

“1984 Revisited: Orwell’s Vision of 2000”

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1984 was completed in 1948 as Orwell was dying of tuberculosis. He vacillated between calling it **1984** and **The Last Man in Europe**. Its dark vision for the future of humanity draws inspiration from the world war Orwell had just witnessed, the atrocities of the monstrous Nazi War and Propaganda Machines, Stalin’s equally vile purges and gulags and the consolidation of a Soviet police state, crushing any illusions of Marx’s utopia of a workers state. Even more disturbing, the war was brought to a close by the unimaginable horrors unleashed by the dropping of atomic bombs on civilian populations. More disturbing, because they were the actions of the so-called civilized world, the last bastion of freedom, democracy, and human rights. This collective horror by three different states - fascist, communist, and capitalist democracy must have thoroughly disillusioned Orwell and removed for him any hope of humans rising from the ashes of the war and rebuilding their societies on a higher moral plane.

In addition, Orwell had already experienced bitter disappointment while fighting for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. In his **Homage to Catalonia**, he describes the splintering of the Left into many disputing factions followed by the betrayal of them all by the Soviet communists who failed to support the world revolution of the working classes which had begun in Barcelona. Following the directive of Stalin, the Soviets believed the time was not yet ripe for revolution, but, more to the point, Stalin had no control of the situation in Spain. Later, of course, there followed the communist purges of the anarchists in Barcelona in which Orwell himself was arrested and barely escaped with his life. Orwell was equally disgusted with the West, because it too betrayed the Republican cause, fearing the loss of its markets and investments with the possible victory of the revolting working classes. As a result, a million lives were lost in this most savage war, and the world, particularly the Spanish people, had Franco and the Fascists to contend with for forty more years. Finally, the stage

was set for WWII with Hitler and Mussolini conducting the first massive aerial bombing of Basque civilian populations. The West played the Neutrality game, while only the USSR and Mexico provided weapons to the loyalists, but Stalin made sure the weapons did not fall into the hands of the anarchists or socialists not under his control.

Moreover, as a young man, Orwell had experienced British imperialism and its brutalities while serving with the Imperial Police in Burma. (**Burmese Days**) He had also witnessed French colonialism and atrocities against Arabs while living in Morocco. During the war he had experienced, in addition to the Blitz, state censorship as a journalist in London, and had himself worked for BBC spreading propaganda to India over the airwaves. Wherever Orwell looked, and his gaze missed very little, he saw freedom threatened. Surely these experiences collectively were to later find their way onto the pages of **1984**.

It is true that Orwell patterned Oceania after the police state of the communist USSR with its gulags, purges, contrived trials, KGB, labor camps, its inner party and so forth. The omnipresent mustachioed Big Brother is certainly modeled after Stalin, and there is a similar, almost god-like aura about him. The arch betrayer, Emanuel Goldstein can easily be substituted for Trotsky, the fallen angel, glasses, goatee and all. But it would be a great mistake to interpret **1984** solely as a critique of Soviet communism, as it was so interpreted in the United States, which accounts for its enormous popularity - particularly during the McCarthy era. We must not lose sight of the fact that Oceania is an English-speaking state with its center in London, not some remote and exotic location. Orwell's vision of the future is that of the centralization of state power and the crushing of the individual, of human freedom and the human spirit. It is a state power without ideology, neither communist, capitalist, socialist, or fascist, though it has elements of all these. It is simply raw, brutal power acting for its own sake. (A vision of the future is the stomping of a boot on a human face forever, O'Brien tells Winston.) If we interpret **1984** as primarily a critique of Stalinist Russia, or as the disillusion and disappointments of Orwell with socialism, his book would not read nearly as profound, nor his warning be so eminent. In a word, **1984** raises the central question as to what the second half of the twentieth century holds for human kind based on the ominous events of the first half century. Orwell is projecting the social and political currents in place in

1948 and warning us as to what could happen in the future if we are not on guard against propaganda and demigods. Orwell was shocked at seeing members of the British intelligentsia so easily seduced by propagandas, orthodoxies, and ideologies that departed, in his opinion, from rationality and sanity. Thus, **1984** reflects this mistrust in human nature, knowing the ugly causes humanity can embrace, seemingly by rational and intelligent people.

He himself was very distraught by the many reviews which appeared shortly after **1984**'s publication and he found it necessary to issue a statement to clarify his intention and defuse the many misinterpretations.

“It has been suggested by some of the reviewers of **1984** that it is the author's view that this, or something like this, is what will happen inside the next forty years in the Western World. This is not correct. I think that, allowing for the book being after all a parody, something like **1984** could happen. This is the direction in which the world is going at the present time, and the trend lies deep in the political, social, and economic foundations of the contemporary world situation. Specifically, the danger lies in the structure imposed on Socialist and on Liberal capitalist communities by the necessity to prepare for total war with the USSR and the new weapons, of which of course the atomic bomb is the most powerful and the most publicized. But danger lies also in the acceptance of a totalitarian outlook by intellectuals of all colors. The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: Don't let it happen. It depends on you.”

In **1984** the world is dominated by three states, Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia that are constantly at war with one another, but in an eternal deadlock, none of them having the advantage. The southern hemisphere is like today's Third World, a source of raw materials and the arena wherein armies fight one another. The three states are continuously shifting opponents, so one is never quite sure who is at war with whom. But it really doesn't matter, because that there be war continuously is what ultimately matters. In truth, each state is at war with its own populations, subjugating and exploiting them completely, and uses war against an official enemy in order to deflect internal criticism, muster patriotism, and use up the production of workers which would otherwise go towards creating affluence and making their lives more comfortable. This in turn would lead to leisure and thinking, the worst possible scenario for Big Brother and the Party.

Thinking, independent thinking free of the official Party line, is naturally, the worst enemy of the state, and must be eradicated. Doublethink, the ability to hold to contradictory views as being true and selectively employ one or the other as needed by the Party, was a technique commonly employed. History, the collective memory of the past and of society, is destroyed daily so a context for thought does not exist, and the door is left open for invention and contriving of events by the state since there is nothing to check them against. (Winston himself is engaged in this dirty work at the Ministry of Truth.) The official language of Oceania, “newspeak,” is gradually replacing English as old dictionaries are being eliminated and replaced with new ones. The new dictionary of newspeak is designed to eliminate words and concepts, with the rationale of eliminating the thinkable. If there is no word for “freedom” say, there cannot be the concept, and so on. With a limited vocabulary and a lack of historical sense, the state is assured of eliminating enemies. Meanwhile, until the new language is in place, the ultimate police state consisting of thought police and two-way television screens are put in place to monitor subversive thoughts. Torture, disappearances, and out and out murdering of citizens complement the above techniques at the Ministry of Love. Controlling the outer person, one’s behavior, is easy for a totalitarian state; the challenge is to control the inner person, and this of course is the problem for the inner party. It must not only control but destroy the inner person, so that the only objective reality outside the human mind is that which the Party dictates. The Party is objective reality. There is a parallel here to Plato’s Cave: the party members of **1984** are like the prisoners who are shackled forever facing the wall, the only reality being the fleeting shadows of objects reflected on the wall which the Party chooses to exhibit.

Having given this brief overview to remind you of some of the more salient features of 1984, I come now to the question, to what extent has the world realized Orwell’s dark vision as we near the end of the century? There are two answers I should like to give to this question, although, one can imagine numerous responses. If we talk about the Cold War era, we see much of Orwell’s structure in place. Three grand areas and ideologies roughly describe the world: the US, USSR, and China along with their satellites and spheres of influence and their huge militaries. War is continuous but never takes place in the three major regions, but instead is fought in the Third World mostly with proxy armies.

The arms race is such that production is largely used up for military rather than the well being of citizens, concentrated instead among the multinationals, particularly the defense contractors. There is a state religion inculcating hatred among the peoples of these grand areas, deflecting internal criticism and manufacturing consent for military adventures abroad. In our own case, communism is Satan, the USSR the evil empire, to use the immortal words of one of our great statesmen. Stalin and Mao, and eventually Ho Chi Minh, the Ayatollah, and Fidel Castro are the Emanuel Goldstein's who with their minions attempt to overthrow the good and the just, namely, the peace-loving and democratic societies of the West. Of course, the good and the just are simply Yankee imperialists and their running dogs in the Chinese state religion, and capitalist criminals in Soviet propaganda. Each of these grand areas has its thought police, a system of spies, counterintelligence, prisons, and so on, to protect the state religion from heresies. In our own case we had the McCarthy era with its accusations and purges, HUAC, the FBI's Cointelpro, enemy lists, the CIA, and our puppet regimes abroad.

The tension between these three states accounts for nearly all the political violence which occurred since the end of WWII. It expressed itself in the many wars of national liberation and the attempt of the European colonial powers to hold on to their pre-war empires. Such is the case, for example, in Southeast Asia where first the French, then the Americans became mired in the massive destruction and quicksand of Vietnam. One can interpret the French and American interventions in Vietnam, at least on one level, as the attempt to maintain the long standing underdevelopment of southeast Asia, and control of its resources and markets. In some sense, the entire forty-five years of Cold War can be attributed to similar motives, though it has been described in other terms, as the fight for freedom, the struggle between the evil of communism and the good of democracy - always democracy, incidentally, never capitalism. History, however, does not record the developed nations as ever demonstrating an interest in freedom for the underdeveloped nations, if by freedom one means independence, both economic and political. But ultimately, whatever the terminology used to describe the struggle, even official apologists would have difficulty in denying that the West fought to preserve the fruits and tools of development, its homelands and grand areas, its markets, its sources of raw

materials, its geopolitical positions, its high standards of living and quality of life - by claiming the right to keep half the world in a state of continuous exploitation, political control, and permanent underdevelopment.

The communist resistance to this, sometimes out of hegemonic motives, such as flowed from the Soviet Empire, at other times drawn from motives of nationalism and the struggle for autonomy and liberation, together checked Western economic expansion for decades. But it helped to create a dangerous world of enormous military weaponry and nuclear arsenals as well as huge national debts left over as residue. It is only now, with the defeat and collective suicide of communism, that economic globalization is firmly entrenching itself throughout the world as had been planned since the end of WWII with the creation of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and GATT, later fine-tuned by the Trilateral Commission, and now, by the World Trade Organization.

If the West can be accused of leaving trails of misery and death in the wake of its violent “defense” of freedom, the Soviet communists can easily be accused of victimizing the other half of the world in its “defense” of the working classes. From the murderous years of Stalin’s purges to the invasion of Soviet tanks in Eastern Europe, the communists have left a trail of bodies - victims of gulags, secret police, occupying armies, prisons, tortures, forced labor, imposed totalitarian governments, suppressed voices and the denial of liberties and human rights - all the while devastating and polluting the environment in a style that would make the West envious. The West has of course also contributed to these types of horrors, if not in their developed home turfs, where national myths and ideology forbid them, then indirectly by CIA-backed coups abroad and by supporting, training, and arming corrupt fascist regimes, puppet governments, and surrogate armies who were willing to cooperate in these dark and profitable undertakings. These hired guns qualify for the dirty wars, their hideous deeds often overlooked, because they declare themselves to be the “staunch enemies of communism.”

To be sure, most of the violence of the Cold War was generated by the two nuclear super-powers, the US and the USSR, with china, still a sleeping giant, having a lesser impact, but still an important player in this global mischief. Needless to say, the US played off the two communist giants, one against

another, sometimes in détente with one, and nearly at war with the other, at other times a reversal of adversaries, much like the situation in 1984. And naturally, the USSR and China played the same game, playing all sides against the middle. Chomsky claims that all sides profited by the cold War which explains why it lasted so long.

At the height of the cold War, then, only God must know how very, very close we came to nuclear war (on fourteen occasions we went on defcom alert and were at the brink of launching missiles). Consider; had the world engaged in nuclear war, the kind of society the survivors, if any, might have constructed from the ashes. I think such a world very likely would have resembled Orwell's horrific vision of the future. It is more than a remote possibility that Orwell's dark vision may have come within a heartbeat of coming to pass as depicted in Kubrick's film, **Dr. Strangelove**. The Cold War era not only resembled life depicted in **1984** to a large degree, but may have been directly on track towards achieving its full scenario with nuclear war and the rise of monstrous states like Oceania in the aftermath, has there been survivors.