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Source: *The Journal of General Education*, 1984, Vol. 36, No. 3 (1984), pp. 206-215

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27797000>

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GEORGE ORWELL AND THE THEORY OF TOTALITARIANISM: A 1984 RETROSPECTIVE

George M. Enteen

Those of us sufficiently opportunistic to have assigned George Orwell's renowned novel to our students during 1984 have had the necessary pleasure of re-reading it, and of re-experiencing the chill, the frustration of love corrupted, and the profound gloom of Winston's final submission to Big Brother. The rest of us recall such concepts as "newspeak," "doublethink," "unperson," and "memory hole." We never forget that "ignorance is strength" and perhaps we recall the taste of Victory Gin and the lingering odor of cabbage in London stairwells.

I had never before used a novel in teaching a course on the history of Communism. Getting my students to read works of fiction is too easy; getting them to master a work of historical scholarship is a major challenge, and for some of them my course is their only opportunity. Nevertheless, to have side-stepped *1984* when discussing totalitarianism in 1984 would have been almost Orwellian.

Novels are important sources for historians, but are increasingly problematic for those of us who have been even slightly influenced by contemporary literary criticism. Shakespeare was wrong, we are told, in seeing art as a mirror held up to nature. Far more oblique is the relationship between art and life: a deep structure combining subjective intention, universal archetypes, and cultural myths. Making inferences from such verbal distillations is chancy stuff for those of us who are trained to analyze such pedestrian fare as Stalin's speeches and *Pravda* editorials. Remember also that Orwell called *1984* a utopia; "distopia" is what some people would now say, but either way it means that the action is set in another realm. It is, moreover, a special form of fiction—satire—which means that exaggeration is required. Orwell's novel has, of course, obvious reference to a historical entity (Stalinist Russia) and we also have the author's word that Nazi Germany was not entirely removed from his mind.

The historian's problem with *1984* is compounded by the fact that parts of it read like a historical study and invite interpretation at that

level. The chapters from Goldstein's book are a summary or a parody of Trotsky's political sociology. In a literal sense, however, they are fiction. It would be irresponsible to skirt such methodological problems more than momentarily. I decided to illustrate these matters for my students by presenting to them the history of my own encounters with Orwell's novel: how my first reading of it affected me as a student of Communism, and why the work still seemed important to me in 1984. My small captive audience of students has now dispersed, but my hope is that the wider audience reading this article will also find some merit in my observations.

As a student I read *1984* in much the same spirit as I read the sports page of my high school newspaper: I naively assumed a correspondence between word and thing. As a result, I felt that Orwell's novel violated my experience when I went to the Soviet Union as a graduate exchange student in 1959-1960. Orwell was not entirely to blame, of course; my own ignorance was the chief culprit. But I rightly did not absolve my literary instructor or other teachers of all responsibility. The theory of totalitarianism provided coherence, but my learning lacked substance. This is not to say that my ignorance was complete, for I could read Russian, if not speak it. I also had some familiarity with past events and knew something about various institutions, but I had no sense of the texture of ordinary life. My sight belonged to Orwell, and I stumbled about clumsily.

Arrival in Moscow and then the processing of the student group of which I was a member were Orwellian enough—disorder, rule-guided people all around, dank ill-lit corridors, and all the rest. The next day an American companion and I ventured into downtown Moscow to sort out a few bureaucratic matters before departing for Leningrad, where we would be enrolled in the University. We sought to warm ourselves with tea at a sidewalk cafe near the Bolshoi Theatre. Though it had been summer-like in Copenhagen at our stopover, seemingly pancake-sized snowflakes melted in the street of Moscow, warning us of a fast-passing autumn. An ice-cream vendor made her way past us, and then a bootblack. I remember my disquiet; Orwell had not warned me of such sights and services.

Toward evening I fetched out the address of a distant relative. A cousin, whose family was almost as close to me as my own, had an aunt who resided with her daughter in Moscow. The aunt was an Old Bolshevik, a party member since before the Revolution of 1917, though her active membership had lapsed in the 1920s. She had severed ties with the American branch of the family in the 1930s, but correspondence had resumed after Stalin's death. We could not altogether avoid talking about politics. It was, after all,

my first opportunity to argue with a real Communist. “The purges,” she remarked, “the Germans were responsible, of course. They had cleverly managed to misinform Stalin.” Here was a true believer. Our arid dispute was a minor aspect of our meeting. Far more important to me was her warm and gracious hospitality. And it was gratifying to note her satisfaction on seeing snapshots of American nephews and nieces who were unknown to her. Proximity and continuity were my feelings, not the estrangement one might expect in light of our different lives and the contrasting histories of our respective societies. This was but the first instance of an experience that was repeated numerous times in the course of the next ten months.

Leaving her apartment, my companion and I happened on a scene that again deepened my disquiet. A crowd of pedestrians had gathered around a policeman and a drunk. The crowd was good-natured; the drunk, swaying to and fro, wore a smile he might have copied from a cartoon in the *New Yorker*. “Home or to the station,” was the decision imposed by the policeman. “Go home,” urged the crowd. The drunk continued to sway, however, almost violating the law of gravity. “Which is it?” asked the policeman. “*Podumaiu*,” he replied, “I’ll think it over.” Astonished, I wondered, “Where is Big Brother?”

Not only such naive observations but a host of other experiences, in a variety of institutions and settings, some highly intimate and close to the core, had a similar sense and flavor. I should remind the reader that 1959-1960 was a special moment in Russian history. Economic progress had been steady since 1952 and would begin to falter only a year or so later. The de-Stalinization process initiated by Khrushchev was approaching its zenith. It was not freedom that was in the air, but the hope of legality, a general optimism and some sense of well-being. The camps had been largely emptied of political prisoners and the threshold of fear had dropped dramatically. Social concern and patriotism were widely evident among our fellow students. Those of us who found places in the exchange program at that time were fortunate indeed; the moment afforded a range of glimpses rarely possible in Soviet history.

I wish to suggest that a seam of life was evident to me that Orwell and my other teachers had not prepared me for, a dimension of existence seemingly unpredicted by history. Curiosity, intellectual vitality, hope, solidarity—those were not all that I saw, of course, but they were vital parts of my perception. How could my fellow students in Leningrad have known so much about America and its popular culture, given their paltry sources of information? This remains

a puzzle to me even today. The historians I met (I had read some of their works: tedious, flat, replete with falsification)—how different they sounded in the lecture hall or in conference. They were often erudite, proud, disputatious, and possessed by a manifest love of the past. The discrepancy between their writings and their observable behavior set the direction of my scholarship for years to come.

Was Orwell entirely misleading? Far from it; he was accurate and prophetic in all sorts of respects. Had I been more astute in my reading of Julia's response to her situation, I would have been prepared for many of the impressions reported above. We slowly learned that informers abounded in the dormitories and were evident in the circles of Leningrad society into which we ventured. If Russians were not afraid to associate with us, then Jewish, Baltic, and some Ukrainian friends sometimes were. More circumspect, they would meet us in public, but not in their homes, nor in our dormitory. And it turned out that some of our Russian friends were unduly optimistic as to what was safe. On occasion we had to protect them from themselves by insisting that they not visit us. We never mentioned the names of friends to other friends. The authorities' widespread and persistent reliance on secret informers is generally acknowledged to be the least pleasant aspect of Soviet society. And Orwell was also correct with respect to the squalor and the dinginess of ordinary life. Though statistics point in one direction, the appearance of things to ordinary American eyes is quite another. Poverty is perhaps not as pervasive as Orwell suggested; one can escape at the ballet, and many Russians keep a toe-hold in the countryside, where they traditionally find renewal.

If one's first impression is how unsuccessful the censors are—how much better-informed and independent in their thinking people are than they are said to be—a second impression is corrective. The censors have their share of victories. The flatness of the public images and the one-sidedness of the reporting inevitably dull the senses. A coarsening of mind results. If the authorities find it increasingly difficult to elicit public response by manipulating the symbols associated with socialism, they manage to get results by using national symbols. Of course, most governments these days are expert at that game.

Orwell indeed was highly astute in his depiction of Julia and her response to the system. Some readers interpret her rebellion as biological or hedonistic at best, a response to the sexual urge. I think that this view is mistaken. Clearly she lacked Winston's theoretical interest in the workings of the system and his need to formulate a conception of the past, as well as to understand his own history. Her

rebellion was, however, anything but mindless. She possessed a shrewdness that Winston in turn lacked. "One knew that it was all rubbish so why let oneself be worried by it?" was Julia's response to ideology.¹ "Moreover she took it for granted that everyone, or nearly everyone, secretly hated the Party and would break the rules if he thought it safe to do so."² In Julia, Orwell depicts a range of the responses one may readily find in the Soviet Union.

Beyond particular descriptions, Orwell was correct in a fundamental sense: he grasped how the political order perverted the basic concept of citizenship. No public space existed in which a person could formulate his own notions about the direction to which his society might aspire. There was no place to avow what he deemed was just, for some segment of society or for himself. Not a citizen, the person was not even a subject in the traditional sense, thanks to the Party's constant tendency to mobilize his efforts and his passions. The utter lack of freedom and absence of rights of a Soviet individual is perhaps shown in starkest relief in the post-Stalin years. The prominent dissident Valery Chalidze was deprived of his passport—and hence of his homeland, his property, his access to family and friends—yet not violently, and not as an object of terror. It was taken from him in a New York hotel lobby and in accord with due process, or at least the appearance of it. A law permits the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet to take such an action. Chalidze had no opportunity either to learn the charges against him or to confront his accusers; nor could he appeal the results. This was only one case of many.

The notion of an "unperson" and the idea of a "memory hole" have become standard terms in our language. As a novelist, Orwell exaggerated and simplified the mechanisms for controlling the past. I suggested above that the historian's sense of the past and his public's also were less contorted than I had expected from my naive reading of *1984*. But the Party is not without its successes on what it used to call the "historical front." Control of the past is not a natural state of affairs. It is an achievement, the result of formulating, testing, and revising policies; obstacles must be overcome, battles won. The Party's success in dominating a modern profession, both nurturing and directing it, is an impressive administrative accomplishment, however repulsive. Russians and other Soviet nationalities have lost much of their past, even such basic things as their native cuisine. Like most modern men, they hunger for meaning, roots, and continuity. Impoverished by lack of knowledge about the past, they are the more easily prey to manipulation through nationalistic slogans. Lacking balance, they tend to fear foreigners as agents of contamination, or to go to the other extreme of fawning upon

objects or ideas of foreign origin. I do not wish to exaggerate this tendency. Soviet life is such that people sometimes feign such attitudes, and many who have actually possessed them at one time have managed to discard them. It is often no more than a matter of growing up.

Why was Orwell so penetrating? How could he see so well from afar? Some critics, to be sure, have faulted his characterizations. One can imagine the erotic scenes coming from the pen of John Updike with a different ending. And if Anthony Burgess had done the torture scenes, one can imagine even more complete demoralization. Yet Orwell's depiction of the future—a boot grinding a face, forever—is strong enough. He successfully conjured up the taste of cheap gin and the stale tobacco that so readily slips out of the cigarette paper. How could he have known these things? His own history provides the answer. His character was hardened against the background of an unstable social status, helping to explain his stance and perception. As Eric Blair, he clearly felt himself to be a misfit in English society; he seemed to view himself as a victim of the system. But his self-contempt was combined with a sterling integrity. Among his acquisitions from Eton were a mastery of the English language and a dedication to it.

Integrity of language was central to him. “The slovenliness of our own language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts,” he wrote. In the *Road to Wigan Pier* he commented, “Political chaos is connected with the decay of language . . . one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end.” “Swift,” said Orwell, “did not possess ordinary wisdom, but he did possess a terrible intensity of vision, capable of picking out a single hidden truth and then magnifying it and distorting it.”³ He could have said the same about himself.⁴ Newspeak is at the heart of Orwell's novel and forms the axis of his vision. Abuse of language is the beginning and end of *1984*, the ultimate instrument of domination, although George Steiner has pointed out that Orwell incorrectly understood the mechanisms of linguistic degradation. Not the reduction of the number of words and meanings, as is posited in newspeak, but verbal inflation and the ever more refined application of euphemisms is the danger. Each of us has his favorites; “pacification of the countryside” and “separation with extreme prejudice” are mine. On these grounds alone, our debt to Orwell is immense. He has alerted us to such abuse; our sensitivity to the usage dubbed Orwellian has probably impeded the deterioration he cautioned against.

The concept of newspeak is helpful in still another context. Those of us who study Russian history cannot help but ponder Stalin's massive terror. Over and over we ask, in different ways, about the

conscious motives of the purges and the political and social impulses behind them, what some scholars call the structural predispositions. Many Russians answer these questions quite simply: Stalin was trying to make us stop thinking. The overt simplicity of the answer is deceptive; its meaning requires reflection.

Orwell wrote in 1984, "Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness."⁵ The student of Russian history recalls a statement made by Trotsky as early as 1924. He defended himself against the charge of violating Party discipline.

Comrades, none of us wishes to be or can be correct against his party. The party in the final reckoning is always right, because the party is the only historical instrument given to the proletariat for the realization of its basic tasks . . . I know that one cannot be right against the party. One can be right only with the party and through the party, for history has not created any other path for the realization of what is right. The English have an historical proverb: My country right or wrong. With considerably greater historical truth we can say: Right or wrong on separate, specific points, in separate aspects, this is my party.⁶

How prophetic were the words of V. V. Osinsky, a Bolshevik factionalist, who as early as 1920 disputed Lenin's definition of "democratic centralism."

Complete militarization is bound up with the limitation of the civil and political rights of man, with his complete bondage in production, etc. Complete militarization means that man is removed to a situation where they tell him: for the moment you are not a citizen, you are only a functionary, you must fulfill your civic duty not at meetings but in the workshop. . . .⁷

An outburst by Grigoriy Piatakov in 1928 (but unpublished until after Orwell's death) is also brought to mind by Orwell's definition of orthodoxy.

What was the October revolution, what was the Communist party, but a miracle. . . . The essential characteristic of this party is that it is bounded by no laws, it is always extending the realm of the possible until nothing becomes impossible. Nothing is inadmissible for it, nothing unrealizable. For such a party a true bolshevik will readily cast out from his mind ideas in which he has believed for years. A true bolshevik has submerged his personality in the collectivity, "the party," to such

an extent that he can make the necessary effort to break away from his own opinions and convictions, and can honestly agree with the party—that is the test of a true bolshevik.⁸

In Stalin's view, the Party in general and he in particular were responsible before History to plot the path to the future, to bring mankind to its shining future; he alone, by virtue of his position, was fit to think about such matters—to be political.

There is more in Orwell's art than assertions about totalitarian politics. His ideas can be construed as judgments about our own highly bureaucratized, consumer society, submitting itself to high technology. Problems come to mind of surveillance and privacy, of ritualized politics, of little brothers spawned endlessly, of brains scrambled by television news, of worlds consisting of images of images. Not only technology but also specialized institutions multiply vested interests and create ever-new forms of barbarism and opportunities for barbarism. These are fit and tempting subjects, but they are not central here. Instead I wish to conclude by commenting on Orwell's vision of mankind as expressed in *1984*. Its compelling power accounts for his popularity today. He has produced a bifurcated image of mankind—on the one hand, man bursting his chains, a free and spontaneous creature, man as he should be; on the other hand, man enslaved by what he has himself created, broken on the wheel of civilization, immoral and irrational, estranged even from his distinctively human qualities. This side of his vision corresponds to what Hannah Arendt called "living corpses," as Eric Fromm wrote of "soulless automatons."

The bright side of Orwell's vision—man as he should be—has complex features and diverse roots. Its most obvious aspect in *1984* is man's affinity with nature. Orwell's affirmation of the natural man reiterates a radical tradition that goes back at least as far as Rousseau, and perhaps to ancient Greece, in its criticism of civilization. It celebrates man uncorrupted by the institutions, hierarchies, and other constraints of society, uncorrupted also by the one-sided development of his reason at the expense of his emotions and intuition. In this context, Orwell dissociates our reason from our humanity. It is not just nature outside ourselves, where we go for walks or vacations, seeking idyllic moments or suntans, or to feel the power of tempests, but also nature within—the erotic impulse—that is Orwell's concern. Sex represents renewal and liberation for Winston and Julia. So fundamental is love-making as a matrix of our humanity that it constitutes for Orwell a political conspiracy against Big Brother. O'Brien informs us of Big Brother's plan to abolish the orgasm, noting that the Party's neurologists "are at work upon it

now.”⁹ Sex as the fundamental need to be connected one-to-one—the best chance to preserve and nurture the “humanity” in oneself—is an aspect of Orwell’s vision. Passion, in uniting the sexes, engenders the family, the community, and presumably the nation. As the basis for self-sacrifice, it is the source of the highest human values.

The other component of the bright side of Orwell’s vision draws upon the conservative tradition, going back at least as far as Edmund Burke, perhaps to the Bible. A loss of memory risks the loss of our entire humanity. Without history we are ciphers; only sex can parallel it as a source of identity. This theme appears in every chapter. The systematic destruction of the past and of the very conception of a past were among the most graphic and chilling thoughts of the author. Winston initially rebels by writing in his diary. He succeeds, by producing a record more stable than wind-blown ripples on the face of a lake, in creating a new concept of the past. Our humanity, then, has roots in culture as well as in nature. In some measure, our human nature is the product of intelligence and the fruit of continuity. In this way, Orwell’s vision embraces both conservative and radical traditions of our civilization. We owe our humanity to artifice and reason as well as to passion.

Let us look briefly at the dark side of Orwell’s vision—the soulless automaton, the living corpse, striving for power after power unto death. O’Brien informs Winston:

Never again will you be capable of ordinary human feeling. Everything will be dead inside you. Never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity. You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves.¹⁰

Is this possible, or is it merely an author’s ploy? In special cases, it is clearly possible. One can turn to Hannah Arendt’s book *The Origin of Totalitarianism* for definition and evidence. She demonstrates the world of Sophie’s Choice—the world where conscience cannot guide choice, where punishment is estranged from both law and behavior, where individual differentiation is itself obliterated.

Orwell indeed goes a step further than Arendt. Once Winston betrays Julia, he may be viewed as a living corpse, as defined in the passage quoted above. But Orwell pushes on. In the closing lines, gazing up at the enormous face of Big Brother, Winston for the first time perceives “what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark mustache.”

O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down

the side of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.¹¹

Is this a mirror held up to nature, or a dying author's effort to imprint his reader? The question is not about bootlicking or about the observed tendency of the oppressed to identify with the oppressor. Rather, the question is, does historical evidence exist which shows that man can be made to love his tormentor?

I am happy to end by noting that most of the evidence I am familiar with belies Orwell's somber conclusion. Bruno Bettelheim, a survivor of Hitler's terror, affirms the practical value, even in the camps, of conscience and the willingness to sacrifice. Those who retained their humanity survived best. The memoirs about the Soviet camps tend to support Bettelheim, not Orwell. Evgenia Ginzburg testifies to the power of love even in the most inhumane conditions. Solzhenitsyn, in his trilogy, as stark as Orwell's novel, demonstrates an ineradicable ability of man to hate his tormentor. It would seem to be more difficult to get man to stop thinking than either Hitler or Stalin ever dreamed.

Notes

1. George Orwell, *1984* (New York: New American Library, 1983), p. 129. Citations are to this edition since it is readily available.
2. Orwell, *1984*, p. 126.
3. George Orwell, "Politics vs. Literature," in *Collected Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), p. 398.
4. In this regard see George Steiner, "Killing Time," *The New Yorker*, December 12, 1983, p. 178.
5. Orwell, *1984*, p. 47.
6. Stenographic notes of the Thirteenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Moscow: Krasnaia Nov', 1924), pp. 166-67.
7. This quotation is from a minority report delivered at the Ninth Communist Party Congress; the translation used here is that of Robert V. Daniels, editor of *A Documentary History of Communism*, 2nd ed. (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1984), 1:125-26.
8. V. V. Osinsky, summarized by Leonard Schapiro in *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 381.
9. Orwell, *1984*, p. 220.
10. Orwell, *1984*, p. 211.
11. Hannah Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), pp. 447-59.
12. Arendt, p. 245.