Primary Sources
Rebecca Solnit on George Orwell

Eyal Press: From *Public Books* and Type Media, this is Primary Sources, the show where writers and intellectuals talk about some of the greatest influences on their work. I'm Eyal Press.

My guest today is the historian, activist, and essayist Rebecca Solnit. I've known Rebecca for almost a decade and, each time we see each other, it seems she has another new book out. Since 1990, she has written more than twenty, on subjects ranging from natural disasters and wandering to feminism and social change. In 2008, she published "Men Explain Things To Me," an essay about the experience virtually every woman has had of being talked over by a clueless, overconfident man. The essay gave rise to the term "mansplaining" (a term Rebecca herself never used) and, along with her other writings on gender and power, helped turn Rebecca into one of the most influential and admired feminist writers of our time.

In the past, Rebecca has singled out female authors such as Virginia Woolf as important influences. Today, though, she'll be talking about a more surprising writer to whom she feels she owes a debt: George Orwell.

Orwell is best known for essays such as "Politics and the English Language" and for his chilling portrayal of totalitarianism in novels such as *1984*. He has long been revered by male writers such as George Packer and the late Christopher Hitchens. But female writers, including Rebecca, have tended to be more critical, sometimes taking Orwell to task for ignoring the injustices of sexism.

And yet Rebecca counts Orwell as a major influence. In fact, she has devoted her latest book to his life and work. It's called *Orwell's Roses*, and it was inspired by a visit she paid to his rural cottage, where she learned about the gardening he did long ago. Rebecca contends that nature not only mattered greatly to Orwell, but that it is directly related to his antifascism. In our conversation, she elaborates on her unconventional view of Orwell. She offers an alternative reading of *1984*. She talks about how Orwell was both a socialist and a critic of the left, and why she identifies with this, and argues for the political importance of pleasure and beauty. And she explains why, despite Orwell's troubling silence about the plight of women, she believes we should still read his works.

Also, a heads up: this conversation includes multiple brief references to sensitive topics, including sexual violence and gender violence.

Eyal Press: Rebecca Solnit, welcome to the show. So glad you're here. When did George Orwell begin to matter to you?

Rebecca Solnit: I almost don't know because I read *Animal Farm* when I was still so young. I thought it was a book about animals and had strong feelings about Boxer, the horse. I read some of his other novels in my teens, *1984*, pretty early. And then I read *Homage to Catalonia*, which was a big influence on my second book, *Savage Dream*s, I wrote at the end of my twenties or so,

but the real landmark Orwell book for me was a big ugly kind of omnibus anthology of his essays called the *Orwell Reader* I bought at a used bookstore for a couple of bucks when I was either at the end of my teens or beginning of my twenties. And, you know, I grew up to be an essayist, which is pretty much what I intended, and that book, as much as anything, or maybe more than anything, really modeled for me, what essays could do and what an essayist could be.

Eyal Press: Mm, I'm guessing, though I'm not sure, that one of the essays in that volume is an essay– I believe it's the first piece of Orwell's writing that you mentioned in your book and it's titled "A Good Word for the Vicar of Bray," published in 1946. Was that in that book?

Rebecca Solnit: It was actually, and that was part of what was startling about this book is that I had read and loved that essay since my early twenties, I cited it in something I published in my late twenties, so clearly it was already really present, but I always thought it was fascinating as a fugitive trace of who Orwell might have been had he not lived in an age of so much corruption and conflict and turmoil. It felt to me like the person he couldn't be, the person he didn't have time to be, because he was this grim, serious anti-fascist figure, and really this book is launched from the realization that he did manage to be that person he is in the essay.

"A Good Word for the Vicar of Bray," for those who haven't read it, is this delightfully meandering essay. You feel a lack of pressure, both about the writing as well as about the subject matter. It's about various cultural things, and maybe the thread that runs through it is the idea that planting a tree, and especially he says, one of the long lived hardwood trees like a Walnut may outlive any other deed of yours, good or bad. And then the next time you check your karmic roster, you might slip an acorn or two into the ground; but he describes planting fruit trees and roses himself 10 years earlier and having just seen them and seeing how well they're doing, how little effort was involved at the outset and how the fruit trees may be bearing fruit into the 21st century. Even though it feels like a very slight essay in conventional terms, it's also looking forward to a 21st century from 1946 at the beginning of the atomic age. So it's also not at all pessimistic. It's actually thinking about the future in pretty ecological terms and relatively cheerful ones.

Eyal Press: And the Vicar of Bray is this figure who he says will be remembered for a Yew tree that has been planted outside of a church. Is that right?

Rebecca Solnit:- So yeah, the vicar of Bray in his essay is a comic figure who during the religious wars in England kept switching sides so that he wouldn't be killed or exiled or have to go into hiding. And so it's about a kind of political quislingism or fickleness; and the other thing he mentioned, the Cicar of Bray did is plant this magnificent yew tree, which it sounds very much like he's seen, although he doesn't specify. And, my friend Sam Green, who had a lot to do with the inception of this book, and I actually went and looked for the yew tree. We met the current Vicar of Bray who lives in a very conservative district and said some very "Vicar of Bray"-ish stuff about handling his Tory constituency–or congregation, not constituency. And we found some magnificent yew trees, but nothing that felt like the superlative yew we were looking for.

Eyal Press: And yet in that essay, you think there's something important—certainly to you; is it a sensibility? Is it just the fact that he's interested in nature and that in and of itself deserves more attention?

Rebecca Solnit: It's not only that he's interested in nature with all this talk about gardening and planting trees, but it's also a really cheerful, pleasurable essay. You can tell he's enjoying himself thinking about the song in this poem, thinking about trees and gardens and things like that. And, I had always thought of it as like the person Orwell might have been had he not been in this turbulent time.

But the interesting thing is, um, and of course the beginning of the book is, Sam Green may someday do a film about trees. We were talking about trees. We had been exchanging emails and clips and nuggets of facts about trees. We were hanging out in the summer of 2017. He was talking about trees planted by notable people. And I said, because of the essay, "Oh, you know, Orwell planted fruit trees." And then we jumped on my computer to see if they were still there. He wrote a letter to the address Orwell lived at in Wallington in Hertfordshire. And we hadn't received a response.

When I was on book tour later that year, we decided to take a cab to the cottage, met the lovely couple who invited me in, much to my surprise, showed me around, told me the fruit trees had been cut down, introduced me to Nigel next door who remembered the fruit trees, so at least they had a witness; and then very casually said, "Oh, but the roses he planted are still here. Would you like to see them?" And of course I was so exhilarated, but I left with the sense that I had never really thought hard enough about what it meant that our great anti-fascist, our great prophet of totalitarianism, the author of *1984*, "Politics of the English Language," and a lot of other very heavy-duty anti-fascist, anti-totalitarian, antipropaganda pieces of writing had planted roses and meeting what they then thought were his roses. They're now a little more dubious about that as I found out as we were going to press, but they may or may not be.

But it made me think, what does it mean that this man of all people planted roses? Because we often think of Orwell as the most austere, the most dedicated, the most grim, the man who—as he says himself—made his job facing unpleasant facts. The fact that he was also facing flowers, planting flowers, cultivating flowers, loving flowers in his vegetable garden, his goats and chickens, the natural world, birds, watching the weather, allowed me to pursue a bunch of questions I've long had about pleasure and beauty and politics and the left and the relationships between aesthetics and ethics and many other things and so a book was born in that garden in 2017.

Eyal Press: Rebecca, you mentioned *1984* and you use the word "grim". And I think that most people who hear that title and who have read the book and recall reading it maybe in high school or years ago, or maybe during the Trump era, think about the grim portrait of the world of this dystopian future that it paints. But you say in the book—you write quite a bit about *1984*—and you tell us about a different *1984* that you discovered upon rereading it. Can you say a little more about that?

Rebecca Solnit: Yeah. One of the great pleasures of having been around for a number of decades now is encountering the same work of art over and over and being a different person at different times. I had read *1984* many times starting with well before the actual year *1984* when I was very young, and of course what's startling and original and new to readers, particularly when it came out, is it's dystopian portrait of a totalitarian state that penetrates into people's homes, attempts to control their thoughts and emotions. And has the thought police and almost total control over people's lives. Of course that's most what we remember because that's most startling and significant about it in some ways.

But Winston Smith, the scrawny, not always courageous protagonist of it, rebels against Big Brother and how does he do this? He does eventually take real interest in overthrowing the regime, but he also just pursues introspection, personal life, a love affair. The very opening of the book, *1984,* begins with Winston Smith opening a book that he's bought in a junk shop in a proletarian district that will become very important. It's beautiful, creamy paper he's writing on with an inkwell and old-fashioned pen, and the sheer sensual pleasure of writing as well as having your private thoughts and a way of expressing them, is really the beginning of the book. He's staking out this space to be what he's not supposed to be, which is partly somebody having meaningful sensory experience, independent thought. But then, he has these dreams of the golden country, which is just a very quotidian British countryside place with molehills and pastures and trees and things. And when he falls in love with this young woman, she takes him off to consummate the relationship, in what turns out to be an exact duplicate almost of the golden country he's dreamed of.

And it's part of what's startling about the book when I read it this time; it's much less a realist objective style novel in that there's so many echoes between his dreams and actualities and there's a lot of eeriness in the book, but there's also a lot of beauty: there's birdsong, there's the golden country, there's little things—a glass paperweight with a bit of red coral in it, becomes a really significant object that represents this little world of his love affair, this link to earlier times. The sheer beauty of the object feels like resistance, because beauty itself is subversive.

And then finally, there's the woman singing outside the window of that room above the junk shop where the beautiful notebook and the paperweight came from. And she, for me, is the real hero and center of the book and the metaphor Orwell uses to describe her is roses and rosehips and that was startling to me. And it's very easy and often done by the left and the rest of the world, to treat sensory experience, these direct encounters, as somehow trivial, irrelevant, beside the point, but one of the points the book makes is that the regime wants—the last and final command of the regime was to not trust evidence of your eyes and ears. So, to trust evidence of your eyes and ears by paying close attention, by finding things that stimulate that attention, is a kind of subversion. It doesn't topple regimes, but it does cultivate trusting your senses, independence of thought, pursuing empirical evidence, and believing yourself rather than what the regime tells you.

Eyal Press: So, so to you, this surprising color and beauty even, in *1984*, is pretty central to the novel? You see it as a counterpoint and as an integral piece of the message of the book, if I'm hearing you right?

Rebecca Solnit: Yeah, I think we've all spent our time looking at Orwell as a writer who wrote about what he was against and he was very good at being against things, was passionately against authoritarianism, against propaganda and lies, the sloppiness of language that excuses human rights abuses, who's also very critical of industrialism and urbanism, who was a great lover of the countryside, et cetera. So not only does he actually write a lot about what he's for, including privacy, the privacy that, as Edward Snowden reminded us, is a necessary part of liberty and independence of thought and free association.

But he's for a kind of freedom to do what you want and his own freedom to do what he wanted turned out he wanted to garden, to be in the natural world, to milk his goats, and collect his eggs from his chickens, to ramble about in the countryside, to watch the weather, to go fishing. Those were his great pleasures. He died with a fishing pole in his hospital room, hoping to be flown to a sanatorium in Switzerland and get some fishing in. He began writing the novel *1984* by moving to the Isle of Jura in the Scottish Hebrides, a long-held dream of his, and spent that summer barely writing and mostly starting up a garden that would come to be on the scale of a farm: it ultimately would include a horse, two cows, a pig, geese as well as chickens, ornamental plantings, and a bunch of vegetables. And he also had a fishing boat and lobster traps and was eating a lot of seafood as well, which, in that era of British rationing, was also a very sane and healthy way to live.

Eyal Press: I'm sensing you delight in this sort of counter portrait of Orwell, as not the ascetic man at the typewriter, but rather the gardener.

Rebecca Solnit: It was really fun to find out that there was this other Orwell and I think it's not so much just about who Orwell is, but that so many people on the left in particular, and I think in our society in general, think if you're serious, if you're committed, you have to have this austere, joyless life. Something I often find on the part of the left and this around climate as well is the idea that a kind of puritanical self-denial is your noble contribution, and one thing I constantly insist upon is that people who are being hideously oppressed in other parts of the world are not sitting around saying, "well, at least those middle-class people in England or the US are not having nice desserts or flowers," you know? Nobody in a death camp or in the midst of genocide is like, "well, I'm glad they're not wearing pretty clothes in America," you know. That is not our valuable contribution. Our valuable contribution is to actually do shit for them and that is entirely compatible with tending your garden, listening to beautiful music, et cetera.

One thing that became very resonant for me in the book was the phrase "bread and roses," which was coined by a woman's suffrage organizer in 1910, Helen Todd, when she said, "if women get the vote," and of course this turned out to not exactly be the case, "but when women get the vote, we will have bread for all and roses, too." And bread meant the bare necessities of life, which is often all the left really campaigns for; and those are good things: we need food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, but the roses meant that we all need and deserve something more. We deserve that unquantifiable, experiential thing that is education, culture, leisure, beauty, nature, et cetera, and I love that phrase when I came to look at it deeply, because from its very origins, it meant we need more than the quantifiable. Human beings are not so contained and controllable. You have to leave some leeway for the fact that you may want to listen to cello concertos, and I may want

to listen to punk rock. You may want to go to all night raves and I may want to plant a vegetable garden. Our pleasures and joys are actually very subjective and individual and so we can't control human life enough to decide exactly what those are going to be.

Another piece of it that felt really important about Orwell is that he—he said in a questionnaire—one of those author questionnaires in 1940, "after writing, the thing I am most passionate about is gardening, particularly vegetable gardening." It raised also a question for me, what are those things we need to do in our lives that may be regarded by others, or even ourselves as trivial, irrelevant, indulgent, trite that, in fact, are what we actually need to do in order to be able to do the real work we're here to do?

Eyal Press: I noticed that there's one passage you quote twice in the book, and it relates very much to what you're talking about. It connects this sort of pleasure and this individual pursuit to the act of writing itself. Orwell says, "I could not do the work of writing a book or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience." You quote that twice and I wonder what it means to you and whether it is, in factm true for your own work?

Rebecca Solnit: It is absolutely true. Everything I write, beyond text messages, has some aesthetic dimensions, and there is a sense, I think with all my work, of coherence as a kind of beauty, integrity of meaning as a kind of beauty. And so there's another thing that's really important in the book—we often treat beauty as an optional luxury, a kind of add-on and a side dish, but I was very interested in, well, what is beauty to Orwell? And obviously he loves roses, in particular, and flowers in general. There are a lot of them in his books, a lot of them in his life; he plants and cultivates them. It's a beautiful description when he's in London during the war of someone coming up from the countryside with a bunch of grapes and one red rose, rare things at the time, and him cupping his wasted hands around the rose to smell it more deeply, holding it up to his face, the poet Ruth Pitter, who brought them, writes with an air of reverence. And roses were so fun for me because they kind of are the emblem of beauty at its most conventional, but what beauty was to Orwell I think, ultimately was a kind of integrity, something that is internally consistent, that has integrity in the moral sense, something that's honest and truthful to the best of the speaker or writer's abilities, something trustworthy. And, of course, you can invert that again and see what he was against was all this slippery, manipulative, deceptive, euphemistic, language so the aesthetic and the ethical began to seem not very separate at all but also, of course, you know, I not sure what page it's on as I look at the galley, the unindexed galleys I'm holding, but he does say in that wonderful passage, "as long as I live, I shall continue to feel strongly about,"—I'm quoting from memory—"obscure facts, love the surface of the earth, and take pleasure…in the sound of words," or something like that.

Eyal Press: Yes, it's—I think, if this is what you're referring to—"so long as I remain alive and well, I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take a pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information."

Rebecca Solnit: That's actually been, those few sentences have been the closest thing I've had to a kind of credo for the last 30 years. I absolutely love them. I love the individual eccentricity of scraps of useless information, loving the surface of the earth, and, again, it's this Orwell that we

have not been encouraged to see; this man who is doing his job against the horrors of his age, but is also taking pleasure, loving the surface of the earth, enjoying those scraps of useless information and feeling strongly about prose style.

Eyal Press: He's in tension with, you've said several times, a certain part of the left, maybe the dominant part of the left in his lifetime, that may see a certain interest in flowers or beauty and aesthetic experience as indulgent or extraneous to the class struggle and other more important things. Do you think that's still a problem on the left today—this sort of, I dunno what you want to call it: whether it's a certain kind of utilitarian thinking or just an indifference to aesthetic experience? Do you think that's less of a problem now or do you still feel yourself wrestling with some of the things that you think he was pointing out?

Rebecca Solnit: I think we now benefit greatly from organizers like Adrienne Maree Brown, who actually published a book called *Pleasure Politics*. I think that the Black Civil Rights movement, which had music and beauty was a lot less that way, but I think a lot of the white left and that kind of communist and communist-adjacent left, et cetera, did fall into a trap of this anti-aesthetic austerity, and I grew up also when people were calling everything bourgeois and Orwell writes about a woman writing in to say that flowers are bourgeois. And of course there's many answers to that, one of which is, well, do you think the proletariat doesn't want beauty and pleasure or do they just not have access to it? You know, are we not fighting not just for bread but roses, too? But the other thing is, it was also very fun to write this book. I told Sam that one point that I felt like I was throwing sissy flowers at manly Orwell because flowers are always seen as feminine, although they are the sexual parts of plants and they have both male and female parts, most of them. Flowers are treated as very trivial when the flowering plants are the dominant organisms on Earth. They make this world, they sequester the carbon, they feed us; we are utterly dependent upon them. If all the flowering plants disappeared tomorrow, we would disappear the day, you know**,** more or less the day after. So the roses were an invitation to think very hard about flowers, to think about plants, both before flowering plants existed, the earlier plants that sequestered all the carbon in atmosphere to create the modern atmosphere and the sequestered carbon that became the coal, oil, and gas we've been extracting for the last 150 years to create climate change, and also to think about plants and genetic science and the genetic controversies in the Soviet Union, where they decided to deny genetic science and Darwinism in favor of bogus science that helped create some of the mass famines of the Stalinist era, and also cause scientists either to be sent to the gulags, executed, or driven to suicide and exile because to tell the truth about even the nature of plants under Stalinism became a very dangerous thing to do and this man named Lysenko, who is promoting a lot of bogus science became kind of a darling of Stalin and the dominating figure for a while in Soviet science; and Orwell was fascinated by Lysenko, and the way that lies in science were functioning became very much an influence on *1984.* So again, plants are, you know, if you eat food and breathe air, plants are very relevant to your life. So, I wanted to get at that as well and in a way, Orwell, you know, the roses are a portal to look more deeply at Orwell, but Orwell is a portal also to look more deeply at plants and to think about plants in these political ways; political ways, because of the age we're in, that are inseparable from ecological ways, including climate change.

Eyal Press: There's a lot about climate change in the book and you say at various points, certainly one point I recall, that the understanding that what happens to nature is political was not

something that Orwell could see at the time, in the same way that we see it now in terms of making the planet uninhabitable, but he did take a great interest in the extractive industries: in coal, in thinking about how these industries shaped the modern world, and the role they played in the lives of people who never went near a coal mine. I wonder if you could tell us a little more about the Orwell who goes to the coal mines, which is an Orwell who fascinates me because he appears in my own recent book, *Dirty Work.* But tell us more about that Orwell.

Rebecca Solnit: Orwell plants those roses in the Spring of 1936. And he's just come back from the industrial north of England, near Manchester, the town of Wigan and its surroundings. He's been sent on assignment by his left-wing publisher to report on and write a book about the desperate poverty there of the unemployed and also he takes a very hard look at the coal industry, both the condition of the miners and their families. He goes down into the mines on three occasions and is really kind of stunned—much more than he is, I think, by the Spanish civil war or anything he tells us about his time in Burma—by what he sees: the sheer nightmare of these incredibly hot, often very low ceiling spaces you have to hunch over, even crawl through (sometimes the ceilings are only three feet high), these men who, half-naked or mostly naked, work in those conditions with no protection, inhaling the coal dust, filthy, only bathing once a week over their whole bodies, and just the intensity of the labor, he actually has, you know, he was a very unhealthy person, and his life has kind of a triumph over his medical condition. But he actually collapses after one of his visits and has to spend a few days in bed. And he says at one point that there's some kinds of manual labor he could imagine himself doing, but there's absolutely no way he could ever be a miner. He also says in this remarkable passage, that he's back in Wallington in this cottage in the country that he's just had coal delivered, and they've put it in the coal chute, that, how easy it is to not think about where things come from, and as an environmental writer, that's been one of my long interests.

I think that throughout most of human history, most of what you used, you would have some relationship to. If you wore wool clothing, you probably not only knew it came from sheep, you might know or own the sheep it came from. You might have done the spinning and weaving yourself or known who did. We live in a world of alienated commodities now, and this is very much what your book *Dirty Work* is about. It's very easy to not know where our meat, our food comes from, where our energy comes from; in Orwell's time, coal was very visible. You were building coal fires in grates and tending boilers, and stoker was a major job. Now, natural gas and other stuff is much easier to render invisible. When you put that gas pump nozzle in your gas tank, you're not going to see what comes out of it. You just see numbers rack up and so he was doing this really interesting thing that we do a lot as environmental journalists of connecting the dots, making the system visible so that readers would think harder about these pieces of the world that they're morally and practically engaged with but don't see. It seems striking to me that he comes back and almost immediately plants the first real garden of his adult life. It felt like he sees this world that feels so dead and filthy and ugly and miserable and exploitative. And that in some sense, the garden he plants is kind of the opposite of that. And then of course, he goes off to the Spanish Civil War at the end of 1936 and those two journeys to the coal mines in the North and to the Spanish Civil War, are what really do the job his left-wing friends couldn't do, of turning him into a deeply left-wing, deeply political writer, into the Orwell that has done so much for the discourse the last 80 years or so.

Eyal Press: Well, I think it's so interesting that you focused on the coal mine period, on the visit he made, because Orwell is so known for taking an interest in lies that conceal brutality and ugliness, and when we think of that, we think of the ugliness of Stalinism, right? That's totalitarian ugliness, but he's writing there about the ugliness of capitalism, right? And, you sort of pick that up and say, "this is still very much a concern in our world".

Rebecca Solnit: Yeah. And there is a tendency to think *1984* is about the Soviet Union, that the bad people he's talking about are all them. And of course he's deeply critical of the part of the left that becomes Stalinist. One of the things that I feel we've never discussed enough that Orwell brought up very much for me is if you support authoritarians and authoritarians are by their very nature are human rights abusers, then in what sense are you the left or what the hell is the left? Orwell is also very critical of the poverty and injustice and propaganda and lies of the *status quo* in his own life; it's very much part of his novel set in his own England. Even before he went to the coal mines, he wrote about going and picking hops, the hops used to make beer and seeing this underpaid, casual labor and seeing how they get by. Of course, in *Down* an*d Out in Paris and London,* he was very interested in poverty and the lives of the poor. And it feels almost like an expiation for going to Eton and his parents desires to kind of thrust him on this upwardly mobile path and make the most of their aristocratic family connections that he's very much going against the grain by entrenching himself, in many ways, among the poor and greatly enjoying, at many times, the company of the poor, although he could never shake the fancy accent he got from Eton, the most elite school in Britain, and he was kind of a misfit wherever he went, I think.

Eyal Press: If I can bring you back to coal mines one more time.

Rebecca Solnit: You can.

Eyal Press: The part of the book that I just found really fascinating, and seemed inspired by that was the journey you then take. You decide to go and find out where and how roses are produced. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Rebecca Solnit: I had actually known for a long time that most of the roses sold commercially in the US come from Colombia and that it's an absolutely brutal industry, and it, for me, emblematizes, even before I met Orwell's roses, that we often live in the modern era in a kind of oxymoronic, paradoxical state between things that look beautiful and that are morally ugly, are produced in hideous ways. The 1980s was when we began to talk about the sweatshops that made Nikes; you know, I'm holding my iPhone to do this now. We know that iPhones are also produced under hideous conditions. I live in California where we know a lot about how our fruits and vegetables are produced and what's exploitative there.

A lot of the book is about reading Orwell, going to some of Orwell's places and things, but the one major detour from that kind of Anglocentric business, plus the Spanish Civil War, et cetera, was that I went to Colombia. I had the extraordinary, good fortune of being friends with a young man named Nate Miller, who's a union organizer who'd spent three years in Colombia, conducted possibly the deepest investigation of the Colombian rose industry published in the US,

and who was very glad to come with me and spend a week with me in Bogota, going to the greenhouses on the outskirts and looking at it. The export flower industry dates back to the 1960s, but it's become more and more of a kind of Fordist systematized factory where workers function like machines. The wages are incredibly low for our lovely Valentine's Day and Mother's Day ceremonies in the US. They often make workers work a hundred hours a week. They use toxic chemicals. The majority of the workers are women, many of them single mothers. So they're both unable to spend enough time with their children, you know, when pregnant or nursing, they may be spreading the pesticides and other chemicals to their kids. Through Nate, I went to meet with an organizer and some contemporary rose workers who talked about the repetitive stress injuries, the sexual harassment, and the rose workers have all these sayings, in Spanish, of course; things like, "you know, the consumers get the roses, but we get the thorns," or "the roses look very beautiful, but their production is full of tears," and it felt like they emblematized, whether it's how your sweater is made or your food is made—you do such a powerful job of looking at meat packing in the U S in *Dirty Work* and what a monstrous industry it is, how traumatic it is for the workers to be killing and dismembering animals in these brute conditions and how we choose not to know it, choose not to see it, choose not to see them.

Eyal Press: Rebecca, that brings me to a question that, I must say, has been asked to me, and I never know what to say but, but I assume your conclusion is not don't buy roses; don't appreciate the beauty of roses because of the ugliness behind so much of this that is produced and brought to you; don't buy a sweater you like. How do you think about all that?

Rebecca Solnit: I actually mostly don't eat red meat and I'm very fortunate. I live in the Bay Area; we have a lot of local growers. I can buy great flowers, some of which you're looking at.

Eyal Press: Indeed.

Rebecca Solnit:—from the local farmer's market and I'm actually talking to the people who grew them. I can't guarantee that there's no exploitation, but they are not being flown on 747s from Bogota to Miami and then trucked. Their carbon footprint is not so huge. I actually don't buy supermarket and Trader Joe's and florist roses, because they actually do feel kind of weird to me now that I've seen these rose greenhouses. I actually spent a number of hours in the room, this huge cold room where workers are assembling the bouquets and they leave Colombia already wrapped in cellophane, trimmed in et cetera, ready to drop into the buckets in your supermarket or florist. And I actually think for those of us who are affluent enough to make the choices, we have good choices, we don't need those exploitative things. And of course, climate change asks us to consume more locally, to eat lower on the food chain, so we could just not eat red meat for the most part, you know, or do some red meat harm reduction.

Eyal Press: So you can still have the aesthetic, but you don't need the exploitation with it?

Rebecca Solnit: I think so. Yeah. No, I love, you know, I do love flowers; it's funny at different points, at the beginning of the pandemic, I really needed flowers in the house and lately, I've been doing it again, and actually, the last person who bought me roses, knew and explained that

these had come from a local grower, that I was, you know, that it was going to make a difference to me. And I was glad to know it was so.

Eyal Press: Rebecca, you've talked about one thing you share with Orwell and identify with, and that's an appreciation of beauty, of landscapes and flowers and also of the beauty of language. But there's a second thing, that you mentioned quite early in the book, and it's sort of a theme in the book, and that's Orwell's, as you put it, honesty about the shortcomings of one's own side and loyalty to it anyway. I think you're referring there to his book, *Homage to Catalonia* and his experience of really seeing and confronting different factions of the left up close, including the Stalinists. Tell us more about that.

Rebecca Solnit: What I've been very aware of in the age of Trump is that a lot of people who are supposed to be the left, are avid supporters of Putin, of Assad, that parts of the left—or what's supposed to be the left—have been pro authoritarian. It's often directly connected to, on the part of what's supposed to be the left, that's misogynist and sometimes racist as well, and, so, I have in a very young kind of way, this indignation. If we're not all agreed that universal human rights and absolute equality are what defines the left, and what the hell is the left?

And Orwell was exceptional in some ways in that he saw a lot of the sins and flaws of many people who were supposed to be considered the left, was very outspoken about them, antagonized a lot of people, but never did what some of his peers did, which is to say, well, if so many people on the left love Stalin and authoritarianism and are turning a blind eye to the gulags and the mass deaths and the human rights abuses and the repression of freedom of speech and thought, the massacres of poets, then, you know, a lot of them went over to the right. And Orwell was able to thread a careful course of sticking with what he wanted the left to be, which was about a much more—you know, he once called himself a Tory-anarchis—about a more generous left concerned with equality, economic and otherwise, but also concerned with freedom and liberty and self-determination and privacy.

Eyal Press: You say at one point in the book that in your reading, conservatives who think Orwell's for them because he's this critic of the all-powerful state are misreading him.

Rebecca Solnit: There's a wonderful phrase by one of his friends, where he says, "The reason Orwell, wasn't a communist is because all the people who were communists weren't real communists and Orwell was," and his friends say, essentially, that he believed in kind of small communities. He definitely believed in the eradication of poverty and extreme wealth and whatever redistribution that was required; he believed in universal human rights and what the communists of the era—and I'm sure there were people there who just believed in communism as a kind of pure ideology—but a lot of them ended up becoming supporters of the Soviet Union and its satellites, which meant that they became supporters of authoritarians who were absolutely brutal on human rights. And so we need to make that distinction. You know, the redistribution of wealth is awesome, I like it myself and state control of absolutely everything turns into a complete nightmare. And we've seen that over and over. And, of course for Orwell that began with the Spanish Civil War where he realized he wasn't fighting with the loyalists against the fascists; he was with the non-Stalinist left being sabotaged, demonized, and exterminated by the

Stalinist left in a three-sided war that Stalin was fueling, and Orwell himself became a hunted man because he had been with a Trotskyist group fighting on the loyalist side. And he was hunted not by the fascists, not by Franco's people, but by the loyal communists. If history had been very slightly different, Orwell would have died in Spain in 1937.

Eyal Press: He nearly did, right?

Rebecca Solnit: Not only did he get shot through the neck by a fascist bullet, which he survived, but his last days in Barcelona, he was living in hiding and desperately trying to get out of the country because he was very likely to be killed if he was caught. He and his wife, Eileen O'Shaughnessy Blair were supporting their friend George Cop, who, had in fact been imprisoned and would be for many months, under horrific conditions, for being part of that non-USSR aligned left, and Cop had been Orwell's commander.

Eyal Press: We've talked about some of the affinities between your own sensibility and Orwell's and some of the things that draw you to him, some of the things you write about with clear admiration and identification, but it's not everything. And in fact, you're quite open in the book about his blind spots. Most notably, and here I'm quoting, "around gender, around how marriages and families can become authoritarian regimes, in miniature, down to the suppression of truths and promulgation of lies that protect the powerful." You don't deny or excuse Orwell's blind spot on gender, but you also don't dismiss him; so how do you orient towards Orwell in light of that blind spot?

Rebecca Solnit: I used to have an English professor who said, "but fortunately that Shakespeare hadn't read Freud," and there's an ahistorical way that we often demand people of the past embody our values, or be essentially discarded, without recognizing that we don't have the values we have because we're so fucking awesome and amazing and perfect. We have the values we have because we are ourselves the result of historical processes. I just turned 60. I've seen the discourse around sexual orientation, gender, race, disability, body image, et cetera, change radically really in the last 10 years, and certainly over the last 50 years. Orwell, he did have an aunt who was a suffragist and his mother was a suffragist, a woman's vote sympathizer. He might have been more aware of it. He's younger than Virginia Woolf, who was very aware of those things. But I don't think it's particularly interesting or useful to fault him for not being ahead of his time or more aware of his time in this respect. I also feel like, these people are not there to become our friends or even necessarily our role models. They're there if they have something useful to offer us, and Orwell has a lot of useful things to offer us. I could also throw in, he's actually a pretty good anti-racist for a guy born to a British colonial family in 1903 and talks about American anti-Black racism, British colonialism, defends Indian people being discriminated against by Britain, et cetera. But he doesn't particularly get gender and, of course, that passage you read is also a reflection on my own work, which has been very much about how much violence against women is first of all violence against our voices in a world where women had always had equal audibility, credibility and consequences in our speech. So much of the domestic violence, the sexual harassment, the rape, et cetera, would not have taken place. We saw that with Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas, with Christine Blasey-Ford and Brett Kavanaugh, and you see it over and over and over again. And a striking example was Tara Westover's book

Educated, where the price of being a member of her conservative fundamentalist family is agreeing that her brother's horrific violence against her never happened. And I know families like that, and my family is not that far removed, where there is not really a lot of—people do not particularly want to recognize gender violence and have a lot of ways of making sure it won't be recognized. And so in a sense, what's more useful is to say, Orwell gives us models of how lies and propaganda and manipulation, deception, evasion take place, and we can use them to apply to the family as a kind of state in miniature, even if he didn't.

Eyal Press: Am I right in hearing that we shouldn't be superimposing our contemporary standards on people who breathe different air and had a different sense of awareness of different things, but that you would be, and you are, less forgiving, on those fronts for your contemporaries? For say, members of the white male left with whom you've openly locked horns, maybe for very similar blind spots, but to which you're much less ready to forgive, for understandable reasons?

Rebecca Solnit: Yeah. We're more than half a century into a very powerful feminist movement, certainly in the United States and the English-speaking world and there isn't any reason for men to not be on board with that. It's a very different world by law, by culture, than the one Orwell was in, in which women had gotten the vote, and part of it is for me, even in the last 10 years, young feminists have been really good at recognizing more subtle forms of inequality and discrimination. I have learned too, I recognize the intersectionality of a lot of oppression and some of the forms it takes in ways that I did not even 10 years ago. So, on the one hand, I want to give people both latitude for not knowing what we know now, because we didn't know it then and recognize that it's all in process.

Something I always find somewhere between amusing and horrifying is that righteousness generally comes from the position that we are now so fully awake, we cannot awaken further; we are now without flaw and sin. And of course, part of what you get, if you're historically-minded is, this job is not finished. In 10 years, we're gonna look back and say, "oh, in 2021, we hadn't really recognized yet." And I don't know what it is that we haven't recognized yet: gender being on a spectrum, intersex and trans people, non-binary people, et cetera. That is a very different set of frameworks than most of us had 15 or 20 years ago, and I assume those things are going to continue to change. So part of why I think we don't need to be harsh about the past is because maybe the future will not be too harsh towards us; but I just want to add a coda to that, which is, there are people who are not better than their age, but there are people who are real monsters in their age. You can look at what a woman dubbed the "mid-century misogynist", the Phillip Roth, John Updike, Saul Bellow crowd. And there were people writing who did not hate women, the way those men and the Beats hated women.

Eyal Press: Rebecca, I wanted to ask you one other thing. In the book, you imagine this Orwell who might not have been the great voice of anti-fascism if his times had been different, and who might've written very different things. In your own memoir, you also talk about imagining a world in which you didn't have to write about violence towards women. You wouldn't, I'm not sure burden is the right word, but you talk about the difficulty and the weight of returning to that over and over again because it is still so much part of our world, and I wonder if that's part of

what lay in this project, to go back to Orwell, and that's something you identify with, to a certain extent, because you've become such an important voice around these issues, but that means you have to write about them all the time and you have to sort of be on call to talk about them.

Rebecca Solnit: What was wonderful for me is to realize is that not only did Orwell write a number of essays about everyday pleasures, notably about the natural world with the "Vicar of Bray" essay and a wonderful essay about toads that ended up including atomic bombs and a lot of politics, but it's partly about spring and beauty, but he wrote a whole cluster of essays in 1946, when he was recently widowed, about to begin *1984,* and it would be very easy to look at these essays as relatively lightweight. He writes an essay about the pleasure of junk shops, but he describes in the junk shops, glass paperweights with a bit of coral in them and that's the glass paperweight that will end up in *1984.* You can see the relationships. And so I think he actually did manage to be that writer to some extent, and I have managed to write about the things that give me pleasure, about beautiful things, and sometimes to write about very serious things in ways that do feel, I hope, have aesthetic pleasure for the reader, which is finding patterns and meanings, had a kind of aesthetic pleasure for me as the writer.

It was really the younger me that thought, "Oh, if Orwell had lived in a peaceful time." But I don't think any human being has lived in a time. Maybe, maybe some of those hunter gatherer societies we idealize or early agrarian societies maybe, you know, like being Hopi in the year 1300, there weren't a lot of human rights abuses to expose. But in the world, the literary world, you and I are heirs to, I don't think there has been a moment—not in Chaucer's time, not in Shakespeare's time, not in Dickens' time, not in Virginia Woolf's time, not in James Baldwin's time—when there weren't pressing human rights issues, pressing abuses of power, pressing lies to write about. And I think you can do both.

I think for example, Baldwin and Woolf's political work is actually profoundly beautiful and moving partly because they were two writers. They're two of my other major influences who found a way to be both deeply political and deeply personal and not compartmentalize. I don't yearn for that other Orwell, both because I think we have him, and because I think he himself correctly saw that had he remained a really apolitical person, his writing itself might have been essentially trivial. He writes about the purple passages in his prose before he became political, and the way in which it felt like, to use one of his words and not mine, a lot of it, I think, felt like humbug. His novels, before this politicization with the coal mines and the Spanish Civil War, are not great novels. *Animal Farm,* I see as an allegory or a fable, as did he. And *1984*, he called a satire, but I think that his realist novels are not particularly good, and they're closest to what he might have been without that politicization, so thank God he went to Wigan, went into the coal mines, went to the Spanish Civil War, where he discovered the Soviet Union and Stalin utterly corrupting that war, and so the integrity that I find as an aesthetic that is an ethic in his work, is partly about not segregating these things, and that's one of the beauties of this work. Even in the "Vicar of Bray," which might be his most lightweight essay, he's asking the question: What do we leave posterity? And leaning towards a kind of environmental awareness of: Can we think in long-term pieces of time? Can we look at trees, seriously? Can we think about legacies?

Eyal Press: Rebecca Solnit. Thank you so much for sharing all of this and thank you for your book. It's marvelous and people should go buy it and read it.

Rebecca Solnit:. It's such a pleasure to have this conversation. Thank you so much.

Eyal Press: Primary Sources is a co-production of *Public Books* and Type Media Center. *Public Books* is an online magazine of ideas, arts, and scholarship. You can learn more at www.publicbooks.org. Type Media Center is a non profit home for independent journalists. It is committed to building a more equitable future for journalism in the public interest. Learn more about its flagship programs at www.typemediacenter.org.

Our show's executive producer is Caitlin Zaloom, the founding editor of *Public Books*. Our producer is DJ Cashmere. Our engineer is Jess Engebretson. Special thanks to Kelley McKinney, the publisher and managing editor of *Public Books* and Taya Grobow, executive director of Type Media Center. See you all next week for a brand new episode.