Stephen Sedley, in a 1984 article in *Inside the Myth • Orwell, Views from the Left* attacking George Orwell's *Animal Farm* as both politically and artistically lacking, points to the fact that his thirteen-year-old daughter was "bored stiff' by the novel, because she, like most students today, was "too new to political ideas to have any frame of reference for the story." In this, Sedley has a point: in the early 1980s, I was in high school and was given *Animal Farm* to read for the first time, along with the simple (indeed, simplistic) advice that this novel was an allegory of the Russian Revolution and the decline of subsequent Soviet Communism. The political environment in the United States being what it was in the early 1980s, coupled with the fact of my total lack of awareness of the circumstances of the Russian Revolution and the principles of Marxist-Leninist Socialism which the Revolution at first fought for and then lost sight of, my own interpretation of the novel resembled in both content and complexity the following statement: "George Orwell thought Communism was Bad."

*Animal Farm* is in fact one of the most studied and most readily misinterpreted novels of the twentieth century. And, given our distance from the events which it allegorizes and from the ideas it counterposes, it has only become easier to misinterpret since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The pigs have at last been vanquished, and Mr. Jones has returned to the farm, as we knew he would all along.

But in 1984, as Stephen Sedley was writing, there was no end to the Cold War in sight. The atmosphere on the Right was one of suspicion of all things Communist—the Soviet Union was, after all, the "Evil Empire," and the anti-Communist forces in the United States government held an unquestionable position of moral superiority. The atmosphere on the Left was no better—anything which looked like a criticism of the Soviet Union was considered a reactionary justification for the oppressions of capitalism.

It is this environment, then, which underscores Mr. Sedley's willful misreading of Orwell's tale. How else could he come to the conclusion that Orwell's argument in the novel is "that socialism in whatever form offers the common people no more hope than capitalism; that it will be first betrayed and then held to ransom by those forces which human beings have in common with beasts; and that the inefficient and occasionally benign rule of capitalism, which at least keeps the beasts in check, is a lesser evil"?

Insofar as I believe Orwell to have an argument in *Animal Farm*, I suspect that it was stated much more closely, with less intervening static, by Adam de Hegedus in an early review of the novel in *The Commonweal*:

Orwell is not angry with Russia, or with any other country, because that country "turned Socialist." On the contrary he is angry with Russia because Russia does not believe in a classless and democratic society. In short, Orwell is angry with Russia because Russia is not socialist.

Contrary to Sedley's claims, *Animal Farm* is not arguing for capitalism as the lesser of two evils, but is rather angrily pointing out the ways in which the Soviet experiment turned its back on its own principles—and is perhaps of the opinion that such descent from idealism to totalitarianism is inevitable in any violent revolution.

In order to read *Animal Farm* as the allegory which Orwell's contemporaries understood it to be, one must first have an outline of the key players. Old Major, the prize boar who first passes on his ideas about animal oppression by the humans and the future Rebellion of the animals, is commonly thought to represent either Karl Marx, one of the authors of the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, or Vladimir Lenin, who adapted Marx's ideas to the Russian Revolution. Neither Marx's nor Lenin's influence remained long in its original state. Just as with Major's ideas, followers of Marx and Lenin "elaborated" their ideas into a complete system of thought which did not exactly reflect the intent of the original. (Late in his life, Marx insisted that he was certainly not a Marxist.)

Napoleon and Snowball, the pigs who are primarily responsible for this elaboration of ideas into doctrine, represent Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky, respectively. Some of the novel's details slip a bit from a strict representation of reality, as Orwell found it necessary to compress some events and change some chronologies in order to make his story work. For instance, Snowball's original plans for building the windmill correspond to Lenin's plans for the electrification of Russia; however, though this plan was not the point on which the Stalin/Trotsky conflict turned, the ultimate result was the same as that between Napoleon and Snowball: Trotsky was driven from the country under a death warrant; he was reported to be hiding in various enemy states; he was held responsible for everything that went wrong under the Stalinist regime; and, ultimately, his supporters were violently purged from the ranks of the Communist Party.

These correspondences between the Russian Revolution and the Rebellion on *Animal Farm* are generally agreed upon by the critics. Not much has been said, however, about the allegorical roles played by the humans in the story. Mr. Jones, quite clearly, represents the last Czar in Russia, whose dissolution and cruelty laid the groundwork for the workers' rebellion. The neighboring farmers, Mr. Pilkington of Foxwood and Mr. Frederick of Pinch-field, who are described as being "on permanently bad terms," represent the leaders of England and Germany respectively. The closeness of their names seems to imply an essential sameness—quite a shocking notion for a novel written at the end of World War II!—but Pilkington is described as "an easy-going gentleman farmer who spent much of his time in fishing or hunting according to the season," and his farm is "large, neglected, [and] old-fashioned." Frederick, on the other hand, is "a tough, shrewd man, perpetually involved in lawsuits and with a name for driving hard bargains," and his farm is "smaller and better kept." Pilkington is thus representative of the Allies' lackadaisical attitude toward their neighbors, while Frederick carries with him elements of German aggressiveness and bellicosity.

In fact, late in the novel, "terrible stories" begin leaking out of Pinchfield about the cruelties Frederick inflicts on his animals, no doubt corresponding to the horrors of Hitler and the Holocaust. It is thus that much more shocking when Squealer (who, as Napoleon's mouthpiece, might be said to correspond to *Pravda*, the Soviet propagandist press) announces that the deal Napoleon had been working out to sell some timber to Pilkington has instead been changed so that the deal will be made with Frederick. This devastating turn of events corresponds to the revelation in 1939 of the secret Nazi-Soviet anti-aggression pact which, like the peace between Frederick and *Animal Farm*, did not last long, but was abruptly ended by Hitler's attempted invasion of Russia.

Once Russia entered the European war on the side of the Allies (culminating in victory for the Soviet Union, as Squealer claims for *Animal Farm*, though the only victory was in gaining back what they had before), increasing attempts were made by Stalin to achieve some level of entente, or agreement, with the other Allied nations. A series of meetings were held between the leaders of the various nations, and one particular conference held in Teheran after the war began the eruption into detente, or discord, which resulted in the protracted Cold War. This conference is represented in the novel by the meeting between the pigs and the humans at the end, at which a quarrel breaks out over cheating at cards.

Despite this discordant note, however, the final lines of the novel reveal the greatest shock of all. As the other animals watch through the windows, they notice:

Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.

These lines are crucial to a full understanding of the novel. Orwell does not claim here that Napoleon/Stalin is worse than the humans, and thus that the animals would be better off under benign human control. In fact he points to an ultimate identity between the pigs and the humans, between Stalin and the leaders of the "free" nations, an idea which would have been considered heresy by both sides. This conclusion implies not that the Rebellion has been a failure because the animals are worse off than they would have been under the rule of Mr Jones, but that the Rebellion is a failure because it has completely set aside its own ideals—which may be seen in the corruption of each and every one of *Animal Farm*'s Seven Commandments—and landed everyone back exactly where they started, with the many suffering abuses in order to support the position of an elite few. Or, in the interpretation of George Woodcock in *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell*:

old and new tyrannies belong to the same family; authoritarian governments, whether they are based on the codes of old social castes or on the rules of new political elites, are basically similar and present similar dangers to human welfare and liberty.

It seems clear as I reread the novel now, understanding better than I did as a teenager the background against which Orwell wrote his allegory, and paying close attention to the implications of the novel's last few lines, that no part of the novel presents any such simplistic, cut-and-dried message as "Communism is Bad." Even Stephen Sedley's more sophisticated argument about the novel's ideological unsoundness suffers from an apparent—and misguided—belief that Orwell as novelist held any sympathy for Jones, Pilkington, or Frederick.

Other critics, such as Robert A. Lee, writing in *Orwell's Fiction*, hold that it is in fact dangerous to read *Animal Farm* too strictly as an allegory of a specific set of events, as one may in that way miss a broader applicability of its meaning. Lee argues that *Animal Farm* is more than an allegory of twentieth-century Russian politics, and more even than an indictment of revolutions in general: "Orwell is also," claims Lee, "painting a grim picture of the human condition in the political twentieth century, a time which he has come to believe marks the end of the very concepts of human freedom."

This picture of the human condition is what Orwell's allegory has to offer us today, now that the Cold War has been "won" and the humans are back in control of the farm. I do not believe, as Sedley seems to, that Orwell would be relieved that the "benign, inefficient" capitalists are back in charge; I believe he would instead point out that we are deluding ourselves if we think we are closer to those revolutionary ideas of justice, brotherhood, and equality than were the citizens of Stalinist Russia.

Source: Kathleen Fitzpatnck, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1998.