Twitter Thread by Celeste Headlee



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THREAD: Before any conservative tries to invoke George Orwell, let me tell you an interesting story about his first book.

Orwell was a policeman in Burma while it was still under British rule. In his early 20s, he quit to pursue writing. He decided he wanted to write about

the poorest in society, the homeless and the destitute. So, he went undercover as a tramp in both Paris and London. He lived in filthy dives, working as a dishwasher, and at one point having to sell his clothing to get lodging for the night in London. He described how different

he felt when he put on the ragged clothing and said, “Dirt is a great respecter of persons; it lets you alone when you are well dressed but as soon as your collar is gone it flies toward you from all directions.” Orwell was obsessed with the plight of the poor and

with the inequity in our systems that pushed people to the margins. “I shall never again,” he said, “That all tramps are drunken scoundrels, nor expect a beggar to be grateful when I give him a penny, nor be surprised if men out of work lack energy.”

Another quote from the book: “It is curious how people take it for granted that they have a right to preach at you and pray over you as soon as your income falls below a certain level.”

When he finished the book, he struggled to find a publisher. T.S. Eliot was an

editorial director at Faber & Faber at the time and rejected Orwell’s manuscript, saying, "We did find it of very great interest, but I regret to say that it does not appear to me possible as a publishing venture."

Eventually, Orwell threw the manuscript away while in the home of a friend. But that friend rescued it and brought it to a literary agent. It was then published by Gollancz, under the stipulation that Orwell had to remove the bad language. Orwell got a book advance of £40.

One more excerpt from the book, when Orwell is talking about the irrational fear of the poor, “based on the idea that there is some mysterious, fundamental difference between rich and poor, as though they were two different races, like Negroes and white men.”

Orwell goes on to say, “The mass of the rich and the poor are differentiated by their incomes and nothing else, and the average millionaire is only the average dishwasher dressed in a new suit. Change places, and handy dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Everyone

who has mixed on equal terms with the poor knows this quite well. But the trouble is that intelligent, cultivated people, the very people who might be expected to have liberal opinions, never do mix with the poor. For what do the majority of educated people know about poverty?”

So, I don’t recommend that wealthy conservatives conjure George Orwell to support their complaints. Orwell was a socialist, an activist, and no friend to the rich.

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