

Animal Farm: a new version on US television

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"All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others." (George Orwell, Animal Farm, 1945)

The US cable network TNT recently broadcast a well-publicised remake of George Orwell's classic, *Animal Farm*, directed by John Stevens. Orwell's book was written as a parable of the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union. This review examines some points in which the remake diverges from the original.

First of all, here is a summary of the plot as conceived by Orwell: One night, on a farm in which the animals are cruelly oppressed and exploited by the farmer, an old boar, "Old Major" (representing both Marx and Lenin), speaks to the other farm animals. He advises them to rebel, drive off the farmer and set up a new community under their own control.

Old Major dies three nights after his speech, but the animals heed his advice and soon drive out the farmer and his wife (representing the Russian Revolution). The leadership of the revolution falls to the pigs (the Bolshevik Party), because they are generally considered to be the cleverest of the animals. They also take over the leadership of the farm after the farmer is expelled. Seven principles are established and posted on a large wall, i.e., they form a constitution upon which the new society was to be based.

Two pigs in particular stand out. Snowball (identified with Trotsky) is highly intelligent and an exceptional administrator and Napoleon (Stalin) has the ability to get things done. These two pigs initiate all the animal's important schemes (although Snowball insists that through systematic schooling all animals are educated to the level of the cleverest animals, suggesting Lenin's proposition that every cook must be brought to the position of being able to administer the State).

The farmer subsequently attempts to recover his property, waging a battle in which the animals, under Snowball's leadership, prove victorious (the Civil War from 1918). Consequently, however, the farm is left in dire poverty. Not long afterwards a conflict emerges

between Snowball and Napoleon. Snowball starts the building of a windmill to provide the farm with electricity (the five-year plan for industrialisation), but Napoleon opposes this and wants to maintain emphasis on agriculture. The conflict concludes when Napoleon sets savage dogs (the GPU) onto Snowball and drives him from the farm—Napoleon has trained the dogs from birth and they are his compliant tools. Napoleon then takes up Snowball's plan for the windmill as his own.

A hard life begins for the animals. Back-breaking labour is imposed on them by Napoleon. Food supplies become ever more meagre. A system of terror and constant threat from Napoleon's dogs is built up, while Napoleon allows himself to be feted as a great leader and a grotesque personality cult is put into place.

One after the other of the originally formulated seven principles are betrayed by Napoleon and his clique. They begin to drink alcohol, to sleep in beds, and they reinstate the death penalty (referring to the great purges of the 1930s). They lay the groundwork for this by changing the original law. Thus, "No Animal shall kill another" becomes "No Animal shall kill another *without reason*". Of course it is Napoleon and his cronies who determine what reasons are valid.

The most grotesque alteration is that of the last law: from "All Animals are equal" to "All Animals are equal—but some are more equal than others".

At the end of Orwell's book it is impossible to tell the difference between the ruling pigs and man. Orwell's conclusion is pessimistic with no possible solution in sight. An earlier cartoon movie of *Animal Farm* yields to the gloomy scenario that one day the animals overthrow the pigs and reinstate mankind.

Orwell's book is a skilful metaphor about the degeneration of the Soviet Union which accords in many respects to Trotsky's analysis. Thus when Snowball (that is, Trotsky) after the great battle demands that pigeons are sent to neighbouring farms—to bring about revolutions there as well—Napoleon (Stalin) disagrees. This refers to Trotsky's insistence on world revolution, to which Stalin

opposed his concept of “Socialism in one country”.

However, this has not prevented *Animal Farm* being mainly interpreted in an anticommunist sense—as an indictment not against Stalinism but against socialism itself.

Orwell himself cannot be held chiefly responsible for this. He considered himself a social democrat and opposed Stalinism, for most of his political life, from the left. Close to the British Independent Labour Party, he enlisted in a POUM Brigade in the Spanish Civil War and wrote a scathing indictment of the Stalinist sabotage of the Spanish revolution in *Homage to Catalonia*. This earned him the hatred of not only the Stalinists themselves but also of those intellectuals who were attracted by Stalinism into popular front organisations, only to join the anticommunist camp in droves after World War Two.

In a proposed preface to the work, Orwell noted that the book “was first thought of, so far as the central idea goes, in 1937, but was not written down until about the end of 1943”. He was not free from the feelings of disappointment and bitterness that led many intellectuals to the conclusion that if communism was not directly responsible for Stalinism, it was inevitably condemned to degeneration, and that left oppositionists such as Trotsky were fighting a hopeless cause. From here it was only a short step to the conclusion that bourgeois democracy was preferable to a communist society. (This sort of thinking led Orwell in 1949 to turn over 35 names of Stalinists or sympathisers to a secret British government unit called the Information Research Department.)

In Orwell's book much remains open and ambiguous. The final political road he would have taken can only be surmised—he died only a few years after the book's publication, aged 47, of tuberculosis. It is therefore impermissible to merely dismiss his work as an anticommunist tract. The new TNT version, however, goes even further along this particular road than all previous interpretations.

Technically the production is striking throughout. In its extensive use of the latest computer technology, the film succeeds in presenting “real” animals, i.e., speaking pigs, horses and sheep. One departure from the book is in the point of view from which the story is told. In the book an omniscient narrator describes the events; in the film we see everything from the point of view of one of the (female) dogs. One might agree or disagree with this change—undoubtedly it makes the events more “palatable”, but an element of sentimentality intrudes which would have been better left out.

However, the ending of the film diverges markedly from the text. The dog tells how one day the rule of the pigs is overthrown (this accords with actual events over the past decade in which Stalinists were either driven out or went voluntarily).

But what then follows is just dreadful. New people take over the farm. A happy American family is shown driving through the farm gate in an open car. Father, mother, two adorable children (an insipid version of Blueberry Hill is being played on the car radio)—the perfect family, the perfect owners. The message to the viewer is obvious: thank God for the end of communism, thank God for the return of the market economy and human rights. The new rulers are the guarantors of peace, freedom and prosperity.

A look at the conditions in almost every country in which capitalism has been restored over the last years makes utter nonsense of such an interpretation. Russia today especially presents a picture of misery: poverty, disease, corruption, war—this is the real post-Stalinist reality. The TNT version is a striking example of how art is used by the ruling class for its own purposes, twisted in a particular direction and thereby turned, in this case, into a complete falsification. The work is used to make a particular political point, i.e., in praise of capitalism and its humanitarianism (e.g., in this case its concern for animals ...). What the story's author would have thought of the interpretation is of no more concern than the question of whether the particular point it attempts to make concurs with reality—which is certainly not the case in this instance.

The ruling forces demand of their subjects that they recognise capitalism as the only form of humane society—at the very moment they are increasingly and brazenly discarding their humanitarian facade (war against Yugoslavia, social spending cutbacks, the rightward turn of all political parties). And to this end, one is expected to close one's eyes to everything bound up with historical reality and artistic intent.

A wretched spectacle.



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