ORWELL, *ANIMAL FARM*, AND THE POLITICS OF CRITICAL RECEPTION


This article explores the critical reception of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* between the Second World War and the present day. Detailing the conditions surrounding the text's publication, immediate reception, and eventual canonization, the article illuminates how contradictions between Orwell's support for international socialism and his wartime embrace of popular English patriotism—between Left and Right—shaped critical debate about the novel's literary value and the consequences of its politics. Deemed unpublishable during WWII because of its critical send-up of the Soviet Union—a wartime ally in the fight against Nazi Germany—*Animal Farm* achieved significant success after the war, when the western world pivoted toward ideological opposition to communism. Ironically, the novel's send-up of the Russian Revolution, the reason for which it had initially been shunned, became the reason for its massive popular success. Critics of this era focused frequently on the implications of the text's form. Some lauded Orwell's skillful deployment of the barnyard fable, while others—and particularly those on the political left—excoriated the novel for its historical inaccuracy, disillusion, and failure of political imagination. For many of these same reasons, *Animal Farm* remained a contentious text throughout the Cold War. Critics associated with the British New Left were forced to reckon with the power of the Orwell mystique, and to defend socialism against a seeming indictment from a disillusioned former traveler. This same problem offered conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic an opportunity to promote the novel as a warning on the inherent dangers of communism and socialism generally. Critical attention has waned since the end of the Cold War, and yet continually renewing debates about left politics and English national culture ensure that Orwell, his novel, and the contradictions which animate both will remain relevant well into the twenty-first century.

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