



**YOU  
DO  
NOT  
EXIST**

An introduction to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Christopher Snowdon

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# About the author

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# 1. Eric Blair

This is not an introduction in the sense that you should read it before you have read the novel. It contains many spoilers. You should read the book first.

Nor is this a biography of George Orwell, although a few facts about his life before he started writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may be useful. Eric Arthur Blair was born on 25 June 1903 and grew up in Oxfordshire. In 1922, after attending Eton College, he joined the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. In 1927 he returned to England after contracting dengue fever and resolved to become a writer. He adopted the pen name George Orwell for his first book *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933).

Orwell spent the 1930s as a struggling novelist and book reviewer. In December 1936 he travelled to Barcelona to fight with the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) in the Spanish Civil War. Later joined by his wife, Eileen, he was shot in the throat in May 1937 and was lucky to survive. Under attack from both fascists and pro-Soviet communists, the couple fled the country two months later. Orwell recalled his experience in Spain in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and thereafter became an explicitly left-wing political writer, known for criticising both capitalism and communism.

In 1941, while Eileen was working at the censorship department of the Ministry of Information, the staunch anti-imperialist Orwell began working for the BBC's Eastern Service, broadcasting morale-boosting propaganda to India. He resigned from the BBC in the autumn of 1943 and took the job of literary editor at the small left-wing magazine *Tribune*. In 1944 he completed his peerless satire of Stalinism, *Animal Farm*, although difficulties finding a publisher for a book that criticised the USSR meant that it was not published until after the war.

Eileen died while undergoing an operation in hospital in April 1945, leaving Orwell to raise their recently adopted son, Richard. Much in demand after the success of *Animal Farm*, Orwell wrote copious articles, essays and book reviews in 1945–6 and began work on his next novel. Its working title was *The Last Man in Europe*.

## 2. The long fuse

George Orwell did not finish writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* until October 1948, but the seeds of its creation go back at least as far as the early 1940s. All of the key themes and many of the memorable phrases in the novel had been floating around in his consciousness for years. Above all, he kept coming back to the fear that objective truth was being destroyed by the totalitarian mindset.

In 1942 Orwell wrote a long essay about the Spanish Civil War in which he recalled newspaper reports that were pure fiction and complained about ‘history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various “party lines”’ (1968b: 294). Seeing the same phenomenon in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, Orwell sensed that ‘the very concept of objective truth is fading away’ and envisaged ‘a nightmare world in which the Leader, or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but *the past*’ (1968b: 295, 297).<sup>1</sup>

If the Leader says of such and such an event, “It never happened” – well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five – well two and two are five. This prospect frightens me much more than bombs... (1968b: 297)

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1 Throughout this essay, italics are Orwell’s own unless stated otherwise. All references are to Orwell books unless stated otherwise.



In February 1944 he restated his view that the obliteration of the past was worse than violence:

The really frightening thing about totalitarianism is not that it commits “atrocities” but that it attacks the concept of objective truth: it claims to control the past as well as the future. (1968c: 110)

In a letter written three months later, Orwell noted the ‘tendency to disbelieve in the existence of objective truth because all the facts have to fit in with the words and prophecies of some infallible fuehrer’ (1968c: 177). By this time, he had completed *Animal Farm* and his next novel was clearly taking shape in his mind:

Hitler can say that the Jews started the war, and if he survives that will become official history. He can't say that two and two are five, because for the purposes of, say, ballistics, they have to make four. But if the sort of world that I am afraid of arrives, a world of two or three great superstates which are unable to conquer one another, two and two could become five if the fuehrer wished it. (1968c:177)

A world of two or three superstates in a permanent state of war. A totalitarian ruler who insists that  $2+2=5$ . A regime that controls the present and therefore controls the past. The abolition of objective truth. There is no doubt that the foundations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were laid in Orwell's head long before the war ended. One of Orwell's notebooks contains a list of ideas to be included in a novel to be titled *The Last Man in Europe*. These notes are significant because, according to Orwell's first biographer, they could not have been written after January 1944 (Crick 1982: 582).

The themes Orwell had in mind included 'Newspeak', 'Position of the proles', 'The Two Minutes Hate', 'Dual standard of thought' and 'The party slogans (War is peace. Ignorance is strength. Freedom is slavery)' (Crick 1982: 582–3). His outline of the plot was rough and embryonic, but it included 'The nightmare feeling caused by the disappearance of objective truth' followed by 'Love affair with Y' and 'torture and confession' (Crick 1982: 583–4).

As he organised his thoughts after the war, several concepts that we now think of as quintessentially Orwellian appeared repeatedly in articles and essays. In 'The Prevention of Literature', published in January 1946, he argued that totalitarianism demands 'the continuous alteration of the past, and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence of objective truth' (1968d: 86).

A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible. But since, in practice, no one is infallible, it is frequently necessary to rearrange past events in order to show that this or that mistake was not made, or that this or that imaginary triumph actually happened. (1968d: 86)

This amounts to Winston Smith's job description in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Orwell also found a career for Julia when he suggested, in the same article, that it was 'probably not beyond human ingenuity to write books by machinery' (1968d: 92). Once again, there was a reference to the '2+2=4' equation when he argued that some truths are too important to be abolished:

... so long as two and two have to make four when you are, for example, drawing the blue-print of an

aeroplane, the scientist has his function, and can be allowed a measure of liberty. (1968d: 94)

In March 1946, in an article titled 'In Front of Your Nose', Orwell introduced a concept that he would later call *doublethink*, when he discussed political activists who hold 'totally contradictory ideas in their heads at a single moment' (1968d: 151).

Medically, I believe, this manner of thinking is called schizophrenia: at any rate, it is the power of holding simultaneously two beliefs which cancel out. (1968d: 151)

The importance of  $2+2=4$  was repeated yet again:

In private life most people are fairly realistic. When one is making out one's weekly budget, two and two invariably make four. Politics, on the other hand, is a sort of subatomic or non-Euclidean world where it is quite easy for the part to be greater than the whole or for two objects to be in the same place simultaneously. (1968d: 154)

To have the truth withheld from you, to be told endless lies, was to Orwell as oppressive as being prevented from speaking freely and was worse even than violence. As objectionable as he found the shameless deceit of the state-controlled media of the USSR and Nazi Germany, he was even more concerned by the half-truths, evasions and mental gymnastics of communism's fellow travellers in the West and by the gullibility and confirmation bias of those who believed them. Russophiles had, he believed, so corrupted 'English intellectual life' that 'known facts are suppressed and distorted to such an extent as to make it

doubtful whether a true history of our times can ever be written' (1968d: 84).

In 1944 Orwell wrote:

... one expects governments and newspapers to tell lies. What is worse, to me, is the contempt even of intellectuals for objective truth so long as their own brand of nationalism is being boosted. The most intelligent people seem capable of holding schizophrenic beliefs, or disregarding plain facts, of evading serious questions with debating-society repartees, or swallowing baseless rumours and of looking on indifferently while history is falsified. (1968c: 340)

For Orwell, a world in which language was corrupted and constrained was a dystopia by definition. Badly expressed English, purple prose and waffle had always infuriated him, and his essay 'Politics and the English Language' remains a key text for students who want to learn how to write lucidly. In May 1946 he argued that 'there does seem to be a direct connexion between acceptance of totalitarian doctrines and the writing of bad English' (1968d: 190) and that 'the connexion between totalitarian habits of thought and the corruption of language is an important subject which has not been sufficiently studied' (1968d: 188). As a political writer, Orwell could be expected to be interested in the way language was used in political discourse, but he felt the threat to the written word particularly keenly. One only needs to read the titles of several Orwell essays from the 1940s to see an enduring theme. In addition to 'Politics and the English Language', there was 'Literature and Totalitarianism', 'The Prevention of Literature', 'Propaganda and Demotic Speech', 'Literature and the Left' and 'Politics vs Literature'.

Language and literature are central to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The importance of words pervades every chapter. Winston's job is to retrospectively censor the press and revise history, but he is a writer of sorts and takes a certain pride from creating the fictitious Comrade Ogilvy. His rebellion begins when he starts writing a diary ('To mark the paper was the decisive act' (1971: 9)). He falls in love with the girl from the fiction department. His colleague Syme is working on the eleventh edition of the Newspeak dictionary. The total rewriting of English classics is part of the Party's long-term plan. The dimly remembered nursery rhyme 'Oranges and Lemons' is a recurring motif. Winston learns the truth about the world (if it *is* the truth) from a samizdat copy of a book. The telescreens tell nothing but lies, but in the written word there remains the potential for truth.

The relatively few people who kept a close eye on Orwell's journalism in the 1940s would have found much that was familiar in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: the suppression of objective truth; the erasure of people; the rewriting of history; the totalitarian outlook of intellectuals; nuclear superpowers in a stalemate; doublethink, Newspeak, novel-writing machines, 2+2=5. It all came together with Orwell's memories of the lies told in the Spanish Civil War, the doodlebugs raining down on London during the Blitz, his work as a wartime propagandist at the BBC, Eileen's work in the censorship department, the brutality of the Burmese police, the cruelty of English public schools and the austerity of post-war London. It was as if his whole life had been leading up to this novel. All that remained was for him to write it.

### 3. Jura

Orwell started work on the book in July 1945 but only wrote the first 12 pages before turning his attention to newspaper articles and essays, which lasted him through the autumn and winter. With the publication of *Animal Farm* in August, Orwell finally achieved a measure of commercial success, and in February 1946, after complaining that he was 'constantly smothered under journalism' (1968d: 132), told his literary agent that he was going to 'drop all journalism for six months as from the end of April and get on with another book' (1968d: 138). In a worrying sign of things to come, his plan to leave the distractions of London behind and head to rural Scotland had to be rescheduled when blood started pouring out of his mouth. He had suffered another pulmonary haemorrhage.

Orwell had first suffered from tuberculosis in March 1938. He probably contracted the disease in a Spanish hospital in 1937 after being shot in the throat with a bullet, which was millimetres away from killing him. He put a brave face on it in 1938, as he always would, writing to a friend: 'I've been spitting blood again, it always turns out to be not serious' (1968a: 343). But it was serious enough for him to spend six months in a sanatorium and move to Morocco the following winter on doctor's orders.

Orwell's health had never been good, and it would only get worse. Although eager to contribute to the war effort, he had been turned down by the army on medical grounds and

had to settle for joining the Home Guard. By 1943 he was deemed too unfit even for that. When tuberculosis struck again in 1946, Orwell was aware that a diagnosis would mean spending months in hospital, and so he retreated to his bed for two weeks pretending to have gastritis and was back on his feet by 22 May to leave London for a remote farmhouse on the Isle of Jura in Scotland's Inner Hebrides (Taylor 2019: 62). He told friends that he was going in search of cheaper fuel, cleaner air and the solitude required to write a novel. He planned to stay for six months and have *The Last Man in Europe* finished by the end of the year, but his first sustained spell in Jura was relatively unproductive. By Orwell's own account, he had written only fifty pages by October 1946, when he returned to London, where he spent a notoriously cold and snowy winter.

For the remaining three years of his life, Orwell blamed the dreadful state of his health on 'that frightful winter in London' (1968d: 459). On 10 April 1947, a month after falling ill with tuberculosis yet again, Orwell returned to Jura, determined to finish the novel. This time he made good progress and could report that he had written a third of it by the end of May despite being in 'the most wretched health' (2002a: 149). He was forced to take to his bed in October and by Christmas was in hospital in Lanarkshire. He remained there for seven months and would be bed-bound more often than not in what little time he had left. Writing to his publisher in February 1948, he announced that he had 'finished the rough draft of my novel all save the last few hundred words'. Although he declared it a 'ghastly mess as it stands', he said 'the idea is so good that I could not possibly abandon it' (1968d: 459).

Having originally expected it to be published in 1947, Orwell was now hopeful of a release date in May or June 1948. In fact, it would take another year. Recovering from tuberculosis in the 1940s was a slow, painful and uncertain process. Surgeons performed 'collapse therapy', deflating his left lung to allow it to repair itself. Orwell was fortunate enough to have the money and connections to get hold of a new antibiotic medication from America, streptomycin, which had not yet been licensed in Britain. Not knowing the correct dosage of the drug, doctors used trial and error, but it seemed to work for a while, albeit with horrible side effects.

During his time in hospital Orwell wrote a few book reviews but was unable to use a typewriter until May 1948, five months after being admitted. Still very ill, he was discharged in July and spent the summer working furiously on the novel in what D. J. Taylor (2004: 395) describes as 'a desperate race towards a finishing line that would carry its own built-in defeat'. By October he was able to tell his publisher that he had finally finished it.

I am not pleased with the book but I am not absolutely dissatisfied. I first thought of it in 1943. I think it is a good idea but the execution would have been better if I had not written it under the influence of TB. I haven't definitely fixed on the title but I am hesitating between NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR and THE LAST MAN IN EUROPE. (2002a: 457)

All that was needed was someone to type up the manuscript. Orwell sought to recruit a typist, but after finding no one willing to travel to Jura, he resolved to do 'the grisly job' himself (1968d: 513). As the winter closed in on the windswept island, Orwell sat in bed banging away on his



'very decrepit typewriter' (1968d: 513) with a hand-rolled cigarette dangling from his lips, in order to submit the book in December as he had promised. The state of Orwell's health in these months can perhaps be glimpsed from this description of the prematurely aged Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

The next moment he was doubled up by a violent coughing fit which nearly always attacked him soon after waking up. It emptied his lungs so completely that he could only begin breathing again by lying on his back and taking a series of deep gasps. (1971: 28–9)

Working through the pain and exhaustion, Orwell completed the typing on time, posted the manuscript to his publisher Secker & Warburg and immediately booked himself into the Cranham Sanatorium in the Cotswolds, later telling his friend David Astor that 'I would have gone to a sanatorium two months ago if I hadn't wanted to finish that bloody book off, which thank God I have done' (2002a: 485). He had barely a year left to live.

## 4. Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia

The world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is divided into three superpowers, none of which has the might to overwhelm the others, following a nuclear war from which no victor emerged. In October 1948 Orwell wrote in a letter that the book was 'about the possible state of affairs if the atomic war *isn't* conclusive' (2002a: 451). By his own account, the idea of the world being carved up into three roughly equal empires took hold in Orwell's mind when he saw the leaders of the USA, USSR and Great Britain discuss the post-war settlement at the Tehran Conference in late 1943 (2002a: 487), but it was also inspired by the work of the American writer James Burnham and his 1941 book *The Managerial Revolution*.

Burnham was an unusual character who went on quite a political journey in his life. As a Marxist professor of philosophy in the 1930s, he had been a friend of Leon Trotsky. By 1940 he had rejected Marxism and developed a theory of managerialism which posited that capitalism was being replaced, not by socialism but by a form of elite bureaucratic rule. After the war, Burnham's politics shifted decisively to the right, and by 1947 he was calling for a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the USSR ('before Communism swallows Eurasia', as Orwell put it (2002a: 96)). In the 1950s, he helped found the conservative magazine *National Review* and supported the McCarthy hearings. In the 1980s he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Ronald Reagan.

Burnham was still broadly considered a man of the left in 1946 when Orwell wrote an essay titled 'Second Thoughts on James Burnham'. Orwell noted that every testable prediction the American had made had been wildly incorrect. He had made bald assertions about future events which he insisted were part of an inevitable historical process, but which were quietly forgotten when they failed to materialise. In *The Managerial Revolution*, published just a few months before Germany invaded Russia, he said that it should have been obvious that Hitler and Stalin would form a pact to weaken the capitalist nations rather than fight each other (Burnham 2021: 186). In later editions of the book published after the invasion, he shamelessly insisted that the 'outbreak of the Russo-German war, and its course, seem to me a confirmation of the fundamental analysis presented in this chapter' (Burnham 2021: 211). He also predicted that Germany and Japan would win the war and that Russia would split into two countries (Burnham 2021: 210). As Orwell shrewdly observed, Burnham's analysis amounted to little more than watching geopolitical events unfold and assuming that whichever nation was in the ascendancy would forever dominate the world.

Orwell wrote two long and mostly critical essays about Burnham in 1946 and 1947 and yet, despite all his reservations, quietly admired him for his intellectual courage and for the theory, laid out in *The Managerial Revolution*, that the big political ideologies of capitalism, fascism and communism had had their day and would soon be replaced by rule by amoral elites. One only needs to quote from Orwell's second essay on Burnham to see his influence on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Burnham foretold the rise of three super-states which would be unable to conquer one another

and would divide the world between them ... all three super-states would be very much alike. They would be totalitarian in structure: that is, they would be collectivist but not democratic, and would be ruled over by a caste of managers, scientists and bureaucrats who would destroy old-style capitalism and keep the working class permanently in subjection. In other words, something rather like "Communism" would prevail everywhere. (2002a: 98)

Although it was quite evident by 1947 that there were two post-war superpowers, not three, Orwell maintained that *The Managerial Revolution* was 'a good description of what is actually happening in various parts of the world, i.e., the growth of societies neither capitalist nor socialist, and organised more or less on the lines of a caste system' (2002a: 104).

Shortly after writing this, Orwell wrote 'Toward European Unity' in which he sketched out three possibilities for the future. The first was that the USA would use the atomic bomb against the USSR before the Soviets got hold of it. The second was that the Cold War would continue until nuclear war inevitably broke out. The third was that fear of Armageddon would prevent atomic bombs being used at all. On the face of it, the last of these seemed the best-case scenario and yet Orwell considered it 'the worst possibility of them all' because:

It would mean the division of the world among two or three vast super-states, unable to conquer one another and unable to be overthrown by any internal rebellion. In all probability their structure would be hierarchic, with a semi-divine caste at

the top and outright slavery at the bottom, and the crushing out of liberty would exceed anything that the world has yet seen. Within each state the necessary psychological atmosphere would be kept up by complete severance from the outer world, and by a continuous phoney war against rival states. (1968d: 424)

It is not at all obvious why Orwell thought any of this would inevitably result from the non-use of nuclear weapons, other than that Burnham had predicted something along those lines. Here, at least, he acknowledges the possibility of two superpowers, but in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he reverted to Burnham's original trio. Why? Although Churchill had been one of the 'Big Three' at the Tehran Conference, it was not difficult to predict that Great Britain's status on the world stage would diminish (Orwell certainly thought so). Japan had been defeated and there was no one to challenge the two superpowers of the USA and USSR, and yet in 'You and the Atom Bomb', published in October 1945, Orwell claimed that 'Burnham's geographical picture of the new world has turned out to be correct. More and more obviously the surface of the earth is being parcelled off into three great empires' (1968d: 25). He argued that China had the potential to dominate East Asia, a perceptive comment in the long run but not something that looked 'obvious' in 1945, or even in 1984.

By 1947 Orwell had accepted that, contrary to Burnham, 'the super-states have dwindled to two, and, thanks to atomic weapons, neither of them is invincible' (1968d: 363). Perhaps he stuck with the three-superpower set-up in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* because he felt that it did not matter whether there were two or three of them so long as they were in deadlock. Perhaps it was because he needed more than

one country for Oceania to go to war with. Or perhaps it was the only way he could use his in-joke about Stalin's apologists switching sides whenever Russia found a new ally.

Whatever his reasons, this is what Orwell ended up with: US-dominated Oceania, whose nominal ideology is Ingsoc; Russian-dominated Eurasia, which practises 'Neo-Bolshevism'; and Eastasia, dominated by China and in thrall to an ideology known as 'Death-Worship', about which Orwell tells us nothing except that it is 'perhaps better rendered as Obliteration of the Self' (1971: 159). The three ideologies are 'barely distinguishable', he says (1971: 159). They are all oligarchies, and their leaders are only interested in power.

Orwell may have come to regret using the word Ingsoc (an abbreviation of English Socialism) since it gave some readers the impression that he was attacking the British Labour Party. In a statement issued in June 1949 – the last thing he ever wrote for publication – he described himself as a Labour supporter and said that the word 'Americanism' would have worked just as well (2002b: 134). But the choice of Ingsoc was both deliberate and significant. If Orwell had merely wanted to make the point that any ideology could become totalitarian, then the words 'Americanism' or 'National Socialism' would have been reasonable substitutes, but, as Christopher Hitchens (2002: 60) notes, 'it would have done nothing to shake the complacency of Western intellectuals concerning the system of state terror for which, at the time, so many of them had either a blind spot or a soft spot'. Fascism had been defeated. Capitalism was showing little sign of veering towards totalitarianism. The only countries that resembled Oceania flew the hammer and sickle.

Unlike *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not specifically about the USSR. It can be read – and was intended to be read – as a warning against totalitarianism in general. But the shadow of the USSR is unmistakable. Big Brother, with his thick moustache, bears a clear resemblance to Stalin, while Emmanuel Goldstein is quite obviously Trotsky (whose real name was Bronstein). The characters call each other ‘comrade’. Oceania’s history books tell lurid stories about the dark era of capitalism that had been ended by the revolution. It is silly to pretend that Orwell was not primarily writing about communism and did not have the USSR at the forefront of his mind. The people who got hold of the book in the Soviet Union knew perfectly well that Orwell was writing about them. Communists everywhere knew that Orwell was writing about them; why else did the novel get such bad reviews in the Marxist press? Bolshevism was not real socialism in Orwell’s view, but then nor was Ingsoc. It would have been a cop-out to give the nominal ideology of Oceania any other name.

## 5. *We*

There was one other book that had an important influence on the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Written in the early 1920s, the Russian novel *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin was the first book to be banned by the Bolshevik regime. Orwell struggled to find an English translation but eventually acquired a French edition, which he reviewed in 1946. In the last year of his life, Orwell tried to persuade his publisher, Fredric Warburg, to issue it in English, writing from his sick bed: 'Certainly it has faults, but it seems to me to form an interesting link in the chain of Utopia books' (2002b: 72).

*We* is set in the 26th century, when people have lost all individualism and live in the One State under the all-seeing eye of 'The Benefactor'. The protagonist is a mathematician called D-503 (people no longer have names, only numbers) who is in charge of building a new rocket, 'The Integral'. A quote from Orwell's review reveals immediate parallels with the plot of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

He falls in love (this is a crime, of course) with a certain I-330 who is a member of an underground resistance movement and succeeds for a while in leading him into rebellion. (1968d: 97)

D-503's plot is uncovered, he is interrogated by The Benefactor, and he betrays his co-conspirators. 'With complete equanimity', writes Orwell, 'he watches I-330 tortured by means of compressed air under a glass bell' (1968d: 98).



Summarised like this, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* sounds almost like plagiarism, although we know that Orwell had already pencilled in a love affair and a torture scene for his futuristic novel long before he read *We*.<sup>2</sup> Despite some plot similarities, the two books are very different. Stylistically, they are poles apart. Orwell's prose was as crisp as ever, while Zamyatin experimented with an Expressionist style dominated by abstract metaphors. Orwell's story is hard and earthy, while Zamyatin's is ethereal, almost dreamlike. The physical environment of the One State is sun-soaked and glistening but thinly drawn, leaving much to the reader's imagination. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is set a few decades from the present in a country that is all too recognisably England. *We* is set centuries in the future on what feels like a different planet. Big Brother rules by terror, and the people of Oceania live in oppressive squalor. The people of the One State lead tightly regimented lives but are reasonably prosperous and, within the confines of what they know, consider themselves happy.

Zamyatin's society of contented drones seems to have been more of an influence on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, published in 1932 and also set in the 26th century, than on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell certainly thought so. In his letter to Warburg, he said that "'Brave New World' must be partly plagiarised from it [*We*] to some extent' (2002b: 72). Huxley denied having read Zamyatin's novel until after he had written *Brave New World*, but the similarities are so striking that this is hard to believe.

Orwell did not consider *We* to be a great novel (although he thought it better than *Brave New World*), but he rightly

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2 In February 1944, he mentioned *We* in a letter, saying that he was 'interested in that kind of book, and even keep making notes for one myself that may get written sooner or later' (1968c: 118).

saw it as an important one. Zamyatin's imagination was responsible for several tropes that would form the basis of utopia/dystopia fiction for the next century. Orwell borrowed from the plot, while Huxley may have borrowed from the setting. Both men, like Zamyatin, were satirising what Huxley (1983: 12) described as the 'nightmare of total organisation'. Although the three novels all have serious points to make about power, ideology and technology, *We* and *Brave New World* are almost light-hearted in comparison to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but then *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was the only one written after Stalin's show trials, after Auschwitz and after Hiroshima.

## 6. The shape of things to come: competing dystopias

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is often portrayed as a howl of despair from a dying man. In fact, Orwell did not know that he was dying when he wrote it. With the help of streptomycin, he was hopeful of beating the disease and, for a time, it seemed that he had. Although his friends were shocked by his skeletal appearance in the last years of his life, he tried to remain upbeat and took any sign of recovery as evidence that his health was finally turning the corner. For all Orwell's public-school stoicism and the measure of fame and wealth that *Animal Farm* had brought him, he had plenty of reasons to be miserable. Not only was he gravely ill, but he was also a widower bringing up a young child alone after Eileen's sudden death. The despair that pervades *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may have been partly a reflection of his personal circumstances, but it was at least as much a reflection of his view of current affairs and his expectations for the future of the world, both of which were drenched in pessimism.

There was, it must be conceded, much to be pessimistic about. Orwell had already lived through two world wars. He had seen Germany, one of the most advanced and civilised nations on Earth, descend into indescribable barbarism. Russia had become a totalitarian state under Joseph Stalin, who had not merely consolidated his power in Russia but had swallowed Eastern Europe into his Soviet empire. Britain

was a diminished force, its people condemned to rationing and austerity with no end in sight. And then there was the atomic bomb, which Orwell knew would soon be in the hands of the Soviets. He wrote in November 1946:

When one considers how things have gone since 1930 or thereabouts, it is not easy to believe in the survival of civilisation. (1968d: 288)

Laid up in a Scottish hospital a month later, he wrote in a letter:

This stupid war is coming off in abt 10–20 years, & this country will be blown off the map whatever else happens. The only hope is to have a home with a few animals in some place not worth a bomb. (1968d: 441–2)

Jura was certainly not worth bombing.

Despite his illness, Orwell was at the peak of his powers as a writer. There had not been a word out of place in *Animal Farm*. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, his second masterpiece, is much longer and crams in many more ideas, but the prose remains concise, clear and economical. By setting the novel in the future, he gave himself a broad canvas on which to express his many fears.

Every futuristic novel with a point to make is an exaggeration of the present. Those that are set hundreds of years in the future have almost unlimited creative licence. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was set less than 40 years in the future and its physical world was easy for Orwell's British readers to visualise since it was little more than a dilapidated version of the present. The rationing, the rubble, the militaristic

slogans, the tasteless food – none of this would have been unfamiliar. For Londoners, flying bombs exploding around them would have been a recent memory. Orwell's own house was hit by a V-1 bomb in 1944, nearly destroying the manuscript of *Animal Farm*. The landscape was also easy to picture. Trafalgar Square has been renamed Victory Square. The nearby church St Martin-in-the-Fields is still standing, but has been turned into a grotesque military museum. Senate House, the imposing London building that was home to the Ministry of Information during the war (and where Eileen worked between 1939 and 1942) has become the Ministry of Love.

From the very start, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* creates an unsettling atmosphere by positioning the familiar at a slight angle from the present. Although the 24-hour clock was not widely used outside the military in 1949, Orwell's readers would have been aware of it. The idea of a clock with 24 hands striking 13, however, was an entirely alien idea. The metric system is much more commonly used in Britain today than it was in 1949, but even now beer is not sold in half-litres. We are familiar with the dollar but do not expect it to be used in England. As Richard A. Posner (1999: 29) says, 'these simple, "rationalising" measures turn out to be sinister in their own right. They illustrate the Party's effort to empty the culture of its historical residues, to make the present discontinuous with the past.'

Unlike the futuristic novels of H. G. Wells and Aldous Huxley, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* cannot really be described as science fiction. There is no technology in the novel that had not been invented by 1948, at least in embryonic form. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is also unquestionably harsher. The dystopias of Huxley and Zamyatin had been unnerving in their portrayal of humanity existing in a state of docile ignorance, but such

ignorance could be mistaken for bliss. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the regime does not pretend to be benevolent. 'Big Brother is watching you' is not a reassurance but a threat.

Orwell fundamentally disagreed with the 'super-rational, hedonistic type of Utopia', as he described *Brave New World* in a private letter (2002b: 72). In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, written in 1936, Orwell said that both Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and H. G. Wells' *The Sleeper Awakes* (1899) presented a 'pessimistic Utopia, a vision of a sort of prig's paradise in which the dreams of the "progressive" person come true' (1989: 188). Orwell intended to take *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in a different direction because he felt strongly that the progressives were mistaken. In 1941, he wrote an article criticising H. G. Wells for being stuck in the mindset of a nineteenth-century rationalist while the world descended into barbarism: 'He was, and still is, quite incapable of understanding that nationalism, religious bigotry and feudal loyalty are far more powerful forces than what he himself would describe as sanity' (1968c: 172).

Huxley and Orwell are destined to be forever mentioned in the same breath. By an odd coincidence, Huxley had been Orwell's French teacher at Eton for a year during World War I when the older man needed to earn some money. There was never any bad blood between them, but they were quietly dismissive of each other's futuristic novels, and both went to their graves believing that their vision of the future was more realistic.<sup>3</sup> When he wrote *Brave New World Revisited* in 1958, Huxley (1983: 12–13) boasted that his 'prophecies made in 1931 are coming true much sooner

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3 Orwell's relationship with H. G. Wells was less civil. In a diary entry from 1942, Orwell wrote: 'Abusive letter from H. G. Wells, who addresses me as "you shit", among other things.' (1968b: 469)

than I thought they would' and that, so long as the world avoided a nuclear war, 'it now looks as though the odds were more in favour of something like *Brave New World* than of something like *1984*'. Orwell, by contrast, was convinced that the society Huxley envisaged could not survive, because life would be so futile that even its rulers would not be able to summon the energy to defend it (1968d: 97). It was his belief that 'hedonistic societies do not endure' (1968b: 46). In his review of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Orwell asserted that people 'want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades'. He considered Fascism and Stalinism to be 'psychologically far sounder than any hedonistic conception of life' (1968b: 29). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, O'Brien pointedly scoffs at 'the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined' as he explains to Winston that the Party has something immeasurably worse in mind (1971: 214).

Orwell's scepticism about such Utopias may explain the presence of the Anti-Sex League in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This is not a satirical version of anything Orwell witnessed in the 1940s, nor was it taken from anything in Soviet or Nazi culture, neither of which were especially prudish. It does, however, distinguish *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from its closest predecessors. In *Brave New World* and *We*, casual sex is positively encouraged. (By contrast, smoking and drinking – almost the only vices still available in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – are punishable by death in *We*.)

As a prediction of where the twentieth century was heading, an anti-sex movement could hardly have been further from the mark, and it is often argued that the world has moved more in the direction of Huxley's self-indulgent, pill-popping, promiscuous ignoramuses than towards Orwell's boot-in-the-face nightmare. Champions of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

respond by pointing to the widespread use of cameras to monitor the population, the corruption of language and 'fake news', but it is hard to deny that in several important respects Huxley and Zamyatin had a better feel for how the twentieth century would develop. And yet it was far from obvious in 1948 that the gains made by totalitarian regimes would wane as the century progressed. Orwell had no reason to caution his readers about the risks of excessive hedonism, of which there was little sign in post-war Britain. It was not a hypothetical world of mindless pleasure-seeking that Orwell wanted to warn us about, but the very real threat of totalitarianism.



## 7. Satire

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is split into three parts. The first, in which we are introduced to Winston Smith and his bleak totalitarian world, is the blackest satire. The second has the makings of a thriller. The third comes close to horror. For many readers, it is Room 101, the rats and Winston's final gin-soaked tears that live longest in the memory. The book ends on such a down note that it is easy to forget that the early chapters are written with a surprisingly light touch.

In the public statement released in June 1949, written primarily to remind the world that he was still a socialist, Orwell stressed that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was 'after all a parody' (2002b: 134). Christopher Hitchens (2002: 135) claimed that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* contains 'absolutely no jokes' and yet it is not completely devoid of humour. Winston's relationships with his co-workers, particularly 'the imbecile Parsons', have something of the situation comedy about them. There is nothing funny about Room 101, which contains 'the worst thing in the world' and which people would rather die than enter, until you learn that Orwell endured countless editorial meetings at the BBC in a room of the same name. The novel also contains the kind of dry lines that pepper Orwell's work and which the reader is never quite sure are intended to be funny or not, such as when Winston suddenly becomes infatuated with Julia after receiving the love note, having previously suspected her of being in the Thought Police:

Only five nights ago he had contemplated smashing her skull in with a cobblestone, but that was of no importance. (1971: 90)

This is, admittedly, not the kind of thing that will make many readers spit out their coffee with laughter, but it is not entirely humourless.

Some of Orwell's targets for parody in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were more serious than others. There are occasional glimpses of Orwell's pet peeves taken to extremes. The sentiments of the 'very old man' who tries to order a pint of beer from a barman who only knows litres and half-litres surely echo the frustrations of the author who, in March 1947, defended imperial measures and criticised the metric system (1968d: 351–2).<sup>4</sup> In the same article, he complained about a now forgotten plan to rationalise English spelling. Known as Nu Spelling, it may have been a partial inspiration for Newspeak, the Party's permanent solution to free thinking.

In November 1944, Orwell came across the British Institute of Fiction-Writing Ltd., a company that claimed to have analysed 5,000 stories and could sell the secrets to aspiring writers in 'The Plot Formula' for one guinea. Orwell quoted advertisements in a similar vein which appeared to have reduced fiction writing to a science. For example:

PLOTS. Our plots are set out in sequence all ready for write-up, with lengths for each sequence. No remoulding necessary – just the clothing of words. All types supplied. (1968c: 314)

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4 The man is described as being in his 80s, as Orwell would have been in 1984 had he lived.

Outraged on behalf of authors everywhere by the suggestion that creative writing could be reduced to a formula, Orwell started a minor spat by mocking the company in the pages of *Tribune*. He received an angry reply from the company's boss, to whom Orwell gave no quarter, and the incident may have sown the seeds of the novel-writing machines in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In an unpublished essay written towards the beginning of the war, Orwell argued that words did not exist in the English language to describe many aspects of human experience. With characteristic overstatement he wrote: 'Everyone who thinks at all has noticed that our language is practically useless for describing anything that goes on inside the brain' (1968b: 17). To remedy this, he proposed inventing thousands of new words to allow people to better communicate their thoughts and feelings. Nothing came of the idea, of course, but he inverted it in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with the ever-smaller dictionaries of Newspeak. In Oceania, the number of words is continually reduced with the deliberate aim of restricting communication and therefore, it is presumed, thought. The dampening effect on communication is plausible enough, but whether it would restrict thought is more doubtful: the whole point of Orwell's essay on the subject was that thoughts *are* possible without the words to express them.

Perhaps the most clearly satirical passage in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the scene in which Oceania turns on a sixpence from being at war with Eurasia to being at war with Eastasia. The scene works as a simple parody of government propaganda and underlines the fact that Winston is surrounded by blatant lies which no one dares challenge and many do not even notice. But even in the dystopia Orwell has created for us, it is not quite believable. The speaker at the Hate Week rally is handed a piece of paper

and changes his narrative 'in mid-sentence, not only without a pause, but without even breaking the syntax' (1971: 148). There is not a murmur of dissent, even from the unruly 'proles' who presumably make up a part of the crowd. It would be more believable if the Party at least waited for the speech to end before announcing the volte-face – more realistic perhaps, but less powerful as satire, for Orwell had a specific event in mind; he was mocking the English communists, who furiously denounced the Nazis until September 1939, when the Hitler–Stalin pact made them fall silent for 20 months (or become actively pro-German), before they once again became stridently anti-Nazi when Russia was invaded.<sup>5</sup>

Orwell half-predicted this reverse ferret in a speech on the BBC Eastern Service, which was printed in the *Listener* just three days before the Germans invaded Russia. Lamenting, not for the last time, the tendency of totalitarian regimes to attack 'the very concept of objective truth', he said:

To take a crude, obvious example, every German up to September 1939 had to regard Russian Bolshevism with horror and aversion, and since September 1939 he has had to regard it with admiration and affection. If Russia and Germany go to war, as they may well do within the next few years, another equally violent change will have to take place. (1968b: 163)

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5 Orwell had earlier undergone an equally sudden transition from peacenik to ardent patriot. By his own account, he had a dream the night before the Nazis signed their accord with the Soviets that the war had started. It was then that he realised that he would support the war and fight for the British Army if possible (1968a: 590).

He was talking about public opinion in Nazi Germany, but he almost certainly also had in his mind British Stalinists, who needed no coercion from the state to engage in doublethink.

This is an example of the pure satire of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which Orwell takes an event from 1940s Britain and magnifies it to illustrate its absurdity. But there is another side to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which Orwell takes real events from totalitarian countries and sets them in Britain without embellishment. These two aspects of the novel are often indistinguishable, but they deserve to be treated separately. It is possible to imagine Orwell writing the same novel based on nothing more than the Soviet Union as inspiration. It is just about possible to imagine him writing the same novel as a pure parody of the totalitarian tendencies of British intellectuals even if the Soviet Union did not exist. Many of the elements of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* cannot be dismissed as *reductio ad absurdum*, because something very like them was happening in the Soviet Union in 1948 and had recently happened in Nazi-controlled Europe. In the USSR, children really did inform on their parents. The rooms with no darkness, in which bare fluorescent lightbulbs were never switched off, really did exist. The dead really were airbrushed from official photos. History was rewritten even more brazenly than Orwell may have imagined. For example, after the Great Terror of 1936–8, a new *History of the Communist Party* was published, as one of its survivors recalled:

Shamelessly, without so much as an explanation, it revised half a century of Russian history. I don't mean simply that it falsified some facts or gave a new interpretation of events. I mean that it deliberately stood history on its head, expunging events and inventing facts. It twisted the recent

past – a past still fresh in millions of memories – into new and bizarre shapes, to conform with the version of affairs presented by the blood-purge trials and the accompanying propaganda.

... All books, articles, documents, museum materials which contradicted this extraordinary fantasy parading as history – and that means nearly all historical and political writings and documentation – disappeared throughout the country!

More than that, living witnesses, as far as possible, were removed. (Kravchenko 1947: 304)

A few of the purely satirical scenes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may require the reader to suspend disbelief, but much of what went on under *actually existing* totalitarian governments defied belief. It was, in a literal sense, beyond parody.

## 8. Julia and Winston

In a letter to the crime writer Julian Symons in February 1949, Orwell said of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 'I ballsed it up rather' (2002b: 35). This may have been no more than Orwell's characteristic modesty. He never explained what he thought he had ballsed up, but generations of critics have not been shy in submitting their own suggestions. The novelist Anthony Burgess (1980: 22) pedantically complained that the electricity has been cut off in the first chapter and yet the telescreen is still on. He pointed out that although Orwell would have remembered Chinese rice-spirit from his Burmese days, Winston had no such reference point and therefore could not compare it to the smell of Victory gin (Burgess 1980: 26). He also asked how central London was still standing after a nuclear strike (Burgess 1980: 38).

In Orwell's defence, he specifies that it is only the 'electric current' for the lift that is cut off and only 'during daylight hours'. The telescreen could have an alternative source of electricity, as telephones do. It is not Winston but the narrator who compares the smell of Victory gin to Chinese rice-spirit. And Orwell never says that an atomic bomb landed on London (although one landed fifty miles away in Colchester). Burgess did have a point, however, when he asked why Winston would need to seek out a man in his eighties to hear about what life was like before Big Brother. Anyone over the age of 50 would have a decent memory of the era before the revolution. Even 39-year-old Winston has vague recollections. In a similar spirit of nit-picking, it could be

noted that the Party slogan 'Proles and animals are free' (1971: 61) is at odds with the claim in the appendix that in Newspeak the word 'free' no longer had its old meaning and 'could only be used in such statements as "This dog is free from lice" or "This field is free from weeds"' (1971: 241–2). More fundamentally, one might ask why no one in the book, including O'Brien and the Newspeak fanatic Syme, uses more than a few words of Newspeak in conversation.<sup>6</sup>

Several literary critics have complained that Julia is thinly drawn as a character and that her love affair with Winston is implausible and unconvincing. They have interpreted her lack of interest in politics, notably falling asleep while Winston reads Goldstein's book, as a reflection of Orwell's misogyny. Even Orwell's publisher interpreted it this way, writing: 'It is a typical Orwellism that Julia falls asleep while Winston reads it. (Women aren't intelligent, in Orwell's world.)' (2002a: 480). But surely Julia's ambivalence towards the political system is part of her appeal. She is a free spirit who has learned how to play the system rather than fight it. Of all the characters in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* she is the only one who is truly alive. We do not find out much about her background, but that is true of everyone in the novel apart from Winston, who barely knows her himself. She is a supporting character who doesn't speak until the second act and is completely absent from the third act except at the very end. As a romance, it may struggle to convince, but they are hardly Romeo and Juliet. Love itself barely exists in 1984. Their love affair is, as Geering (1958: 92) noted, 'basically political in origin, an act of defiance against the Party'. The way in which Julia first approaches Winston,

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6 Winston notes that Goldstein's speech during the Two Minutes Hate 'even contained Newspeak words: more Newspeak words, indeed, than any Party member would normally use in real life' (1971: 14). A clue, perhaps, that Goldstein is not real.



handing a love note to an older man to whom she has never spoken, may seem unlikely but it is not so dissimilar to Orwell's own scattergun approach to the opposite sex after the death of Eileen in 1945 when he proposed marriage to several women almost at random.

Some readers believe that Julia's unorthodox dating technique indicates that she works for the Thought Police. Orwell's most prolific biographer, D. J. Taylor (2019: 144), claims that Julia is 'very probably an agent provocateur', but there is no firm evidence for this and scarcely any clues point in that direction. If she were a honey trap, surely Orwell would have made this explicit at the end since it would make the world of 1984 seem even more hopeless and would have been just the kind of dramatic reveal that Orwell enjoyed using elsewhere in the book. Instead, when Julia reappears for an icy conversation with Winston in the final chapter, she is a ghost of her former self. Both characters have been practically lobotomised, and the contrast between the ebullient Julia we have come to know and the broken woman in the park is even sadder than the transformation in Winston. There is every reason to believe that she has gone through the same ordeal.

Winston himself bears several obvious resemblances to his creator. He is thin, unwell, middle class, afraid of rats and only a few years younger. 'In both cases,' writes D. J. Taylor (2019: 78), 'a distinctly unhealthy middle-aged man is obsessed with an energetic woman in her twenties.' That woman was Sonia Brownell whom Orwell met in the early 1940s when she was working for the literary magazine *Horizon*. Her friend and biographer Hilary Spurling (2003: 67) is convinced that Orwell based Julia on her. Certainly, there are similarities. Sonia, whom Orwell married three months before his death, worked in publishing and was 15

years younger than Orwell. Julia works in the fiction department and is 13 years younger than Winston. But there the similarities end. Julia is a brunette with no time for intellectual pursuits. Sonia was a fiercely intellectual blonde obsessed by literature.

Incidentally, since Orwell finished the novel in 1948, a theory has arisen, unsupported by evidence, that he picked 1984 as the fateful year by reversing the last two numbers of that year. A more prosaic explanation is that Orwell needed his protagonist to be born towards the end of World War II and be around 40 years old. Winston Smith is better described as the central character in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* than its hero. There is nothing heroic, attractive or even particularly interesting about him. His rebellion amounts to no more than scribbling in his diary and having sex with Julia. He is just another ordinary person retaining an ounce of humanity being put through Big Brother's meat grinder. Orwell was right to abandon the title *The Last Man in Europe*. The focus of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the world Winston Smith finds himself living in, not the man himself.

## 9. The proles

One criticism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that despite the setting being horribly plausible in many ways, the Big Brother regime is simply not believable: no government would have the resources to spy so intensively on so many people. *In extremis*, it would require half the population to be watching the other half. However, as Christopher Hitchens noted, East Germany's Stasi files show that totalitarian governments can employ an extraordinarily large number of spies. The Stasi was formed a few weeks after Orwell's death and could almost have been inspired by *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It employed more than 270,000 people, had up to two million collaborators and informants, and kept files on six million people (more than a third of the population). Orwell's dystopia was not so far-fetched.

In any case, it is not the whole population of Oceania, or even half of it, being permanently spied upon in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. After spending sixty pages immersed in a world of intense surveillance, two-way televisions and secret police, it comes as a surprise to discover that 85% of the population of Airstrip One is barely monitored at all. They are the proles – the working classes – who to Winston, like Orwell, represent honesty, authenticity and hope. Like the animals in his previous book, they have the collective power to overthrow the regime if only they knew it.

Orwell said he got the idea for *Animal Farm* from seeing a small boy whipping a cart-horse. If the horse understood its own strength, he thought, the boy would have no chance (2002a: 88). A similar metaphor appears in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

But the proles, if only they could somehow become conscious of their own strength, would have no need to conspire. They needed only to rise up and shake themselves like a horse shaking off flies. If they chose they could blow the Party to pieces to-morrow morning. (1971: 59)

Left-wing intellectuals in Orwell's time tended to view the working class with pity and disgust while glorifying them in the abstract. If only they were not distracted by drink, gambling, football, pulp fiction, sex, films and the *Daily Express* – went the thinking – they would listen to lectures on dialectical materialism and realise their revolutionary potential. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the 85% of the population who are not Party members are personified by a 50-year-old woman who seems to be constantly hanging up washing and singing popular songs. In Oceania, songs, like novels, are written by machine, but that is no problem for the proles. We know nothing about this woman and nor does Winston, but she is strong, ruddy and hard-working, and therefore comes close to the noble peasant ideal which, for the intelligentsia, was the respectable face of the hoi polloi. Reaching for an animal metaphor, Orwell (1971: 174) describes her as having 'powerful mare-like buttocks' and Winston looks at her with 'mystical reverence'. He murmurs to Julia that this fat, middle-aged housewife, previously described as 'monstrous', is 'beautiful' (how's that for doublethink?). Even as Winston admires the prole woman's body, he denigrates her brain:

The woman down there had no mind, she had only strong arms, a warm heart, and a fertile belly. (1971: 174)

In *Animal Farm*, the working class had been the least intelligent animals on the farm. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, they have been upgraded to humans, but only just. The Party says 'Proles and animals are free' (1971: 61). Syme tells him that the proles 'are not human beings' (1971: 46). O'Brien tells Winston that the proles are 'helpless, like the animals' (1971: 216). This, it should be noted, is the Party line. What did Winston think? Halfway through the book he has a revelation:

"The proles are human beings," he said aloud. "We are not human." (1971: 135)

But alongside the revelation comes an admission:

For the first time in his life he did not despise the proles or think of them merely as an inert force which would one day spring to life and regenerate the world. (1971: 135)

Herein lies the tension between Orwell and the workers. One must, of course, remember that Winston is not Orwell and that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a satire. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as in *Brave New World*, the elite have been indoctrinated into a caste system, but it is an indoctrination to which Orwell could relate. He wrote in *The Road to Wigan Pier* that there were 'four frightful words' that explained why the middle class 'cannot without a hard effort think of a working man as his equal'.

The words were: The lower classes smell.

That was what we were taught – the lower classes smell. And here, obviously, you are at an impassable barrier. (1989: 119)

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell does not say much about the smell of the proles, but he portrays them as almost a different species. For all his compassion for the working class, he could not help looking down on them. In 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War', written in 1942, he used a typically unflattering metaphor:

The struggle of the working class is like the growth of a plant. The plant is blind and stupid, but it knows enough to keep pushing upwards towards the light. (1968b: 299)

In 'The Prevention of Literature', published in 1946, he damned the masses with the faintest of praise when he said that they were 'too sane and too stupid to acquire the totalitarian outlook' (1968d: 93). Other writers might have settled for 'sane' but, as always, Orwell felt compelled to say what he thought.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the masses – 17 out of every 20 people – have no interest in culture, education or politics. Despite bombs falling on their streets on a regular basis, they are only occasionally interested in the war, and then only when the Party ratchets up the propaganda for special occasions. They are not merely ignorant and uneducated – everyone in Oceania is ignorant and uneducated – but incurious and *stupid*. The Party can leave them to their own devices because they have neither the guile nor the initiative to do anything about their circumstances.

This is the classic prejudice of the bourgeois left and Orwell makes remarkably little attempt to sugarcoat it. As Winston walks through the prole area where he will end up having a fruitless conversation with the old man in the pub, he has a thought which surely reflects Orwell's view:

... if there is hope, it lay in the proles. You had to cling on to that. When you put it in words it sounded reasonable; it was when you looked at the human beings passing you on the pavement that it became an act of faith. (1971: 72)

For the radical left, the proletariat were – and still are – a source of both frustration and hope. Frustration because they stubbornly refused to overthrow capitalism or even take socialism seriously, and hope because a socialist revolution, whether through violence or the ballot box, would be easily achieved if they acted in what the intellectuals believed to be their class interests.

John Carey argues in *The Intellectuals and Society* that contempt for the masses was endemic among the British intelligentsia in the inter-war years (Carey 1992). He picks out Orwell as the one writer who really tried to overcome his prejudice. Orwell was certainly more empathetic to the working class than many of his contemporaries (and to the lower-middle class, for that matter – *Coming Up for Air* is a sympathetic portrait of the 1930s intellectuals' *bête noir*: a middle-aged suburban male). Unlike H. G. Wells and Wyndham Lewis, he never fantasised about mass extinction. Unlike George Bernard Shaw and Harold Laski, he never endorsed eugenics. He never admired strong man dictators. And yet, in Carey's view (1992: 41), Orwell was never able to overcome his phobia of the dirt and grime with which he associated the working class.

There was a self-flagellating aspect to Orwell's character that seemed to stem from the guilt he felt about his own privilege. He described his family as 'lower-upper-middle class', which sounds like a joke to anyone outside Britain but accurately describes his parents' precarious position on the fringes of high society. He was by no means the only middle-class socialist to go on a poverty safari in the 1930s, but he threw himself into the hardship with unusual zeal, not only in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, in which he saw how the other half lived, but also for his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, in which he rubbed shoulders with those at the very bottom of society. Orwell's tales of living with tramps and sleeping in Britain's worst doss-houses were eye-opening and sometimes grimly amusing, but he put himself through more misery than was strictly necessary to gather material for a book. After being educated at Eton and spending five years in Burma helping to run the British Empire, his plunge into avoidable hardship in the late 1920s seems, as Carey notes (1992: 41), like a 'self-imposed penance'.

And yet it was not enough. Anthony Burgess (1980: 32) said that Orwell 'tried to love the workers but couldn't'. Like Huxley (and countless others), Orwell blamed consumerism for the docile state of the masses. While soma and the feelies keep the public placid in *Brave New World*, the working class in 1984 is stupefied with 'films, football, beer, and above all, gambling', just as they were presumed to in 1948. Hope may lie in the proles, but the proles themselves were hopeless as far as Orwell was concerned.

Such a portrayal of working-class culture was deeply unfair. As Orwell surely knew, most working people had higher interests and were quite capable of self-organisation and self-improvement. They may not have craved lectures from



Marxist professors – nor did Orwell, particularly – but they were the bedrock of trade unions, friendly societies, sports clubs, temperance groups and many other civil society organisations.

Reading Orwell's depiction of the proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, two questions arise. Firstly, what did Orwell think his working-class readers would make of his portrayal of them as easily pleased simpletons who lack 'the power of grasping that the world could be other than it is' and who 'can be granted intellectual liberty because they have no intellect' (1971: 168)? Did he even expect to have any working-class readers?

Secondly, what role had the proletariat played in the revolution that had brought Big Brother to power in the first place? Had they perhaps been finally roused by socialist pamphleteers into overthrowing capitalism? If so, did they regret it?

## 10. The Ministry of Love

From the moment Winston puts pen to paper in the first chapter, he expects to be arrested, tortured and killed. Neither he nor Julia are in any doubt that they are doomed. Their capture by the Thought Police provides a moment of high drama at the end of the second act, but the reader has been primed for it. For the remainder of the book, Orwell's challenge was to make Winston's ordeal worse than the reader expects. Most readers would agree that he succeeded.

Shortly after *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published, Orwell wrote a letter to Julian Symons, who, in a review of the novel in the *Times Literary Supplement*, had criticised the 'crudity' of the interrogation scenes and claimed, rather contentiously, that the effect was 'comic rather than horrific'. Orwell, as usual, took the criticism on the chin but offered a justification.

You are of course right about the vulgarity of the "Room 101" business. I was aware of this while writing it, but I didn't know another way of getting somewhere near the effect I wanted. (2002b: 137)

The effect he wanted was, presumably, for Winston to be subjected to something so unendurable that he would betray Julia body and soul, snuffing out the small rebellion in his brain forever. To inspire the reader to resist totalitarianism in the present day, there had to be no hope in the totalitarian future. Winston had to be utterly defeated.

The violence in these chapters would be easier to stomach if they had come purely from Orwell's imagination. Readers might console themselves that they are reading fiction, but worse scenes had unfolded countless times in Europe in the decade in which Orwell was writing and millions of people were still being subjected to such torment in Russia and Eastern Europe under Stalin. It is not clear to what extent Orwell knew about what went on in the gulags. When asked for some recommended reading about the USSR, he replied that 'whatever I have learned, or rather guessed, about the country has come from reading between the lines of newspaper reports' (2002a: 127).<sup>7</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the great chronicler of the gulags, was still an inmate when Orwell was writing the book, and his *Gulag Archipelago* was not published until 1973. The Russian defector Viktor Kravchenko's memoir *I Chose Freedom* was published in 1947 and Orwell asked two people to send him a copy. Such requests were usually granted, but Orwell never wrote about the book, and it is not certain that he read it. Had he done so, he would have found ample material for the scenes in the Ministry of Truth. For months, Kravchenko endured nightly interrogations by the NKVD while having to work all day.<sup>8</sup> Sleep deprivation was the NKVD's least violent method of torture, but it was not the only one.

Heart-rending shrieks came from the rooms along the corridor; shrieks and curses, the sound of blows and the dull thud of bodies hitting the floor. (Kravchenko 1947: 261)

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7 In relation to what he called 'the concentration camps' (gulags), he specifically recommended *Liberation - Russian Style* by Ada Halpern, the anonymously written *The Dark Side of the Moon*, and *The Russian Enigma* by Ante Ciliga, who had spent five years in prison under Stalin (Orwell 2002a: 128).

8 The NKVD was the forerunner to the KGB.

His huge fists were crashing into my face like a couple of pistons run amok. Blood spurted from my nose. Blood filled my mouth with a warm briny nausea. “Now will you sign?” And again the hailstorm of blows and kicks enveloped me. (Kravchenko 1947: 270)

An undoubted inspiration for the showdown between Winston and O'Brien was Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon*, published in 1940. Koestler, a disillusioned communist who, like Orwell, had fought in the Spanish Civil War, tells the story of the imprisonment, interrogation and execution of Nikolai Salmanovich Rubashov, a senior official of 'the Party' in an unnamed country that is clearly the USSR. Rubashov still believes in the values of the revolution but is a member of the old guard at a time when a new generation of hardened zealots is seizing control. Exhausted by endless questioning and sleep deprivation, he confesses to trumped-up charges and is shot.

The characters in *Darkness at Noon* are well drawn, the dialogue is believable and the motivations of all involved, though sometimes warped, are coherent. Koestler was merely setting out what he imagined to be happening in prisons across Russia during Stalin's purges in 1938. Despite his ordeal, Rubashov experiences complex and conflicting emotions about the Party and the revolution. Orwell was less interested in such nuance. The main purpose of the extended interrogation scenes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is for the reader to discover that the world of 1984, terrifying though it is, is only a prelude to a more horrific world to come, one in which boots stamp on faces forever and there is no prospect of escape.

It is in these scenes that Orwell pushes Burnham's idea of a ruthless, amoral managerial class that cares about nothing but power to its furthest extreme. In some ways, the scenes are unrealistic. No interrogator would explain his motives at such length, and no secret police would spend so much time on somebody of no importance whom they are going to kill. The Gestapo or NKVD would have been more likely to put a bullet into the back of Winston's head than to spend days explaining the full nature and aims of the regime. They might have tortured Winston if they wanted to extract a confession, but O'Brien has no interest in confessions. O'Brien's interrogation allows Orwell to take his fears to their ultimate conclusion and show what pure power-lust and sadism look like. There is no political objective to make the oppression more understandable. There is no sense of eggs having to be broken to make an omelette. The Party is not interested in ideology or money or even in its own self-interest as such.

The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me?  
(1971: 211–12)

So diabolical are the reasons given for the Party's actions that they cease to be believable as the behaviour of rational beings. As Anthony Burgess (1980: 50) put it, 'O'Brien is talking not of power but of a disease not clearly understood.' And yet, as Dorian Lynsky puts it:

A satire without laughter is still a satire, and the whole point is to go too far. O'Brien is not a man; he's a thought experiment ... O'Brien is the answer to the question "What's the worst that could happen?" (Lynsky 2019: 180–1)

There is a sense in these later chapters that the story has taken on a momentum of its own and is running away from its author towards a crazed and yet somehow logical conclusion. Some critics have interpreted it as the delirium of a dying man sitting alone on a tiny island in the North Atlantic. Certainly, Orwell had never written anything like this before, but look closer and the original targets of his satire are still there, now blown up to monstrous proportions.

Three motifs reappear in O'Brien's questioning, all of which had appeared in Orwell's journalism in years gone by and get to the heart of what Orwell wanted to say about objective truth. The first is the question of who Oceania is at war with, Eurasia or Eastasia. The second is the photograph Winston had seen 11 years earlier of three unpersons – Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford, all executed for treason – taken in New York when the Party's official history claimed they were in Siberia. For Winston, this was the one solid piece of evidence he had ever seen which proved that the Party lied. He had sent it down the memory hole at the Ministry of Truth. Somewhat mysteriously, it reappears in O'Brien's hand in the interrogation room, where he glimpses it for a few seconds before O'Brien drops it into another memory hole and denies that it ever existed.

These are both direct satirical attacks on specific examples of self-delusion among Soviet apologists. As mentioned earlier, the Party's sudden alliance with its former enemy Eurasia and its absolute denial that it had ever been at war with anyone but Eastasia was inspired by the British Communist Party's abrupt conversion from anti-Nazism to pacifism when the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was signed in August 1939 and its sudden belligerence towards Germany when the USSR was invaded in June 1941.

The photograph of Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford also drew on Orwell's personal experience. In 'The Prevention of Literature', published in early 1946, he mentions a little-known piece of evidence that he held in his own hands:

I have before me what must be a very rare pamphlet, written by Maxim Litvinov in 1918 and outlining the recent events in the Russian Revolution. It makes no mention of Stalin, but gives high praise to Trotsky, and also Zinoviev, Kamenev and others. (1968d: 85).

In Russia, the history of the revolution had since been rewritten to downplay the role of Trotsky and inflate the role of Stalin. Zinoviev and Kamenev had both been executed during the Great Purge. Orwell goes on to say that 'even the most intellectually scrupulous Communist' would want this document to be suppressed and no Communist would object to it being republished in a rewritten form 'denigrating Trotsky and inserting references to Stalin' (1968d: 85).

It is 'The Prevention of Literature', more than any other article, that laid the groundwork for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is here that Orwell first described totalitarianism as a theocracy with an infallible ruling class for whom 'history is something to be created rather than learned' (1968d: 86). It is here that he predicts that a 'totalitarian society which succeeded in perpetuating itself would probably set up a schizophrenic system of thought' and would deny the 'very existence of objective truth' (1968d: 86). Historical 'facts' would be whatever the victor said they were. He who controlled the present would control the past. Orwell had first become vividly aware of this during the Spanish Civil War, an accurate history of which he believed could never be written. He had seen it again during World War II while working at the BBC,

both as a propagandist and – even more so – when listening to the enemy’s propaganda. And he saw it in the USSR, where people were erased from history in much the same way as they became ‘unpersons’ in Oceania.

O’Brien’s third line of enquiry distilled Orwell’s longstanding fears into the simple equation of  $2+2=4$ . For Orwell, this represented ‘the very concept of objective truth’ (1968d: 295). If such a basic fact could be denied, then anything could be denied. But to accept it meant that immutable truths existed and even the most powerful men could not alter them. It was a motif that had appeared again and again in his writing for a decade. As early as January 1939 he was warning that ‘we are descending into an age in which two and two will make five when the Leader says so’ (1968a: 414). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this is exactly what happens. O’Brien asks Winston how many fingers he is holding up. When Winston correctly says four, he is given a series of electric shocks. Desperately, Winston says ‘Five! Five! Five!’ but O’Brien knows he is lying and electrocutes him yet again.

And so it goes on. There then follows a break from the torture to allow another lecture from O’Brien before Winston is given something beyond an electric shock, something so powerful that it creates ‘a blinding flash of light’ but causes no pain and leaves Winston genuinely unaware that Oceania is at war with anyone and makes him see five fingers when O’Brien holds up four. The hallucination only lasts a few moments, but O’Brien explains to Winston that it represents progress.

As satire, it is not subtle and yet, oddly, it has a closer relationship to reality than most readers could imagine. As Lynsky (2019: 23) notes, ‘ $2+2=5$ ’ had been an actual slogan in the USSR in the early 1930s. Eugene Lyons, a journalist who lived in Russia at the time, recalled in *Assignment in*



*Utopia* that it featured on Soviet posters in an attempt to inspire the workers into achieving the latest Five-Year Plan in a mere four years.

The formula  $2+2=5$  instantly riveted my attention. It seemed to me at once bold and preposterous – the daring and the paradox and the tragic absurdity of the Soviet scene, its mystical simplicity, its defiance of logic, all reduced to nose-thumbing arithmetic. (Lyons 1937: 240)

Orwell was certainly aware of this. He reviewed *Assignment in Utopia* in June 1938, a few months before he started using the equation in his own journalism. Although the Soviets did not mean for  $2+2=5$  to be taken literally and Orwell takes it to a wild extreme, it is another example of the unsettling blurred lines between parody and reality in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

As O'Brien explains, the erasure of objective truth, along with the diminution of language and the obsessive, maniacal thirst for power, paves the way for a totalitarian regime that can last forever. What Winston calls the human spirit is not an innate characteristic but is the result of patterns of thought that can be eradicated. If Winston is the last man to so much as entertain the concepts of truth and liberty, then truth and liberty will die with him.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Throughout the novel, Winston assumes that he will be shot after capture following a brief period of release, like Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford, but we do not know for sure that this happens. By the end of the novel, he has been out of prison for some time and has even been given a new job. Now that he's a harmless simpleton, the regime has no particular reason to kill him, although that could be said of many others.

Orwell himself did not believe that such a tyranny could prevail forever. At any rate, he did not believe it when he wrote the following words in a 1946 essay about James Burnham:

... the Russian régime will either democratise itself, or it will perish. The huge, invincible, everlasting slave empire of which Burnham appears to dream will not be established, or, if established, will not endure, because slavery is no longer a stable basis for human society. (1968d: 214)

This sounds like one of Winston's protestations to O'Brien in the Ministry of Love, an objection to be swatted away by his tormentor with some deranged and yet internally consistent argument. In this instance, O'Brien's answer might resemble something Orwell wrote back in 1939:

In the past every tyranny was sooner or later overthrown, or at least resisted, because of "human nature", which as a matter of course desired liberty. But we cannot be at all certain that "human nature" is constant. It may be just as possible to produce a breed of men who do not wish for liberty as to produce a breed of hornless cows. The Inquisition failed, but then the Inquisition had not the resources of the modern state. (1968a: 419)

The whole interrogation scene can be viewed as a dialogue between Orwell (Winston) and the Devil (O'Brien). It is Orwell thinking out loud, weighing his optimism against his pessimism. Through Winston, Orwell voices his lingering hopes and gets horribly plausible, withering answers in return or receives replies that are so insane they can only foster insanity in Winston's exhausted head.

“Does Big Brother exist?” [asks Winston]  
“Of course he exists. The Party exists. Big Brother is the embodiment of the Party.”  
“Does he exist in the same way that I exist?”  
“You do not exist,” said O’Brien. (1971: 206)

By the end of it, Winston loves Big Brother. Or does he? In modern editions of the novel, Winston Smith sits in the Chestnut Tree café and writes ‘2+2=5’ in the dust on the table, confirming that he has been brainwashed. This was what was printed in the first edition, and it is what appears in Orwell’s manuscript. But in the second edition produced in December 1950, and in every copy of the book sold in Britain until 1987, Winston writes ‘2+2=’. There is no ‘5’ and this unsolved equation leaves open the possibility that the few square inches within Winston’s skull are still his own. The missing digit was long assumed to have been a typesetting mistake, but the author Dennis Glover discovered that the ‘5’ was also missing from the second impression of the first edition, published in March 1950, which suggests that it was removed deliberately.<sup>10</sup> If so, it is likely to have been at the request of the author, who, we might infer, belatedly decided to leave the reader with a glimmer of hope. There is no direct evidence that Orwell made such a request, and the matter may forever remain a mystery. It could have been a simple printer’s error. If so, it was a remarkably artistic one.

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10 Glover, D. ‘Did George Orwell secretly rewrite the end of Nineteen Eighty-Four as he lay dying?’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 June 2017 (<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/did-george-orwell-secretly-rewrite-the-end-of-nineteen-eightyfour-as-he-lay-dying-20170613-gwqbom.html>).

# 11. The theory and practice of oligarchical collectivism

If the only purpose of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was to show people what a totalitarian Britain would look like, it would not matter if Oceania were cut off from the rest of the world, like North Korea, or if Big Brother ruled the whole world. Winston does not know for sure what is going on outside of Airstrip One and nor does the reader. The international context would be mere scenery, but for Orwell it was crucial. In his June 1949 statement, he once again emphasised the danger of the world splitting in to 'several super states' in the atomic age.

George Orwell<sup>11</sup> assumes that if such societies as he describes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* come into being there will be several super states. This is fully dealt with in the relevant chapters of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is also discussed from a different angle by James Burnham in *The Managerial Revolution*. (2002b: 134)

It is interesting that here, in his last public statement, Orwell was still citing James Burnham, who was by this time well into his 'let's bomb Russia' phase. The influence of *The Managerial Revolution* and its power-hungry technocrats controlling a third of the world endured to the end.

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11 Oddly, the statement switches between the first and third person.

The 'relevant chapters' to which Orwell referred are the lengthy excerpts from Emmanuel Goldstein's seditious book 'The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism', which serve as a way for Winston and the reader to learn the truth about what is going on and how it came to be. Some critics have suggested that in the will-o'-the-wisp world of Oceania, Goldstein's book is another red herring, a fabrication of the Thought Police, but Orwell did not write *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to play games with the reader. He wrote it because he had something to say, and he would not have resorted to such a clumsy device as putting a book within a book unless that book said something important. Orwell had described the Soviet regime as 'a form of oligarchical collectivism' as early as 1940 (1968b: 41). Regardless of whether Goldstein himself was real, what the book says must be assumed to be true (O'Brien, who claims to have co-written the book, later tells Winston that it is).

To understand why Orwell included this material, it is worth noting something he wrote in November 1946:

It is not easy to find a direct economic explanation for the behaviour of the people who now rule the world. The desire for pure power seems to be much more dominant than the desire for wealth. (1968d: 289)

It is the psychology and motivations of seemingly economically irrational elites that Orwell tries to explain in the book-within-a-book and then shows in unforgiving detail in the brutal final chapters of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. His account is somewhat convoluted but can be summarised as follows:

There are, and always have been, 'three kinds of people in the world, the High, the Middle, and the Low' whose interests are irreconcilable (1971: 162). From time to time, the Middle deposes the High, sometimes in the name of equality, and becomes a new elite, but the Low are always subjugated, and equality is never achieved.

In the early twentieth century, industrialised societies had become wealthy enough for everyone to afford a decent standard of living and for a measure of equality to be achieved. Under capitalism, industrialisation had created wealth that was 'sometimes impossible not to distribute'. This posed a mortal threat to the elite because:

... if leisure and security were enjoyed by all alike, the great mass of human beings who are normally stupefied by poverty would become literate and would learn to think for themselves; and when once they had done this, they would sooner or later realise that the privileged minority had no function, and they would sweep it away. In the long run, a hierarchical society was only possible on a basis of poverty and ignorance. (1971: 154)

Aware of this danger, an elite drawn from the middle and upper-working class who aspired to domination devised a plan which would ensure that once they seized power they could never be toppled. They refined the techniques used by the totalitarian regimes of the 1930s, found new technology for surveillance and propaganda, and revived 'practices which had been long abandoned, in some cases for hundreds of years – imprisonment without trial, the use of war prisoners as slaves, public executions, torture to extract confessions' (1971: 165). When the revolution came, the new elite was able to take a 'commanding position almost unopposed,

because the whole process was represented as an act of collectivisation' (1971: 165). Indeed, it was an act of collectivisation because the abolition of private property was uniquely suited to the creation of a rigid hierarchy.

It had long been realized that the only secure basis for oligarchy is collectivism. Wealth and privilege are most easily defended when they are possessed jointly. (1971: 165)

The problem of how to prevent growing wealth trickling down to the masses was to be solved by warfare. Since all three superstates are self-sufficient in material resources, 'the scramble for markets which was a main cause of previous wars has come to an end' (1971: 152). The permanent war being fought in equatorial Africa, South Asia and the Middle East is motivated by three considerations. Firstly, it is a war for 'a bottomless reserve of cheap labour' (1971: 152). Secondly, it boosts the morale of the Party elite whose 'prevailing moods are fear, hatred, adulation, and orgiastic triumph'. Thirdly, and most importantly, it solves the problem of 'what to do with the surplus of consumption goods' that is 'latent in industrial society'. Through the continuous production of armaments that would be destroyed, the primary aim of the war was to 'use up the products of the machine without raising the general standard of living' (1971: 153).

As a way of tying up loose ends in the mad world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism' is satisfactory, but as a rationalisation of the ideas and regimes Orwell was satirising, it is wholly inadequate. It is a mash-mash of popular tropes from the British left, orthodox Marxism, a dash of Leninism and ideas that are antithetical to all three.

It is true that hunger can be an effective way of keeping a population pliant. It is also true that war can make the masses unite around the government. But Orwell goes much further than this and makes a number of implausible assertions. He claims that until the mid-nineteenth century 'class distinctions had been not only inevitable but desirable' but does not explain why (1971: 164). His claim that the 'main cause' of war before the 1950s was a 'scramble for markets' is an old Leninist canard that is not supported by the historical record. Wars are usually fought over territory and are sometimes fought over resources, but are rarely fought over *markets*. Both of the world wars, for example, were fought between nations that had previously been trading with each other. Goldstein/Orwell says that the new permanent war is not designed to inspire the masses but to energise the Party's elite, and he tells us that it is 'in the Inner Party that war hysteria and hatred of the enemy are strongest' (1971: 156). But he also tells us that the Party is dominated by 'bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organisers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists, and professional politicians' (1971: 164). It is hard to imagine a group of people less likely to get swept up in the 'orgiastic triumph' of war.

Orwell references the Marxist concept of 'over-production', which Marx saw as evidence of the inefficiency of the capitalist system and one cause of economic crises. Over-production exists in the sense that the supply of a certain product can exceed demand, to which the standard response is to reduce prices so that supply and demand reach a new equilibrium. Orwell, however, is talking about the over-production of products in general – or, put another way, the over-production of wealth – which could only be a problem if wealth itself is seen as a problem. In Oceania, wealth is indeed seen as a problem because of the fear that it will



trickle down to the proles who will then become literate and overthrow their rulers. As an explanation for permanent warfare in the novel, this is unnecessarily elaborate. The notion that the masses lack class consciousness because they are overworked and poorly educated was always wishful thinking by socialist intellectuals. It never had any evidence to support it and has become untenable after decades of literacy rates being close to 100%. Even in 1948, only 1.4% of 15-year-olds were classed as illiterate, with a further 4.3% classed as semi-literate (Ministry of Education 1950: 5). There is simply no relationship between literacy and the thirst for socialist revolution. Moreover, while it is true that the gains of growth reached ordinary working people in Orwell's lifetime, there is no reason why this money should reach the proles in a society as tightly controlled as Oceania, nor why the Party could simply refuse to teach the proles to read if literacy was such a threat.

Karl Marx argued that capitalism would depress wages and lower living standards until the workers found themselves in an intolerable position. It was this 'immiseration' that would supposedly make them revolt and overthrow the system. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell argues essentially the opposite: that poverty prevents the workers gaining class consciousness and that capitalism would only be overthrown if they had a tolerable amount of disposable income and leisure time.

Orwell acknowledges that between the 1880s and the 1930s inequality had been reduced, living standards much improved, and fewer people were living in intolerable conditions. Moreover, he argues that no government could have prevented this wealth being shared even if it wanted to. This raises the question of why he was so keen to destroy capitalism and why he was so convinced that liberalism had

no future. The answer, perhaps, is that he wanted wealth to be distributed even more equitably than it would under a market-based system and yet he seems to have had strong doubts about whether this would happen under socialism, and with good reason:

It had always been assumed that if the capitalist class were expropriated, Socialism must follow: and unquestionably the capitalists had been expropriated. Factories, mines, land, houses, transport – everything had been taken away from them: and since these things were no longer private property, it followed that they must be public property. Ingsoc, which grew out of the earlier Socialist movement and inherited its phraseology, has in fact carried out the main item in the Socialist programme; with the result, foreseen and intended beforehand, that economic inequality has been made permanent. (1971: 165)

Orwell was under no illusion that abolishing private property centralised both power and wealth.

The so-called “abolition of private property” which took place in the middle years of the century meant, in effect, the concentration of property in far fewer hands than before: but with the difference, that the new owners were a group instead of a mass of individuals. Individually, no member of the Party owns anything, except petty personal belongings. Collectively, the Party owns everything in Oceania, because it controls everything, and disposes of the products as it thinks fit. (1971: 165)

This has clear echoes of Burnham's analysis of what happened in the USSR and what he expected to happen in the USA after the collapse of capitalism:

The state – that is, the institutions which comprise the state – will, if we wish to put it that way, be the “property” of the managers. And that will be quite enough to place them in the position of ruling class. (Burnham 2021: 66)

It is also very similar to what F. A. Hayek had been warning against in *The Road to Serfdom*. To quote from Orwell's summary of that book:

By bringing the whole of life under the control of the State, Socialism necessarily gives power to an inner ring of bureaucrats, who in almost every case will be men who want power for its own sake and will stick at nothing in order to retain it. (1968c: 143)

No wonder so many readers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* assumed that Orwell had turned against socialism. In ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’, written in 1940, he had been far more optimistic about the idea of common ownership:

What is needed is that the ownership of all major industry shall be formally vested in the State, representing the common people... From the moment that all productive goods have been declared the property of the State, the common people will feel, as they cannot feel now, that the State *is themselves*. (2018: 66–7)

By 1948, Orwell had realised that ‘the State’ does not comprise ‘the common people’, but is, in practice, made up

of a small number of people who control the government. Having made this concession, the only way Orwell could salvage socialism was by appealing for it to be run democratically. This had been his central message for over a decade<sup>12</sup> and yet the knowledge that socialism concentrated power and wealth in so few hands made him understandably pessimistic about the chances of such a thing happening.

According to Goldstein/Orwell, a further motive for the Party to keep society in poverty through war was to ensure that meaningful inequality continued to exist.

In a world in which everyone worked short hours, had enough to eat, lived in a house with a bathroom and a refrigerator, and possessed a motor-car or even an aeroplane, the most obvious and perhaps the most important form of inequality would already have disappeared. If it once became general, wealth would confer no distinction. (1971: 154)

If this was to be the outcome under capitalism, the reader wonders again why Orwell was so keen on socialism. With the exception of private jets, Orwell is describing living standards in modern developed economies and yet few people today would claim that wealth confers no distinction. 'Positional goods' act as status symbols in any society. Thorstein Veblen coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' decades before Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. If O'Brien's apartment is any guide, Inner Party members have a material standard of living that is no better than a member of the lower-middle class in Britain between the

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12 In 'Why I write', published in 1946, he said: '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 understand it.' (1968a: 28)

wars. They have a decent carpet and access to wine, but not much more. It seems unlikely that such powerful people would turn down the opportunity to live in greater luxury, just as it seems unlikely that well-fed, literate people would be more likely to turn to violent revolution than hungry, overworked illiterates.

'The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism' attributes to careful planning what can better be explained by human greed, folly and power-hunger. Marx and Engels (2004: 3) wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* that all history was 'the history of class struggles' and that every battle between the classes ended 'either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes'. According to Goldstein/Orwell, a new elite that was interested only in power recognised the cyclical nature of revolution and ensured that their revolution would be the last. Until then, revolutionaries had been well meaning to a greater or lesser degree. Orwell supports this dubious assertion by saying that the 'heirs of the French, English, and American revolutions had partly believed in their own phrases about the rights of man' (1971: 164). As Bryan Caplan notes, it is no accident that the Russian Revolution is excluded from this sentence.<sup>13</sup> The implication is that the Bolsheviks never believed their own rhetoric and were only ever interested in power, but there is a more credible explanation for the Soviet Union's descent into tyranny which applies to every other revolution that has been 'betrayed': ruthless people who are certain to be killed if their regime is toppled will stop at nothing to protect themselves.

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13 Econlib (2021) Caplan, B. *The theory and practice of oligarchical collectivism: Book Club round-up*. Accessed: 13 February 2024 (<https://www.econlib.org/the-theory-and-practice-of-oligarchical-collectivism-book-club-round-up>).

Orwell lived through the most violent part of the twentieth century and could be forgiven for thinking that war was a constant, but the wars that took place in his lifetime were not primarily fought to find new markets, nor to inspire the public, and never to destroy surplus production. The poverty and shortages of the Soviet Union were not deliberately engineered to prevent a counter-revolution – which would be a highly risky strategy – but were the consequences of socialist planning. Centrally planned economies create poverty and shortages which cause public unrest and sow the seeds of a counter-revolution. Faced with growing opposition, the leadership resorts to increasingly violent and repressive measures to save their own skins. Happily for them, extreme repression is possible thanks to the concentration of power that has been accrued by the abolition of private property and the crushing of independent institutions.

This tragic cycle would play out many times after Orwell's death, but although Orwell had, by 1948, recognised the problem of concentrating power in the hands of a few revolutionaries, he did not understand that the inefficiencies of central planning caused poverty and were indirectly responsible for tyranny. Still believing that a free, prosperous and efficient form of socialism was possible, he assumed that the Bolsheviks had never been socialists and that this particular road to hell had been paved with bad intentions. Transposing this to Oceania, he informs us that Big Brother's totalitarianism had been planned from the start, the aim had always been power (which was synonymous with sadism), and poverty was a deliberate creation. Rather than accept that, to quote Lord Acton, 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely', he created an elaborate theory to make the disastrous consequences of central planning and psychopathic leaders look like the result of a carefully constructed, rational plan.

In the grand exposition of the book-within-a-book, Orwell tries to kill several birds with one stone. Why had the USSR become totalitarian? Why were there so many wars? Why did the working class not revolt? Why do totalitarian regimes act against their own economic interests? These are the questions that had been bothering Orwell for years, and 'The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism' tries to answer them with a universal theory. It is overly complicated and does not stack up, even allowing for the exaggeration and hyperbole that goes with satire, but, as Caplan says, it does at least correctly identify 'the immense role that power-hunger plays in the social world'.<sup>14</sup>

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14 Ibid.

## 12. Orwell's error

There was an early warning that Orwell's decision to name Oceania's totalitarian ideology Ingsoc would cause confusion when his publisher, Fredric Warburg, gave his ecstatic reaction to the manuscript of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in December 1948. In a report to colleagues, he interpreted Orwell's decision to call Oceania's political ideology Ingsoc as 'a deliberate and sadistic attack on Socialism and socialist parties generally. It seems to indicate a final breach between Orwell and Socialism' (Orwell 2002a: 480). Warburg said the book was 'worth a cool million votes to the conservative party' and fantasised about Winston Churchill writing the preface (2002a: 480). He urged for it to be published no later than June 1949, in time for the next general election.

Warburg had known Orwell for over a decade. If he believed that Orwell had become a capitalist, it is hardly surprising that other readers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* got the same impression. Orwell was no stranger to having his work misunderstood. *Animal Farm* had been rejected by the US publisher Knopf because it was, in the view of its editor, 'a stupid and pointless fable in which animals take over a farm and run it'. At Faber and Faber, the towering literary figure T. S. Eliot rejected the same book, telling Orwell that 'your pigs are far more intelligent than the other animals, and therefore the best qualified to run the farm – in fact, there couldn't have been an Animal Farm at all without them: so that what was needed (someone might argue), was not more communism but more public-spirited pigs' (Crick 1982: 458).



Needless to say, Orwell did not write *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to help Churchill's Conservatives get back into power. Although he was to the left of Clement Attlee's Labour government, he broadly supported it. Any suggestion that Orwell was veering towards the political right in the last years of his life is mistaken. His views remained remarkably consistent on most political matters throughout the 1930s and 1940s. As Christopher Hitchens (2002: 73) put it, 'Orwell was a conservative about many things, but not politics.' Orwell died a socialist. It is true that his last two novels had been attacks on Soviet communism, but he had always loathed Stalin and his apologists. Nothing ever changed his view that the socialist revolution in Russia had been betrayed, that capitalism was doomed and that his version of democratic socialism was the only acceptable alternative.

The tedious debate about whether *Brave New World* was more prescient than *Nineteen Eighty-Four* rests on a flawed premise since neither book claimed to be a prediction. And yet in one crucial respect, Orwell was categorically wrong. The central assumption at the heart of his novel and of much of his political writing was mistaken. Capitalism and democracy survived, subsequent communist revolutions went the same way as the USSR's, and Orwell's version of democratic socialism was not required to prevent totalitarianism sweeping the world.

These aspects of Orwell's political ideology cannot be brushed aside by saying that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a warning rather than a prophecy. He could not have been more explicit. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a *conditional* prophecy. He said in his statement of June 1949 that 'something like NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR *could* happen. This is the direction in which the world is going at the present time' (2002b: 134). He wrote repeatedly and with great

certainty about the inevitable demise of capitalism. But it turned out that it was not a straight choice between democratic socialism and totalitarianism. There was a third way.

Where did he go wrong? There is an important clue in Orwell's classic pamphlet 'The Lion and the Unicorn' in which the fullest expression of Orwell's vision of 'English Socialism' (as he called it) can be found. Written in 1940 during the Blitz,<sup>15</sup> it begins with a patriotic and sentimental description of England and the English mentality before describing the socialist revolution that he believed to be on the horizon. To Orwell, British defeats early in the war were conclusive proof that capitalist economies were less efficient than planned economies. Believing this to be obvious to all, he saw socialism in Britain as inevitable and, in the third and final chapter, rather giddily outlined what this would, or at least should, look like: all private schools would be closed; the House of Lords would be abolished (although, idiosyncratically, the monarchy would be retained); no one would be permitted to earn more than ten times what the poorest man earned; all mines, railways, banks and major businesses would be nationalised; no one would be permitted to own more than 15 acres of land in the countryside; and all land in the towns would belong to the state (2018: 65–8).

This wish list should dispel any illusions the modern reader may have about Orwell being a moderate social democrat at heart. Moreover, he knew that this could probably not be achieved peacefully – 'I daresay the London gutters will have to run with blood' (1968a: 591).

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15 Its first sentence ('As I write this, highly civilised human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.') rivals *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* opening line about the clock striking thirteen as Orwell's best.

Why did he believe all this to be necessary? Although he denied being a Marxist, he took the classical Marxist line that capitalism was inefficient, creating too many of some products and too few of others. To Orwell, Britain's wartime shortages were an indictment of capitalism:

At normal times a capitalist economy can never consume all that it produces, so there is always a wasted surplus (wheat burned in furnaces, herrings dumped back into the sea, etc. etc.) and always unemployment. In time of war, on the other hand, it has difficulty in producing all that it needs, because nothing is produced unless someone sees his way to making a profit out of it.

In a Socialist economy these problems do not exist. *The State simply calculates what goods will be needed and does its best to produce them.* (2018: 38 – italics added)

I have highlighted the last sentence because it gets to the heart of Orwell's error. There is nothing simple about calculating what goods will be needed in an economy. Nothing could be more complicated. Without prices and competition, it is impossible to know how many products to make or where to direct labour. Resources cannot be distributed efficiently. This is known as the socialist calculation problem and it is a key reason why centrally planned economies fail. First identified by Ludwig von Mises in 1920, it is no less intractable a century later. If you remove price signals and the profit motive, you require a highly altruistic workforce and an extraordinarily well-informed and benevolent leadership to produce even an approximation of what consumers require. No such society is ever likely to exist.

In the absence of market forces, those who run planned economies resort to targets, orders, Five-Year Plans and, ultimately, physical coercion, but it is still not enough. Shortages and deprivation become widespread. The public becomes resentful. Shirking, hoarding and buying on the black market (known in Oceania as 'the free market') become endemic. As the regime loses popular support, it turns to still more oppressive measures and, *in extremis*, becomes totalitarian. When production targets are missed, the regime simply announces that they have been met. Those who tell the truth are shot.

Orwell never understood that the seeds of the political oppression he feared were sown by the economic policies he supported. He never asked many questions about the economics of socialism and showed remarkably little interest in economics as a discipline. Largely apolitical until the mid-1930s, he said himself (in 1947) that he became a socialist 'more out of disgust with the oppressed and neglected life of the poorer sector of the industrial worker than out of any theoretical understanding of a planned society' (2002a: 87). According to Bernard Crick (1982: 305), 'there is no evidence in his writings, letters or among the books he possessed that his knowledge of Marxism was anything but secondary'. Orwell was attracted to socialism because he believed it would liberate the masses. Crick (1982: 408) describes him as 'a libertarian, but of a specifically democratic Socialist kind – both tolerance and emancipation must go together'. Christopher Hitchens (2002: 60) describes Orwell as 'a libertarian before the idea had gained currency'.

Whatever knowledge Orwell had about the economics of socialism came to him via pamphlets and conversations. He named his dog Marx but never wrote a great deal about

Marx. He never wrote much about economics in general. In the vast archive of Orwell's articles, essays, books and letters, there is not a single mention of great economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo or Alfred Marshall nor of contemporary economists such as Joseph Schumpeter or Arthur Pigou. Orwell mentioned the Marxist economist Harold Laski a few times, mostly to remark on what a bad writer he was, but other prominent left-wing economists such as Knut Wicksell, Fred M. Taylor, Thorstein Veblen, Abba Lerner and Oskar R. Lange were never referenced, and even the most influential economist of his day, John Maynard Keynes, seems to have largely passed him by.<sup>16</sup>

Economists from the Austrian School, including Ludwig von Mises, Henry Hazlitt and Carl Menger, were either unknown to Orwell or of no interest to him. The sole exception was F. A. Hayek whose *The Road to Serfdom* Orwell reviewed in 1944. With the gloomy ideas of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* already forming in his mind, it is easy to imagine Orwell being drawn to Hayek's book by its title alone. Not unpredictably, he said he found 'a great deal of truth' in the 'negative part' of Hayek's thesis, namely that collectivism hands a terrifying amount of power to a class of oligarchs, that 'Socialism inevitably leads to despotism' and that Britain 'is now going the same road as Germany' (1968c: 142–4). Where he parted company with Hayek, rather strongly, was on Hayek's belief that the answer to the twin threats of fascism and totalitarianism was the revival of economic liberalism. This, Orwell wrote, 'means for the great mass of people a tyranny probably worse, because more irresponsible, than that of the State'.

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16 Orwell skimmed Keynes' *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* shortly before he died.

Professor Hayek denies that free capitalism necessarily leads to monopoly, but in practice that is where it has led, and since the vast majority of people would far rather have State regimentation than slums and unemployment, the drift towards collectivism is bound to continue if popular opinion has any say in the matter. (1968c: 143)

Orwell concluded: 'Capitalism leads to dole queues, the scramble for markets, and war. Collectivism leads to concentration camps, leader worship, and war' (1968c: 144). The only alternative, to his mind, was a planned economy that allowed freedom of the individual, but he was no longer as optimistic about the prospects of this as he had been when he wrote 'The Lion and the Unicorn'. Indeed, he saw 'no practicable way of bringing it about' (1968c: 144).

It was not just that Orwell saw the survival of capitalism as undesirable; he believed it to be impossible. Again and again, he would assert that capitalism was 'obviously doomed' (1968d: 198) and 'has manifestly no future' (2002a: 166). He said it was 'obvious that the period of free capitalism is coming to an end' (1968b: 162) and in 1940 insisted that '*laissez-faire* capitalism is dead in England and can't revive unless the war ends within the next few months' (1968b: 143). In his view, the only alternatives to capitalism were socialism or fascism and therefore people should pick socialism and do their best to ensure that it is democratic and libertarian. As he wrote in *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

We may take it that the return to a simpler, freer, less mechanised way of life, however desirable it may be, is not going to happen. This is not fatalism, it is merely acceptance of facts. It is meaningless to oppose Socialism on the ground that you object

to the beehive state, for the beehive state is *here*. The choice is not, as yet, between a human and an inhuman world. It is simply between Socialism and Fascism... (1989: 204)

He wrote that in 1936. As the war approached, he became more convinced than ever that the future belonged to two shades of totalitarianism, regardless of which side prevailed. His novel *Coming Up for Air*, published in 1939 and set in the same year, is a tale of suburban ennui in which the remarkably self-aware insurance salesman George Bowling mourns for a lost England. It is not an overtly political work, but the gathering storm of World War II, which Bowling expects to begin in 1941, looms large. As usual in an Orwell novel, the narrator-protagonist shares many of the views of its author:

I can see the war that's coming and I can see the after-war, the food-queues and the secret police and the loudspeakers telling you what to think. (1962: 158)

But it isn't the war that matters, it's the after-war. The world we're going down into, the kind of hate-world, slogan-world. The coloured shirts, the barbed wire, the rubber truncheons. The secret cells where the electric light burns night and day, and the detectives watching you while you sleep. And the processions and the posters with enormous faces, and the crowds of a million people all cheering for the Leader till they deafen themselves into thinking that they really worship him, and all the time, underneath, they hate him so that they want to puke. (1962: 149)

And yet Orwell allowed room for a glimmer of hope.

It's all going to happen. Or isn't it? Some days I know it's impossible, other days I know it's inevitable. (1962: 149)

A year later, in his essay 'Inside the Whale', he reasserted his belief that capitalism was finished and that the likely alternatives could be even worse.

What is quite obviously happening, war or no war, is the break-up of *laissez-faire* capitalism and of the liberal-Christian culture. Until recently the full implications of this were not foreseen, because it was generally imagined that Socialism could preserve and even enlarge the atmosphere of liberalism. It is now beginning to be realised how false this idea was. Almost certainly we are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships – an age in which freedom of thought will be at first a deadly sin and later on a meaningless abstraction. (1968a: 576)

Orwell was right about many things but, as a general rule, the more insistent he was that something was obviously true, the more likely it was to be false.<sup>17</sup> Nazi Germany's success in the early years of the war, along with the growth of the state in wartime Britain, confirmed to Orwell that central planning was more efficient and that, in the absence

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17 Many of Orwell's bald assertions are amusing and were perhaps intended to be. Examples include 'all Scout masters are homosexuals', 'all art is propaganda' and 'all tobacconists are fascists', as well as his famous claim that it was 'unquestionably true' that 'almost any English intellectual would feel more ashamed of standing in attention during "God Save the King" than of stealing from a poor box' (2018: 29).



of democratic socialism, totalitarianism was inevitable. It goes without saying that his predictions were wrong. The world did not split into three superstates. Totalitarianism did not prevail. Capitalism did not disappear.

A further cause of Orwell's pessimism, equally unjustified, was his belief that economic growth in Britain would soon become a thing of the past, regardless of whether it was governed by capitalists or socialists. In March 1948, he wrote:

Quite largely, indeed, the workers were won over to Socialism by being told that they were exploited, whereas the brute truth was that, in world terms, they were exploiters. Now, to all appearances, the point has been reached when the working-class living standard *cannot* be maintained, let alone raised. Even if we squeeze the rich out of existence, the mass of the people must either consume less or produce more. Or am I exaggerating the mess we're in? (2002a: 290)

It seems that he did not believe he was exaggerating since he wrote a lengthy article for *Tribune*<sup>18</sup> six months later in which he returned to what he saw as Britain's dilemma:

A small overpopulated country, importing its food and paying for it with exports, can only keep going so long as the rest of the world is not industrialised. If the present world-wide development of industry continues, there will in the long run be no reason for international trade, except in raw materials, a few tropical products, and possibly a few luxury goods. (2002a: 436)

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18 It was in this article that he coined the phrase 'cold war'.

Like many others in the post-war era, Orwell was excessively concerned with the balance of payments, but he also seemed to believe that the Empire was the sole reason for Britain's wealth. Committed anti-imperialist though he was, he assumed that 'liberation for the exploited coloured peoples' abroad would be incompatible with 'better material conditions for the white proletariat' at home (2002a: 439). Seeing international trade as a zero-sum game, he concluded that 'we are poorer than we were [and] for a long time we shall go on being poorer' (2002a: 439).

This fear did not come to Orwell late in life. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he claimed that 'the high standard of life we enjoy in England depends upon keeping a tight hold on the Empire ... Under the capitalist system, in order that England may live in comparative comfort, a hundred million Indians must live on the verge of starvation' (1989: 148). If the Empire were dissolved, he expected England to be reduced to 'a cold and unimportant little island where we should all have to work very hard and live mainly on herrings and potatoes' (1989: 148).

Orwell's gloomy outlook in the post-war era was therefore based on several assumptions about economics, all of which were wrong. Historians disagree about the economic impact of the British Empire on the people back home. Some have argued that the cost of maintaining and defending the colonies exceeded any financial benefit to the British government, although some individuals did well out of it. Others have argued that the Empire was mutually beneficial, in economic terms, to both Britain and the colonies because it allowed free trade and spurred investment. None of them believes, as Orwell did, that the prosperity of Britain *depended* on the Empire in the 1940s, nor that economic growth in the UK would be halted by

industrialisation in the developing world. Plainly, this has not happened.

Capitalism has seen its fair share of dole queues, but it has led to neither monopoly nor war, and if it is doomed, it has had a much longer run than Orwell expected. In his review of *The Road to Serfdom*, he predicted that 'the drift towards collectivism is bound to continue if popular opinion has any say in the matter' (1968c: 143). In fact, the post-war Attlee government, which Orwell saw as the first tentative step towards a planned economy, represented the high watermark of British socialism in the twentieth century and was followed in 1951 by the return of Winston Churchill as prime minister and 13 years of Conservative government. Like capitalism itself, the Conservatives survived by tacking to the left. By the late 1970s, the era of Keynesianism was exhausted, and the Conservatives adopted some of Hayek's ideas, ultimately leading to the Labour Party tacking to the right in the 1990s.

In 1948, Orwell predicted that 'those born now will never have known anything except wars, rationing, etc.' (1968d: 472). But although he could not have known it, and there were few reasons to expect it, Europe had already put the worst of the twentieth century behind it. The second half of the century, of which Orwell only experienced three weeks, in a London hospital, was relatively peaceful. The Soviet Union eventually collapsed. Fascism did not return on any scale. Nuclear weapons were not used. The British Empire was peacefully disbanded, and living standards in Britain continued to improve: the average weekly wage quadrupled between 1950 and 2000 (in real terms). Orwell's ideal of democratic socialism did not come into being, and public appetite for any form of socialism dwindled as the century wore on. Instead, Europe prospered under liberal capitalism with varying degrees of social democracy.

Would Orwell's politics have changed had he lived a few more decades? One can only speculate, of course, but given his love of individual liberty, the possibility must be entertained. In 1948 he could dismiss the experiment of Russian communism as being the fault of a gangster class subverting the revolution, but how would he have responded to the horrors of China's Cultural Revolution and Cambodia's killing fields? In 1948 it was still possible to view Soviet tyranny as a one-off, but when similar events played out in North Korea, Vietnam, Albania, Romania, Venezuela, Cuba and elsewhere, would he have continued to dismiss them as being 'not real socialism' or would he have recognised a pattern? What would he have made of the wildly diverging economic paths of East Germany compared with West Germany, or North Korea compared with South Korea?

Had Orwell lived into his eighties and experienced the real 1984, he may have continued to believe that libertarian socialism could be realised if the right people were in charge (or, as T. S. Eliot put it, if there were more 'public-spirited pigs'). Many people on the left clung to this hope. Some still do. But it is surely not implausible that a man who questioned so much and prided himself on being able to look facts in the face would have developed serious doubts about socialism.

## 13. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* today

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published by Secker & Warburg on 8 June 1949 in London and on 13 June in the USA. An executive at the publishing house told colleagues that ‘if we can’t sell fifteen to twenty thousand copies of this book we ought to be shot’ (2002a: 482). To date it has sold over 40 million copies.

Orwell never returned to Jura. He spent the last year of his life in medical institutions, moving to London’s University College Hospital in September 1949. Outwardly and perhaps genuinely optimistic about his chances of survival, he did not see *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as his swan song. Upon submitting the manuscript to his publisher, he wrote ‘I have a stunning idea for a very short novel which has been in my head for years’ (2002a: 486–7). Orwell never wrote more than a few pages of this book – titled *A Smoking-room Story* – although he left enough notes to show that it was fully developed in his own mind. Set in Burma in the 1920s, it saw him return to the style of his pre-war novels. It does not seem to have been an overtly political book.

Orwell died of a tubercular haemorrhage on 21 January 1950 aged 46. He is buried in the Oxfordshire village of Sutton Courtenay beneath a simple gravestone that reads ‘Here lies Eric Arthur Blair’. If he had known that his assumed name would soon become a widely used adjective, what would he have expected ‘Orwellian’ to mean? He might

have hoped that it would be used to describe unflinching journalism or speaking plain English or – as he put it – ‘facing unpleasant facts’.

In the event, the word Orwellian did not describe the man but his work. And only one part of his work. No one describes *Homage to Catalonia* or *Coming Up for Air* as Orwellian. The word refers only to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and yet it is used to describe different aspects of that dystopia. The rewriting of history is Orwellian. Video surveillance is Orwellian. Weasel words and dishonest euphemisms are Orwellian. This is what people have taken away from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, even those who have not read it. If the novel had been merely a satire of Marxist intellectuals in the 1940s, it would not have stood the test of time. If it had been merely a parody of the USSR, it would have lost its urgency. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* retains its appeal because the fears that inspired it live on. Totalitarianism may not be an immediate danger, but the technology that could facilitate it is far more advanced than Orwell could imagine.

Orwell did not mention telescreens in his early notes for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, nor did he dwell on the threat of video surveillance in his journalism or letters. As Posner (1999: 19) writes, the telescreen is ‘inessential to the political theme of the novel, which is the feasibility of thought control through propaganda, education, psychology (including behavioural modification), informers (including children), censorship, lobotomising, stirring up war fever, terror, and, above all, the manipulation of historical records and of language’. And yet for millions of readers, and countless others who have not read the book, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is synonymous with being monitored by cameras. Over the decades, the most common cover design for the book has involved a single eye staring out.

In his review of *We*, Orwell noted that the people of Zamyatin's One State 'live in glass houses (this was written before television was invented), which enables the political police, known as the "Guardians", to supervise them more easily' (1968d: 96). Orwell's readers in 1946 may have wondered what the parenthetical reference to television had to do with glass houses. The answer, of course, was that Orwell was already thinking of television not as something that people watch but as something that watches people. It was a prescient insight. Only one in a thousand British households owned a television set in 1948, but it was easy to imagine them becoming ubiquitous. It was also easy to imagine them being used by governments to disseminate propaganda. Orwell's genius was in seeing them as something governments would use to watch people, an all-seeing eye that adds a chilling technological addition to Zamyatin's surveillance state.<sup>19</sup>

Mass surveillance via television was arguably the most accurate of the novel's 'predictions'. Estimates vary, but there may be more than seven million CCTV cameras in the UK today, including nearly a million in London. These figures do not include the ubiquitous cameraphones that are always on hand to capture any newsworthy event. There are 15,576 cameras on the London Underground, and the Met Police has a further 58,000,<sup>20</sup> but most surveillance cameras are privately owned: in shops, outside houses, on doorbells, in cars, on cycle helmets, etc. With one camera for every ten people, Londoners do not need to be told that

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19 Orwell may have taken this idea from the 1936 film *Modern Times* in which Charlie Chaplin is caught having an unauthorised cigarette break by the equivalent of Big Brother who pops up on a telescreen.

20 Clarion Security Systems (2022) *How many CCTV cameras are in London?* Accessed: 13 February 2024 (<https://clarionuk.com/resources/how-many-cctv-cameras-are-in-london/>).

they are being watched. It goes without saying that the movements of any city-dweller who leaves their house can be tracked, as can any vehicle on a public road. Even in the countryside and in private dwellings, you can be tracked through mobile phone records, and everything you view online is kept in the records of your internet provider.

Orwell may or may not be turning in his grave, but the public has generally responded to the creeping surveillance state with equanimity. They have been prepared to sacrifice a measure of privacy for a measure of security. Video evidence helps to solve crime and is therefore presumed to prevent crime. Television shows such as *24 Hours in Police Custody* and *Cops* then take the footage and beam it into people's homes as entertainment. Checks and balances are in place to ensure that the vast quantities of film footage and private data available to the government are not misused, although breaches, leaks and cyber-attacks sometimes occur. It may be broadly true that a person with nothing to hide has nothing to fear (an Orwellian turn of phrase in itself), but an important part of the apparatus of a police state has been created should a future government wish to use it as such.

The real year of 1984 is now further away from us than it was from Orwell in 1948, but *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has never lost its resonance. The ghost of Orwell was invoked during the McCarthy hearings, Watergate, Vietnam, the 'war on terror', the Covid-19 pandemic and on countless other occasions large and small, many of which have disappeared into the memory hole. The post-modernist theories that have spread like knotweed through the universities since Orwell's death explicitly reject the existence of objective truth and human nature. When Donald Trump's press secretary, Sean Spicer, insisted in January 2017 that the new president's inauguration had been attended by more people than that



of any of his predecessors, despite clear photographic evidence to the contrary, many people sensed that – as Orwell put it – ‘the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world’ (1968b: 295). The feeling was heightened when a Trump aide defended Spicer, saying that he had merely been providing ‘alternative facts’. Sales of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* soared.

The word ‘Orwellian’ has been applied to Big Tech censorship, drone strikes, vaccine passports, ID cards, ‘cancel culture’, the Equality Act, the NHS, artificial intelligence, Russian state media, facial recognition cameras, China’s social credit system, DNA databases, university campuses, counter-terror laws, Amazon warehouses and much more – so much more that the word has lost its sting. Blunted through over-use, any form of censorship, any encroachment on liberty, and any misleading statement by a politician is described as Orwellian. Sometimes this can be justified. At other times it feels a little hysterical. Unless you are talking about North Korea, making a direct comparison with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* usually seems overwrought.

And yet there will always be parallels when words are given new meanings, information is memory-holed and the media lie – or lie by omission – to the public. The incidents that inspired Orwell’s fears about doublethink and organised systems of lying were themselves sometimes relatively trivial. Today, when newspapers report that a woman raped someone with ‘her penis’ and a television journalist stands in front of burning cars at a riot scene where 40 buildings have been destroyed and reports on a ‘mostly peaceful’ protest, Orwell is bound to come to mind. What would Orwell have made of publishers rewriting the works of such authors as P. G. Wodehouse, Ian Fleming and Roald Dahl? Orwell was a man of his time in some of his attitudes, particularly

with regards to homosexuals. Will his books be rewritten one day?

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* probes too many fears to become irrelevant and it will be read for as long as the threats that inspired it remain. The immediate targets of Orwell's satire are either gone (the USSR) or are of no importance (Stalinist intellectuals), but advancements in technology have made it easier than ever to create a regimented, state-controlled society if the totalitarian mindset flourishes again. Nothing in Western democracies bears comparison with the hellscape of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but that is a very low bar for civil liberties. The whole purpose of the novel was to make people vigilant so that nothing like it could ever come into being. 'The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one', wrote a skeletal Eric Blair as he lay in a sanatorium in June 1949:

*'Don't let it happen. It depends on you.'*

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