

GEORGE ORWELL AND 1984: A PERSONAL VIEW

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SUMMARY

George Orwell's *1984* is considered a great negative utopia, in the sense it depicts the nightmare of what life might become in an oligarchic collectivism pursued to its logical conclusion. Under a social setup which is nothing but totalitarian barbarism, eternal warfare is the price one pays for an elusive peace. The Party with capital P keeps a total control over all of man's actions as well as thoughts. The novel is a great satire and it attempts to diagnose man's alienation in all its aspects, but with special emphasis on the social organization recommended by Marx and practiced by Stalin.

RESUMEN

La obra *1984*, de George Orwell se toma como una gran utopía negativa ya que describe la pesadilla en que puede convertirse la existencia del hombre bajo un colectivismo oligárquico llevado a un fin lógico. Bajo un contexto social, que no es otra cosa que un barbarismo totalitario, el eterno estado bélico es el precio que se paga por una esquivada condición de pacifismo. El Partido, así escrito, con P mayúscula, mantiene el control total de pensamiento y obra de sus seguidores. La obra literaria es una sátira al extremo que intenta un diagnóstico de la alienación en todos sus aspectos pero enfatizando la organización social propuesta por Marx y llevada a la práctica por Stalin.

KEY WORDS: *oligarchic collectivism, the Party, totalitarian society, the proles, the ruling class, Big Brother, doublethink, totalitarianism, Ingsoc, Oceania, the Thought Police, Great Purgues, the Two Minute Hate, the Youth League, the Junior Anti-Sex League*

PALABRAS CLAVE: colectivismo oligárquico, el Partido, sociedad totalitaria, totalitarismo, las proles, la clase regente, el Gran Hermano, doblepensamiento, Ingsoc, Ocenía, la Policía del Pensamiento, las Grandes Purgas, Dos Minutos de Odio, la Liga Juvenil, la Liga Juvenil Anti-sexo.

INTRODUCTION

George Orwell's *1984*, along with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, is considered a great negative utopia, in the sense that it depicts the nightmare of what life might become in an oligarchic collectivism pursued to its logical conclusion. Under a social setup which is nothing but totalitarian barbarism, eternal warfare is the price one pays for an elusive peace. The Party written with capital *P* keeps total control over all of man's actions as well as thoughts. George Orwell's *1984* is a great satire in the tradition of the other great satirist like Samuel Butler. The style is swift and clean like that of Daniel Defoe, the first English novelist. The novel attempts to diagnose man's alienation in all its aspects, but with special emphasis on the social organization recommended by Marx and practiced by Stalin. In the words of Erich Fromm:

George Orwell's *1984* is the expression of a mood, and it is a warning. The mood it expresses is that of near despair about the future of man, and the warning is that unless the course of history changes, men all over the world will lose their qualities, will become soulless automatons, and will not even be aware of it.

The mood of hopelessness about the future of man is in marked contrast to one of the most fundamental features of Western thought; the faith in human progress and in man's capacity to create a world of justice and peace. This hope has its roots both in Greek and in Roman thinking, as well as the Messianic concept of the Old Testament prophets. (Fromm, 199, p. 257).

This view presents a critique of *1984* including the character of Winston Smith, the protagonist –not really a “hero” in the usual sense of the term -, the totalitarian society discussed in the story, the mystique of power presented and the main political concepts woven into the plot –if any-. These ideas will be developed under three main headings: the background of the novel, the politics of *1984*, and Orwell and *1984*.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE NOVEL

Orwell's socialistic thinking was quite clear in all the publications that preceded *1984*, such as *Down and Out in Paris* (1933), *Burmese Days* (1934), *Keep the Aspidochelone* (1936), *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1936), *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), and *Animal Farm* (1945). Comments on some of these works will be considered as we go on, insofar as they bear on the novel under consideration. *1984* was published in 1949, just a year before Orwell's death, as the culminating glory of an illustrious if somewhat tragic career.

The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, which was published in 1968, gives us a great deal of information regarding the ways in which the main ideas of *1984* came into being. In one of the essays, Orwell talks about Jack London's *The Iron Heel* dealing with Fascist aggression; in the same essay, he also talks about Huxley's *Brave New World*, a sort of post-war parody of it called a Wellsian utopia. About the latter, he says that there is no society like that lasting more than a couple of generations, due to the fact that the ruling class which thought principally in terms of a so-called 'good time' would soon lose its vitality and credulity. Commenting more on *The Iron Heel*, Orwell observes:

It is here that Marxist Socialists have usually fallen short. Their interpretation of history has been so mechanistic that they have failed to foresee dangers that were obvious to people who had never heard the name of Marx. It is sometimes urged against Marx that he failed to predict the rise of Fascism. I do not know whether he predicted it or not –at the date he could only have done so in very general terms—but it is at any rate certain that his followers failed to see any danger in Fascism until they themselves were at the gate of the concentration camp. A year or more after Hitler had risen to power official Marxism was still proclaiming that Hitler was of no importance and ‘Social Fascism’ –i.e. democracy- was the real enemy. (Howe, 1982, p.287).

Obviously, then, Orwell sets out to correct this mistake in his *1984* and points out the dangers of Marxism/Fascism. Like his friend Koestler, Orwell, too, was disillusioned with the empty protestations of Marxism, especially in the form in which it was followed in Russia and China.

Among the so-called sources of *1984* are often mentioned Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932); Eugene Zamyatin’s *We* –translated into English in 1924-; and Leon Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937). Orwell may also have been influenced by Cyril Connolly’s *Year Nine* (1938) to a lesser extent. Connolly, the English critic, suggests that the victim of the totalitarian state confesses imaginary crimes and believes that the punishment is just. This account refers to both Nazi and Stalinist regimes, with particular reference to the Moscow Trials of the old Bolsheviks.

Zamyatin’s *We* is considered to be the strongest influence on Orwell in his writing of *1984*. *We* is cast in the form of a meditation or series of meditations –Irving Howe, ed., *Orwell’s 1984: Text, Sources, Criticism* called the “records”- by a mathematician living in a totalitarian utopia comparable to Orwell’s Oceania. He suffers from the pangs of imagination, meets a woman in the course of activities who pushes him more toward disaster. The choice he had to face, much like Winston Smith, was between a mechanical kind of happiness resulting from an operation and the real happiness offered by the woman’s personal relationship. Thus there are a number of parallels between *1984* and *We*. Trotsky concludes his piece with the following words:

We are far from intending to contrast the abstraction of dictatorship with the abstraction of democracy, and weigh their merits on the scales of pure reason. Everything is relative in this world, where change alone endures. The dictatorship of the Bolshevik party proved one of the most powerful instruments of progress in history. But here too, in the words of a poet who says that reason becomes unreason, kindness a pest. The prohibition of oppositional parties brought after it the prohibition of factions. The prohibition of factions ended in a prohibition to think otherwise than the unallible leaders. The police-manufactures monolithism of the party resulted in a bureaucratic impunity which has become the source of all kinds of wantonness and corruption. (Howe, 1982, p.240).

In addition to these outside sources that have influenced Orwell, one may look at the writings of Orwell himself which clearly point out in the direction of his masterpiece right from the beginning. In a 1947 article entitled *Why I Write*, Orwell explains his childhood and upbringing and the early influences on his literary talents. He analyzes the impulses that led to all his writing: sheer egoism; esthetic enthusiasm; historical impulse; political purpose. We should especially note the last one for one purpose. He makes pointed reference to his political ideas that led to *1984*:

The Spanish war and other events in 1936-7 turned the scale and thereafter. I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understood it. It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own, to think that one can avoid writing of such subjects. Everyone writes of them in one guise or other, It is simply a question of which side one takes and what approach one follows. And the more one conscious of one's political bias, the more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one's aesthetic and intellectual integrity. (Howe, 1982, 247).

And he goes on to say that he “most wanted to do during the past ten years is to make political writing into an art.” (p. 269).

One of the most important motivations of Orwell in the writing of *1984* is the exploration of the connection of politics and the English language. He believed that the decline of the English language had political and economic causes. According to him, the language is becoming ugly because of slovenly thinking, and slovenly thinking is resulting in ugly expression, in some kind of vicious circle. He believes that the process is reversible if only we change our bad habits a little bit. First, we should avoid the habit of imitation and vague expressions. Avoid pretentious dictions, dying metaphors, meaningless words, etc.” (1982). He adds that modern English writing consists in “gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug.”(Howe). In other words, bad writing is easy; good writing is difficult.

The particular relevance of this kind of argument is that Orwell equates most if not all political writing with bad writing. While the content and the tone may vary from one party to another, all bureaucrats write equally badly. He advises all serious writers to avoid stock metaphors, long words, unnecessary expressions, passive voice, foreign phrases, etc. when one can help it. Orwell’s main complaint seems to be that a false kind of language which is pretentious only serves the ends of politics because politics seeks to camouflage the real intentions of the speaker most of the time. Political language is designed to make lies sound true ideas and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

In another 1946 essay entitled *The Prevention of Literature*, Orwell puts forth his political beliefs in no mistakable terms. Bureaucracy can suppress truthfulness in literature; totalitarianism can totally stifle it and all other forms of expression, because when there is fear, there is no expression. Ideas refuse to come to a person who is afraid of the regime.

Totalitarianism, however, does not so much promise an age of faith as an age of schizophrenia. A society becomes totalitarian when its structure becomes flagrantly artificial; that is, when its ruling class has lost its function but succeeds

in clinging to power by force of fraud. Such a society, no matter how long it persists, can never afford to become either tolerant or intellectually stable. It can never permit either the truthful recording of facts, or the emotional sincerity, that literally creation demands. But to be corrupted by totalitarianism one does not have to live in a totalitarian country. The mere prevalence of certain ideas can spread a kind of poison that makes one subject after another impossible for literary purposes. Whenever there is an enforced orthodoxy –or even two orthodoxies, as often happens – good writing stops. (Howe, 1982, p. 269).

Here then are the beginnings of *1984*, the language, the satire, the politics. Most critics consider all of Orwell's early writings as a sort of preparation, including *Animal Farm*, to his *magnum opus*, *1984*.

THE POLITICS OF *1984*

It is said that the best analysis of Orwell's political beliefs is contained in the opposition presented between Oceania's ruling party and Emmanuel Goldstein's critique of it. Goldstein is probably supposed to represent Trotsky, but that is immaterial. The criticism is still valid. The bias of Goldstein's analysis is twofold: the war situation and the party control. (Atkins, 1954, p. 237). There is a state of perpetual war in which the combatants dare not destroy each other, because they depend on one another, in the ultimate analysis. "The primary aim of war is to use up the products of industry without raising the general standard of living." (1954). This is so because if wealth circulates, hierarchy is likely to weaken. Hence the products of human labor must be destroyed.

The chief aim of the party is to conquer the world and destroy independent thought altogether. Scientific research is confined to mass production of goods in all the three marring states. Note that no state can defeat or be defeated by another. War, being continuous, ceases to be a threat to existence. Rather, it becomes a way of life. Society always consisted of three classes, the high, the middle, and the low, and the middle

class always sought to overthrow the high class with the help of the low class. Power can be lost in four ways, through foreign conquest, inefficiency leading to revolt, discontentment among the middle class, and the loss of self-confidence. The most important concern of *1984*, though, is the control of power through the institution Big Brother, the Inner and the Out Parties, and the proles who have some intellectual liberty left – but they are supposed to have no intellect, anyway --. Party members had elaborate mental training, and have the assistance of the Thought Police in all matters. An important technique possessed by the Party is that it can change the past in its records so as to suit its purposes and in order to make all of its actions look good. The Party is infallible; it is based on the dogma known as Ingsoc, with the “mutability of the past” (Atkins, 1954, p. 240). as its central tenet. The bureaucracy is equipped with the tool of doublethink or “the power of holding two contradictory beliefs simultaneously and accepting both of them.” (1954). It is very important to confuse the sense of reality in order for the Party to survive.

The society of Oceania is controlled by four ministries, known for short as Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv, and Miniplenty. It is also interesting to note the three slogans of the Party: War is Peace; Freedom is Slavery; Ignorance is Strength. The compelling irony of all of this is obvious. History is sought to be destroyed by the Party; hence the dilemma of Winston Smith who knows nothing about himself or his past. This is indeed the essence of doublethink.

All government, i.e. Party, workers should be capable of doublethink and altering the past records to suit party purposes. The point of all this is that something like the Oceania of *1984* already existed in 1949 when the book was written. Some kind of doublethink was already taking place in Western society, in Orwell’s England. The extent may not be the same.

Power is the other ingredient of *1984* -- power in all its ramifications. Power transcends everything, including love, as seen by Winston’s initial reaction toward Julia whom he wants to torture just for the fun of it. The Goldstein image on the telescreen during the Two Minute Hate provides the necessary training. Organizations such as the Youth League, the Junior Anti-Sex League, the Spies, and the Thought Police—all bear evidence to this. Winston is thoroughly confused at one stage by

giving up the old modes of thought and by not imbibing the new thought structures properly. This in fact leads to his downfall.

Part of the power mania on the part of the members of the ruling class is expressed in terms of their aversion to the proles who are considered naturally inferior. Yet the Party claims to have liberated them from the clutches of the old capitalists. Yet the Party knew that they had to depend on the proles in a way for their continued power and so there is some indulgence in the form of popular sports, in this case public hanging scenes. Power and cruelty seem to go together. In the same vein, all joy from sex is also taken away, although mechanical sex is tolerated as being a harmless diversion, as long as it is confined to the proles. The cruelty resulting from the craze for power on the part of the rulers is described in the later part of the book detailing Winston's suffering:

It is the world of violence and brutality which we all guessed must lie behind the façade of the society Orwell has portrayed for us, yet it still horrifies by its impact. Even this latest and most modern of all the societies must have its occasional human sacrifices. It is necessary that men should be outraged and broken, that now and again someone should die for the people. There is no question of reforming Winston. He knows that he has to be laid bare so that he becomes nothing, so that his bent body and empty mind can be displayed to the people as an instance of the Government's power when a man is so foolish as to set up in opposition, Winston is a kind of Wallace's Head on London Bridge. (Deutscher, 1974, p. 126).

Total cruelty is the only thing that satisfied the rulers of Oceania; no gentle punishment would do. There must be the infliction of severe and appropriate physical punishment. That alone would fulfill their ambitions for power. Killing is not the aim, but torture. Destruction, no mere supremacy, is the goal. The mind had to be reshaped, made 'pure', but before death –then it could be disposed of as so much rubbish. Power was sought by the Party for its own sake, not for the good of others. Power over the minds is what is wanted by the Party, not wealth, long life, happiness, etc. all of which had no meaning for them. The 19th century showed them that they could master nature. What remained to be controlled was the human mind, the ultimate frontier to be assaulted for its own sake, for the sake of absolute power.

As a political satire, *1984* seems to have achieved its objective. Orwell knew quite well that the writing would be applicable in most respects to his own age. The story would perhaps also apply to the United States of his day :

Indeed, the society of *1984* embodies all that he hated and disliked in his own surroundings: the drabness and monotony of the English industrial suburb the “filthy, and grimy and smelly” ugliness of which he tried to match in his naturalistic, repetitive, and oppressive style; the flood rationing and the government controls which he knew in war-time Britain; the “subbishy newspapers containing almost nothing except sport, crime, and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films cozing with sex;” and so on. (Atkins, 1982, p. 249).

It is easy to recognize features of the book which satirize the British Labour Party of his day just as much as it satirizes Soviet Russia and the Communist Party. Much of the description applies actually to his own environment because Stalinist Russia did not have any of the problems that his heroes are supposed to have. The Ministry of Truth caricatured London’s wartime Ministry of Information.

Orwell’s disillusionment with every form of socialism must have been complete for him to have written *1984*. It is as if we were crying from an abyss deep of despair. The Stalinist Purges preyed on his sensitive mind very much.

One may ask how far *1984* reflects the personality of Orwell and his thinking process as a rational human being. The answer is that it does reflect Orwell’s innermost anguish as an intellectual and his protest against the atrocities of his time, especially in the so-called socialist countries. This anguish consisted in his disillusionment regarding the realities of life that he found. The Moscow Purges loomed large in his mind, almost to the point of obsession, because they were so irrational. His “empirical commonsense” completely failed to explain what was happening around him in certain countries of the Marxist persuasion.

It is not quite right to say that *1984* is the product of a dying man, despite its many draw-backs, such as plot, characterization, style, description, etc. There is in fact none of these ingredients in it. At worst we can say that the novel was written with “the last feverish flicker of life” in him by Orwell:

He identified his own withering physical existence with the decayed and shrunken body of Winston Smith, to whom he imparted and in whom he invested, as it were, his own dying pangs. He projected the last spasm of his own suffering into the last pages of his last book. But the main explanation of the inner logic of Orwell’s disillusionment and pessimism lies not in the writer’s death agonies, but in the experience and the thought of the living man and in his convulsive reaction from his defeated rationalism. (Deutscher, 1974, p.128).

Like his protagonist, Orwell, too, seems to ask “understand *HOW*; I do not understand *WHY*.” (Deutscher, 1974, 129). The *WHY* of course refers to the ultimate reasoning behind the tyranny of Oceania or its goal. It is also doubtful if Emmanuel Goldstein’s classic, the book, has the answer to this question. If it did, Winston had no choice of finding it out, thanks to the intervention of the Thought Police. How much of this applies to Orwell? Consider the following statement:

He asked the why not so much about the Oceania of his vision as about Stalinism and the Great Purges. At one point he certainly turned for the answer to Trotsky: it was from Trotsky-Bronstein that he took the few sketchy biographical data and even the physiognomy of and the Jewish name for Emmanuel Goldstein; and the fragments of “the book”, which took up so many pages in *1984*, are an obvious, though not very successful paragraph of Trotsky’s moral grandeur and at the same time he partly distrusted it and partly doubted its authenticity. The ambivalence of his view of Trotsky finds its counterpart in Winston Smith’s attitude towards Goldstein. To the end Smith cannot find out whether Goldstein and the Brotherhood have ever existed in reality, and whether “the book” was not concocted by the Thought Police. The barrier between Trotsky’s thought and himself could never break down, was Marxism and dialectical materialism. He found in Trotsky the answer to How, not to Why. (1974).

We know however that Orwell's was an inquiring mind and he would have been determined to find the answer to the Why, so he began his quest for "them" or the Nazis or the Stalinists. By the same token, he did not understand Churchill or Roosevelt, either. All of "them" were power-crazy, and Orwell made his jump from workaday, rationalistic common sense to the mysticism of cruelty inspires 1984.

1984 is intended by Orwell to be a warning against the kind of collective oligarchy that is represented by Oceania and Ingsoc. Man masters the machine so much in this scenario that he is able to put an end to poverty; but it does not of course happen. Big Brothers wants people to be his groveling subjects and live –if you can call that living—totally at his mercy. The worst part of it all is, there may not even be a Big Brother, for all we know, He may be just a symbol for collective tyranny. To him a totalitarian society is ruled by a disembodied sadism. Orwell may be implying that all the technological advances that man has made may be much ahead of him and he may not be prepared for his own creations. In more ways than one, man's subjugation is complete. In the case of the novel, Winston is totally "cured", that is, annihilated, destroyed, the last remaining resistance crushed. Crushed to the point that he was prepared to betray his Julia, just to save himself from the hungry rats in the cage.

The impact of the novel was so great when it was published that it was considered that the last word about this book would be one of thanks for a writer who dealt with the problems of the World rather than the ingrowing pains of individuals, and who was able to speak clearly and with originality of the nature of reality and terror of power. Much of the impact is based on the tension that the story creates and maintains. In a way, the character of Winston Smith, while being cast in a rigid frame, is yet constantly shifting in focus and psychological insight. To that extent one might say that there is character development in the story.

In Anthony Burgess's opinion *1984* is a comic book –in a strange sort of way. It is comic in the sense that the comedy is "*all too recognizable.*" (Burgess, 1978, p. 40). It meant a number of things in 1949 which we may have forgotten since. There is a story that says that Orwell wanted to call the book *1948* but it was not acceptable –perhaps to the publisher. Burgess seems to imply that the setting for Orwell's Oceania could be the London which he knew well. There were big posters all over the city with pictures

of a person resembling Big Brother. During this time, there was power shortage, as described by Winston in the story. One had heard about the Hate Week and similar campaigns originating from government sources in some form or other. Cigarettes were in short supply and so were razor blades in post-war London, thanks perhaps to a Ministry of Plenty. The point of all this is that the government is capable of taking care of itself and its favorite bureaucrats; all shortages were set aside for the proles. Austerity for the people; plenty for the bosses –there indeed is comic contradiction. The TV was relatively new at the time, and it did appear as though it was watching you all the time! (1978, p. 14). Burgess even finds parallels between the various Ministries in the book and the actual British government at the time. For instance, the Ministry of Truth reminded one of the wartime Ministry of Information or the BBC where Orwell worked during the war. Even Room 101 was identifiable; this was the basement of the BBC from which Orwell broadcast propaganda to India.

Burgess theorizes that Winston Smith is so called because of his closeness to Winston Churchill in some respects. Churchill was not quite popular with the troops. He was too fond of war, but very few others were. He would not let the army disband for almost six years after the war was all over (p. 15).

Eric Arthur Blair, or George Orwell, as he called himself later, was a born pessimist turned socialist out of an intellectual conviction of the party's superiority and faith in social justice and equality. He went through a period of Lenin worship at school, published a couple of articles in French journals, turned to reformist liberalism later in England. "His outrage at exploitation, inequity, and destitution are fundamentally moral, and his proposed solutions to these problems combine a faith in the possibility of a change of heart in the middle class with a trust in the power of government regulations and reforms." (Zwerdling, 1974, p. 66). Some of these feelings were reinforced in Orwell as a result of the failure of piecemeal reforms attempted by two Labor governments and the growing strengths of the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy. Orwell's socialism actually took shape between 1935 and 1938, may be as a result of his attending the Summer School at the Adelphi Center in 1936, which is described as a "*center of non-sectarian Socialism.*" (1974). The he tried to experience extreme poverty personally among the destitute, some of which might have helped his

change his attitude toward the working class from hatred to tolerance and even respect. He called himself a socialist only after this attitude change occurred.

The outcome of all that we have been saying is that Orwell was a genuine person with serious goals and a concern for humanity, unlike that of the governments that he had around him in his day. To that extent *1984* succeeds well.

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