure brings up associations with morality tales like Aesop’s fables, readers are primed to search for an overarching “lesson.” And even though the book is more interested in exploring shades of gray than teaching a black-and-white lesson on good and evil, many readers still try to find the moral at the end of the story. These two aspects of allegory, an elemental nature and an association with morality tales, have led to misinterpretation. But the problems are not just simply caused by the allegorical form.

The other issue that has led to Animal Farm’s misuse is its problem with critique and negation. T.S. Eliot once discussed just this element of the novel in a letter to Orwell. When Orwell was first trying to publish this book during World War II, he was rejected by publishers, including Faber & Faber. Then editor-in-chief of Faber & Faber, T.S. Eliot, argued that the book was untimely and further said in his rejection letter: “Now I think my own dissatisfaction with this apologue is that the effect is simply one of negation. It ought to excite some sympathy with what the author wants, as well as sympathy with his objections to something: and the positive point of view, which I take to be generally Trotskyite, is not convincing” (qtd. in Jones). Many might agree that Animal Farm skewered Stalin and his policies while being sub textually supportive of other Marxist paradigms, as Eliot claims when he calls the novel “Trotskyite,” but the Cold War propagandists and neoconservatives discussed previously take the positive view to be more capitalist. Neither are on sure footing, as Eliot touched on in his letter when he says, “the effect is simply one of negation,” meaning ultimately there is no positive view in Animal Farm. It negates. It shows what not to be. It offers no concrete solutions. In her essay “Animal Farm: Satire into Allegory,” Lynette Hunter touches on this idea when she argues that Animal Farm is “limited to criticism and exposure of weaknesses, to saying what not to do rather than what to do” (35). To tease out this idea further, it is an easy thing to define Animal Farm as “anti”—anti-communist, anti-Soviet, anti-totalitarian, anti-authoritarian, or anti-capitalist. It lends itself to such language. In the novel, Orwell critiques and deconstructs the Russian Revolution, but he does not reconstruct anything in its place. This negation has the effect of allowing readers to “fill in the blanks.” Eliot filled that blank with Trotskyism, or communism. A few years later, Cold War warriors filled that blank with capitalism and western ideals. These interpretations could not be more in opposition with each other. Animal Farm is limited to criticism, and this has allowed readers to imagine their own version of a solution. This limitation has come back to haunt the novel again and again.

Conclusion:

Many readers, specifically Cold War propagandists, neoconservatives, and socialists, misinterpreted the novel based on its confusing and ambiguous form. The ambivalent allegorical structure, and the narrative’s negative structure, left the novel easy for appropriate in ways that are in opposition with Orwell’s intentions. But if all these people were off the mark, and Animal Farm was not advocating for any particular governmental system, then the book must have another purpose. Perhaps interpreters missed the full significance of the end of the novel,

when finally, the pigs become indistinguishable from the humans. This ending illustrates the circular nature of political processes and the corruption inherent in every political system. No system, even one as idealistic as communism (or animalism, as it is referred to in the book), can escape. *Animal Farm* seeks to criticize political systems and processes as a whole. It is a disservice to the novel to claim it supports any particular governmental system or to use it as political propaganda. Recall a revelatory moment in *Animal Farm* during the initial rebellion, when the animals painted seven commandments on the barn wall, the most important of which was this: "All Animals Are Equal." Toward the end of the novel, the now corrupt pigs painted over and rewrote the commandments. "All Animals Are Equal" was transformed into "All Animals Are Equal, but Some Are More Equal Than Others." In other words, the language of equality is transformed into the language of oppression. "All Animals Are Equal," which, to extrapolate, means all people are equal, is hardly a communist notion. It is the kind of thing most people, regardless of their political ideology, would agree on. But the pigs corrupt the egalitarian ideal and use it to confuse and manipulate the people. By misconstruing the book in the ways discussed, these ideologues are doing the same thing as the pigs. They are abusing the language of equality. In this case, the language of equality being abused is *Animal Farm* itself.

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