

# Modern british history argumentative essay

[Countries](#), [England](#)



Orwell's essay 'England Your England' written in 1941 is typical of the confusion that is felt by individuals and the whole of the country in uncertain political times. George Orwell attempts to set some kind of direction for the country amongst all the confusion of war. England was being bombed by the Germans in WWII at the time. This paper will argue that the central thesis of the essay was that English patriotism and loyalty exists in different forms depending on class in normal circumstances. As a collective idea, it is far more complex and is undergoing transition. For Orwell, the direction of patriotism and loyalty pointed towards an English style socialist revolution capable of fixing the countries social and economic problems. The thesis of the paper is seen through the lens of sub themes that explain the terrible position that the country had found itself in after successive wars, military disasters and a crumbling empire. Orwell also attempted to demonstrate conflicts and divisions in British national character, the class divisions, the decay of the ruling class, the extension of the middle class in the context of the left wing intelligentsia and anti militarism throughout the country. This paper reviews Orwell's historical assessments critically. Nonetheless his work appeals to the common sense of all classes observations of history. It supported his ideas about a democratic socialism for the greatest number. The opening hook line of the essay appealed to the interest of readers from all classes of society and demonstrated where England was positioned in history.

As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me. They do not feel any enmity against me as an individual, nor I against them. They are 'only doing their duty', as the saying goes. Most of them, I

have no doubt, are kind-hearted law-abiding men who would never dream of committing murder in private life. On the other hand, if one of them succeeds in blowing me to pieces with a well-placed bomb, he will never sleep any the worse for it. He is serving his country, which has the power to absolve him from evil.

If a country can abscond the evil of killing another individual in the name of duty then that source must be powerful enough for millions of individuals to risk their lives for something larger. The soldiers gave up personal liberty and their private life to fight a war that many from different classes did not fully understand. Their opinions of the war suffered the same prejudices and contradictions that all classes had about fighting a war. Much depended on the morals and understandings the English inherited through British history. The soldiers could have become conscientious objectors or joined a revolution against the war or the government. Many have debated that the government lead them into the disaster through appeasement or other policies. Surely contradicting the government was no less dangerous than being at war or being killed by a German bomb?

Orwell argued that patriotism and national loyalty were essential to uniting the country, even more than religion or politics and explained why people were ready to send themselves off to war. He viewed the Nazis and Fascist patriotism as a positive force that their opponents could not grasp in the lead up to the war. His opinion was that it could be used as a model for a more moderate socialist government that did not embrace right wing extremism but rather a distinctive British character. He then demonstrated how individuals in England from every class viewed their personal liberty and

patriotism to England. He believed that patriotism was a strange mixture of reality, illusion, democracy, privilege, humbugs and decency; a subtle network of compromises by which the nation keeps itself in check. Another theme runs through the paper and that is of the English people's tendency to change mood about many things, including leadership and politics. For example Neville Chamberlain was openly praised for his policies in the lead up to WWII however it was only when the results of his policies were fully known, were the English critical enough to change their mood and pick a leader like Churchill who understood that wars were not won without fighting. The writer believed that England will pick another leader who can grasp that only Socialist nations can fight effectively. Throughout the description of British character, Orwell conveyed a feeling of confusion, change and compromise when it was required and in times of crises. Despite England's best efforts at understanding the change of moods, he managed to convince the reader that the current system was not working because certain fragments of British society were unable to comprehend the vast changes that were happening in Europe and England at that time. It leaves the reader feeling that the British character is one full of contradiction but capable of patriotism. It will ensure some kind of Socialist revolution with the right leadership will come about. The leadership will have to understand the English character's failings as a society and can then view the diverse forms of patriotism as a positive force. A force that brings about a democratic, socialist government not the one that is espoused by the Nazis or Fascists that is right wing extremist.

Orwell began the task of identifying patriotism and national loyalty by

looking at a jigsaw of characteristic fragments and trivialities that had no connection with each other from an outsider's perspective. He attempted to find a pattern that distinguished the English view of patronage and loyalty that was different from other European countries. This was conveyed by making the reader think of diverse and unique images of England that an everyday outsider would see when walking around England. He portrayed an abstract country and cleverly set a mood for England. He talked about words such as 'rolling green hills', 'autumn mist', 'people cued outside labour exchanges', 'pin tables on Soho pubs' and 'old maids hiking to Holy Communion'. He demonstrated the diversity and uniqueness of the country. Orwell set the scene of the British character within his thesis and gave the reader an idea about the sub themes he will use throughout the essay. He did this with direct language that was not overly poetic to appeal to a large audience however this resulted in a very narrow perspective and simplicity; two of the writer's weaknesses.

The writer made generalisations and stereotypes of the English and of other European cultures throughout his analysis. He mentioned English stereotypes such as 'bad teeth' and 'soft manners'. He wrote about other European stereotypes such as the "Spaniards are cruel to animals, Italians can do nothing without making a deafening noise, obviously such matters don't matter in themselves. Nevertheless, nothing is causeless and even the fact that Englishmen have bad teeth can tell something about the realities of English life." . This made the reader ask, why did he mention such stereotypes if it meant nothing in itself? Of course there was a purpose to using such language and it was to show people's differences. He did this with

his usual style of paradoxes and contradiction but really demonstrated himself to be prejudice throughout his assessment of the British culture. The paradoxes continued, the writer added that England was unique, because its people were not gifted artistically or musically. He created images of England that could be viewed as artistic throughout the paper. For example the following line created an image in the reader's mind. " It is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own" Moreover such a generalisation about the English not being as artistic or musical as other European countries is debatable and there was no solid research to back up this statement. Rather than being critical of Orwell however the reader must understand that his historical assessments are not mean to be academic. The typical Orwell nuances demonstrated how the English saw themselves in a culture that was living now but was grounded in the past. The past must be reflected in the way that a society acted in the present. The morals and history were bound up in the way that people of every class lived their life in the present.

The English were not as intellectual as other European countries and lacked a systematic philosophy according to Orwell's observations about the British character. Furthermore he believed that the English are only capable of abstract thought without a world view and lacked efficiency and practicality. One must be critical again of such a statement. The reader was unable to see any evidence of other countries systematic philosophy that is of more value than the English. It is difficult to see how the lack of English philosophy

or world view stood out from other countries.

The writer conceded that the English had a talent for literature but added that this was the only art that could not cross frontiers. He believed that it is not worthy because it had no value outside its own language-group apart from Shakespeare. His assessment about the history of literature in England and Europe was flawed. He failed to recognise that the spread of literature was slow throughout Europe because of technology. Other writers also influenced European literature such as James Macpherson (1736- 96) who was the first poet to gain an international reputation. Fingal written in 1762 was translated into many European languages has been accredited more than any other single work for bringing about the Romantic Movement in European and German literature . Orwell did not have the passing of years to benefit of him in knowing that Shakespeare's plays have been translated into every major living language; surely a global achievement.

It is easy to be critical of Orwell's generalisations about English history however; Myers (2000) believed that Orwell's strengths lied in his ability to connect with the common sense of readers without complicated arguments. His arguments were based more on observation than anything else and his views of Socialism could be very un-theoretical. He could ground the reader in the everyday culture of the English who for the most part were removed from the left wing intelligentsia. This made for a more engaging and entertaining read for people of varying classes however it did not make up for the lack of historical interpretation as a member of the left wing intelligentsia.

Orwell openly criticised the intelligentsia but was also part of it, another

contradiction. For example he describes how as a collective, the group was out of touch with the common people “ with their out-dated, leisure-seeking lifestyle that take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow.” Furthermore he observed a left wing intelligentsia that completely “ lacks constructive suggestion and never expected to be in a position of power”. The hypocritical position of the left wing intelligentsia changed depending on the conflicts and social climate of the time. This meant that it was far easier for them to be in such a position. A position that does not have to consider what affect the power of their decisions will make on large groups of people. They were therefore unable to view objectively the decision of the ruling elite and were too far removed from the common culture of the country to be successful revolutionaries. Orwell believed that the distinguishing characteristic of the intelligentsia is that they were ashamed of their own country.

The views of the intelligentsia reflected harshly on individuals in or about to serve in the military. The group was critical of the military decisions, the empire and the ruling elite and this filtered through to the morale of the military. The terrible decisions of senior military and government officials resulted in military disasters such as Gallipoli in WWI and Dunkirk in WWII. The disasters were criticised harshly. Orwell believed that the left wing intelligentsia became aware that the government and military were still holding onto ideas from the time of the aristocracy. This made it difficult for intellectuals to express their opinions and policies in high ranking positions. It resulted in a number of left wing individuals that were unable to identify with a military that was holding onto a stagnant empire. Furthermore there



was the decay of a ruling class that was unable to wield imperial power directly. Rather they had to work within the rules of government. This did not appeal to young men that viewed senior officers as being dedicated to red tape and paper work than empire building. Orwell believed that the attitudes of both imperialists and the left wing were a product of the ruling class's inept ability to understand the modern political outlook. It was also a result of social changes that could not contain the illusion of a proud and vast empire. The ruling elite could not control the pressure from reform elements in England.

Orwell believed that the English were always hypocritical of the military activities and there was a contradiction of gentle manners and anti military sentiments expressed by the lower and middle classes. This was from a country of individuals that lived in an empire that was so large that at the peak of its power, the phrase "the empire on which the sun sets" was used to describe the expanse of the empire around the world. The sun was shining on at least one of its territories all the time. Attitudes towards English officers and Red Coat soldiers were often hostile. Orwell also believed that the military was represented by mostly the landed gentry and manned by slum proletarians, farm labourers and a small amount of working class. The army was always tiny and there were constant difficulties filling the ranks. Many of the soldiers and senior officers had been booed in some instances.

Furthermore the army and sergeants created songs that were mock defeatist and humorous rather than proud patriotic songs. The country had an almost unsaid double faced attitude to the military by either politely ignoring or attacking it but defending it at the last minute. It might well be true that

since the “ fifties every war in which England has engaged has started off with a series of disasters, after which the situation was saved by people comparatively low in the social scale”. For example he described a country that prevented invasion and saved the army from Dunkirk and the whole country suddenly worked together and then went back into seclusion. The hostile attitude of the lower and middle classes, the saving of the country from disaster at the last minute, the gentle manners, and the large crumbling empire are a mass of contradiction and confusion. The writer believed that this is regarded as normal to some extent and that every country works against the existing order. Despite hostilities towards the empire, England did not get caught up in power politics, war cries, and demonstrations unlike other European countries. There was no large youth movement like the Fascist and Nazi governments either. Furthermore there was very little evidence of hostile attitudes in the way that the English military presented itself. It did not use the goose step like the Nazi or Fascist soldiers. The English march was more like a formalised walk because soldiers would get laughed at otherwise. This was because Orwell believed that “ What English people of nearly all classes loathe from the bottom of their hearts is the swaggering officer type, the jingle of spurs and the crash of boots.” .

The patriotism of England was not vocal or conscious in many cases and most of the patriotism and war mongering was done by a minority.

Patriotism was sporadic in the context of Britain’s national class system and within the countries different laws and class allegiances. This created compromises between individual liberty and patriotism or militarism. Orwell

believed that England was like a family and described the class differences within it;

“ England resembles a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family, it has rich relations who have to be kow-towed to and poor relations that are horribly sat upon, and there is a deep conspiracy of silence about the source of the family income. It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts. Still, it is a family. It has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy it closes its ranks. A family with the wrong members in control – that, perhaps, is as near as one can come to describing England in a phrase.”

Orwell’s statement was supported by his opinion that the gap between rich and poor was larger than any other European country. Economically the country is “ two, if not three or four nations” and he believed that “ England is the most class ridden country under the sun”. There were no concrete statistics or research to support this statement and therefore it was another generalisation by the writer. Orwell’s views may be supported by evidence of his other works that perhaps his audience had already followed. The mass unemployment in northern England that Orwell was talking about in the Road to Wigan Pier, written in 1937 is one such example. Again his statement appealed to a socialist revolution and to common ideas that most people were aware of in their English history. He did not compare English class to any other countries and did not mention the role that culture and ethnicity had on class. Moreover he did not mention why class was so much more prominent in the UK than other European countries. There were a number of

other European countries where class differences were evident such as Spain and Italy.

Patriotism existed in different classes and in different forms with a connecting thread through all of them according to the writer however class is stronger in the middle than the upper class. For example the cheap public schools were prone to demonstration while the expensive were less so. The working class was not driven by loyalty to England but was more patriotic because of an unconscious form of patriotism like xenophobia and a refusal of foreign customs. For the ruling class, patriotism came in a different form that was often viewed as hypocritical. The common view may have been that the ruling elite sent men to their death in war, mismanaged the economy and military at the same time. Orwell believed that they are not without a conscience, are morally fairly sound and ready enough to get killed. There are plenty of earls and dukes that were killed in campaigns in Flanders and when popular opinion is really making itself heard, he believes that the ruling elite cannot avoid feeling, and find it is difficult not to respond. He was critical of the left-wing writers who denounced the whole of the ruling class as 'pro-Fascist' and believed that politicians that lead them into the current war were probably unconscious of their decisions. There were plenty of examples in history where the aristocracy had let this vulnerability known before both of the wars. The reign of Queen Victoria demonstrated many examples where the royal family was involved with reform that was not in accordance with the desires of the empire. For example Victoria Gaskell the sister of Queen Victoria protested the grim reality of working class industrial misery through literature like 'Mary Barton' written in 1848.

Despite the recognition that the ruling elite are probably not the main conspirators of the war, the author was still critical of their role in British society. He believed that the upper class was still what it was in the mid 19th century despite the land owning aristocracy losing power slowly in 1832. The aristocracy married into the merchants and manufacturers that had replaced them and turned them into copies. They still learnt the right manners at public schools and received the same aristocratic education but were now more likely to have connections to parliament or politicians. The problem was that it was getting difficult for the ruling elite to justify public policies. The ruling elite were seen as being hypocritical and were not taken seriously by the lower and middle classes. Money that they earned from exploiting labour in places like India made massive fortunes. The money did not go towards improving unemployment, housing and slums. Only the money class benefitted, but their class was also decaying because they became owners without imperial authority over their business interests. It was parliament that now exercised new laws and regulations. The money class with no power had difficulty investing because the new laws of parliament resulted in their decay. The slow transition from aristocratic rule to government rule meant that sham feudalism still existed in country areas of England. This explained the lack of changes to schools and the poor military decisions of high ranking officers that were still working under the same ideas of an imperialist Britain. The elite had tolerated the middle and lower classes while things were progressing for the empire however military incompetence started to result in a general disrespect for the elite. Many lower ranking soldiers knew they were up against militaries with modern ideas like the

Fascists and Nazis. The ruling class was unable to grasp Communism, Socialism, Nazism and Fascism and if they did they would have realised that the economic system was unjust, inefficient and out of date. If they had grasped the ideas, they may not have bothered because the rich have less to lose than communism or democratic socialism.

Orwell's assertion that during "the past three-quarters of a century there has been the decay of the ability in the ruling class due to their stupidity" is not necessarily correct. This decay probably arose from the changes in the English social mood. Orwell believed that that since the "fifties every war in which England has engaged has started off with a series of disasters, after which the situation was saved by people comparatively low in the social scale" It is the opinion of this writer that victories from 1850 onward were saved by those of a lower rank because other countries such as Germany maintained a stricter hierarchy, and it they forbid the inclusion of the lower classes in the decisions of the State and the military. In World War I, poor leadership came about not from the 'stupidity' of the elite, but from the rapid development of technology. The world had never experienced comprehensive changes to technology. It took time to understand how technology could counter the weaponry of other countries. The idea that the rich suddenly became 'stupid' is another example of Orwell's making unfair statements.

The old classification of society into capitalists, proletarians and petit bourgeois were now almost obsolete according to Orwell. England's wealth was still in very few hands but a growing middle class was required because of changes to technology. The boundaries between classes eroded because

of the trade union movement's reforms on wages. Most people now had access to better roads, police, libraries, cheap housing and clothes. Habits changed as more people had access to literature and less effort was required for manual work because of technology. There was more time for leisure and recreational activities. There was also a new indeterminate social class if one compared the differences in clothes and looks from 1910 to 1918. There were large numbers living in council flats with incomes and professions that varied widely. The wars most likely resulted in less class distinction but England will always keep its national character such as the gentleness, the hypocrisy, the reverence for law and hatred for uniforms unless prolonged subjugation happens.

George Orwell's 'England Your England' outlines the foundations of English national culture from the uncomplicated position of the foreigner or the common citizen. It reflected the historical and social context of the time through the everyday activities of all the classes. The paper appealed to the greatest amount of people that ensured a socialist revolution. A revolution would embrace patriotism and a more positive English character that was not extreme or right wing. Orwell and his writing suffer from an historical assessment that was often prejudice, general and contradictory. His historical assessment was more concerned with the passing of moral and historical lessons that resulted in what people of classes could identify with at that time in history. The divisions and contradictions in English society were also marked by compromise and an ability to change mood when the sentiment was right. The failure of English society to understand the underlying reason for their military failing, crumbling empire and decay of

the elite in the post imperial age resulted in an English society that was aware of the need for a socialist revolution with a democratic government that would retain a distinctive national culture.

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