

# The Party, the Great Redeemer: an existential-political commentary on Orwell's *1984*

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*This is the way the world ends  
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Not with a bang but a whimper.*  
(T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men")

**Abstract:** *Given its multifaceted relevance, Orwell's 1984 has enjoyed a plethora of theoretical and artistic interpretations. However, I have not come across any such interpretation concerned with the ontological temporality of the novel, i.e. not its narrative development, but its use of temporality as the basic horizon of self-awareness, both existentially and politically. Considering this to be a key feature of both Orwell's novel and totalitarian systems in general, I have taken upon myself the task of loosely exploring such an approach. As it will become apparent, I rely strongly on Heidegger's account of existential and historical time (especially his concept of Being—towards-death). Basically, I will try to provide an existential account of totalitarianism as the resulting systemic product of the flight from the Being-towards-death in particular, respectively an attempt at subduing temporality, in general. In addition, I will make, when deemed necessary, several contextual references to other thinkers such as Foucault, Nietzsche, Freud, Plato and Gadamer.*

**Keywords:** *Orwell, Heidegger, 1984, totalitarianism, dystopia*

## Introduction

Orwell conceived and wrote his *1984* in 1948, therefore, at a time when the world was strongly overshadowed by the clash of the totalitarian ideologies during the Second World War.

Mass society, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been announced by thinkers from both sides of the political spectrum, Nietzsche and Marx, among others, was now ever more concretely taking its toll on history.

Moreover, the world was about to embark on a new world war, fortunately a 'cold' one, but with several correlative 'hot' local conflicts and with an ever-present atomic threat hovering above. The *dialectics of Illuminism* threatened to induce global overinstrumentalization of the lifeworld.

*1984* taps into the supervenient imaginary: total outer/inner supervision and regulation, ubiquitous guilt feelings, paranoia, total repression and derivative existential angst, all in all a generalization of what Foucault would later on call the *carceral society*.

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In nuce, we are presented with an imminent totalitarian version of the future, in which the world is agonistically shared among three superpowers: Oceania, which included the entire American and Australian continents, the English Isles and South Africa; Eurasia, i.e. an overextended version of the U.S.S.R. stretching across the entire continental Europe, from Portugal to the Bering Strait and Eastasia, approximately comprising China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and, sporadically, Indonesia and New Guinea.

Despite their mutual enmity and the different nomenclature, the governing ideology of all these techno-ideological blocks is essentially the same, some sort of power-driven collectivistic nihilism in which, as previously mentioned, each and every spontaneous individual initiative, be it spiritual or behavioral, affective or purely rational, actual or merely potential is harshly repressed. Essentially, what we are dealing with here is the Worldview of a concentration camp.

At variance with the literary habits of the Sci-fi genre at the time, Orwell placed the setting of his novel in the near (earthly) future, precisely in order to connote the imminence of the potential civilizational dead-end described therein.

## **Plot**

Winston Smith, the protagonist of the novel, is a 39 years old English citizen of Oceania and member of the 'Outer Party', as such belonging to the 'political middle class' of the regime: he cannot make any leading decisions, but he has a good education and a 'decent' job with the so called Ministry of Truth; he, along with the other members of the Ministry, must write and rewrite history according to the ideological directives of the 'Inner Party'. More on this, a little later.

Frustrated with the meaninglessness of his, and actually the entire system's, existence, he starts remembering his early childhood and his parents, at a time when there was no Party, no Big Brother (its pseudo-mythical leader) and no Ingsoc (the 'Oceanic' version of the totalitarian ideology). Actually what Winston is thereby half-wittingly doing is 'thought-crime', i.e. mentally evoking a world in which the existence of the Party and all its adjacent aspects was not necessary, in other words, imagining an alternative. This is, in terms of the Party, the worst crime of all.

Winston starts keeping track of such thoughts in a personal diary and the childhood memories pour inside his mind. He also suspects a certain O'Brien, an important Party member, of actually belonging to an underground resistance movement, called the Brotherhood, and entertains the thought of approaching him in order to join up.

At a certain point, his attention is drawn by a young female coworker whom he suspects of spying on him. He actually considers murdering her, but he covertly receives a love message from her. Her name was Julia and she was 27. He realizes that he had been interested in her as well, and, moreover, that his paranoia had actually been due to repressed attraction. They begin a love relationship in hiding. During the following months they draw ever closer to each other, though they never forget that their time together was limited and that sooner or later they would unavoidably be found out. But this imminent fatality makes their relationship even more intense, both physically and spiritually. They end up renting a room above a secondhand store in the prole district (i.e. that part of London reserved for the low-class, the non-Party members, who lived somewhat freer, though, scurvy lives).

O'Brien actually gets in contact with them and invites them to his place, where he denounces the Party, portraying himself as a member of the underground resistance movement. He gives Winston a copy of Emmanuel Goldstein's *Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, the movement's alleged manifesto, and asks him to study it. He also asks them how far and low they would be willing to go, what crimes they would be willing to commit to overthrow the Party.

The manifesto is basically a treatise of socio-political critical theory, analyzing the historical and psycho-cultural origins of totalitarianism, much akin to Hannah Arendt's or the Frankfurt School's contributions in this respect. Winston and Julia start reading and discussing it in the precarious safety of their room. One evening however, soldiers of the Party burst into their room and seize them. They had been denounced by the ground-floor storeowner who was actually spying for the Thought Police.

They get separated and taken to the alleged Ministry of Love. Here they get reeducated, that is physically and spiritually broken and remade in the shape of the Party ideological model. The reeducation agent is none other than O'Brien, who, in reality, was also a Party agent. The reeducation involved a substantial amount of beating and physical suffering, but the psychological torture, described by Winston, is even worse. Therefore he gets taken to the infamous *Room 101* where, according to O'Brien, he is to confront his greatest fear. This proves to be rats. Having come to know Winston's tremendous fear of rats, supposedly during the extensive interrogations performed on him, O'Brien straps a cage full of them onto his head, and threatens to let them loose to eat his face. Winston breaks down, convulsively yelling to do it to Julia, not to him. This absolves him in the eyes of O'Brien: spiritual breakdown.

After that we find Winston as a reintegrated, 'decent' member of the ideological society. He actually meets Julia accidentally on the street and exchanges a few words with her. There was no more trace of the old love between them. Once, before their capture, he had told her that "Confession is not betrayal. What you say or do doesn't matter: only feelings matter. If they could make me stop loving you—that would be the real betrayal." (Orwell, 1996, pp. 130)

The Party had succeeded in doing precisely that. They did not feel anything anymore. The love of Big Brother had prevailed once more.

## Analysis and interpretation

In Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, the sophist Kallikles argues that power makes right. Socrates objects to this thesis by referring to the story of king Erysichton, who drew upon himself the righteous wrath of the goddess Demeter for having cut down the trees in her sacred forest. In revenge, the goddess hustled Limos, the goddess of starvation and famine, onto him. Under the spell of Limos food could no longer still Erysichton's hunger, but, on the contrary, intensified it. So king Erysichton, so the story goes, came to sell all his belongings and, afterwards, his own daughter, for food, and, in the end, to devour himself. In his counter-argumentation, Socrates equates such self-devouring hunger with the lust for power.

I think this is a good starting point for the analysis, as Orwell explores in his dystopia precisely the nature and dynamics of such a power-bent version of the human civilization, with the self-devouring consequences that go along with it. Power is no longer viewed as means to an end (be it wealth, security, happiness and so on), as in a more or less classical perspective (Hobbes, Machiavelli, Marx etc.), but as something sought for its own sake, as Nietzsche or

Freud saw it: as a direct manifestation of the will of life itself, its intensity varying in direct proportionality to the latter's strength as such. Main point: power is a symptom of life itself and not a means.

„The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake... The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power.” (Orwell, 1996, pp. 208)<sup>1</sup>

However, an important difference from Nietzsche's *will to power* view is the instrumental collectivism of the Orwellian system, which Nietzsche would have regarded precisely as the epitome of the life-undermining slave mentality. Main point: Nietzsche's will to power was, essentially, about the reality-generating power of the individual (an artistic analogy), the Orwellian system was about the reality-subduing power of the mass (born out of resentment, in Nietzsche's terms). This is actually one of the essential differences which separates Nietzsche from the Nazi ideology that he would most certainly have despised.

The basic idea would be the following: reality, i.e. the world, is essentially alien and hostile to the human being. Death is the clearest evidence thereof. The human individual is too weak to withstand its power on its own. However, great transgenerational agglutinations of individuals can, especially through technology, withstand and ultimately even subdue reality. But the great *developer of reality* is time. And time emerges into the human world either as history, or as existential time (i.e. *our lives*). So whoever or whatever controls history and existential time, controls reality.

One of the proper ways of making this point is by looking at Winston's job. As previously mentioned, what the so called Ministry of Truth was doing, was altering the archives, i.e. the written memories of past events in keeping with the directives of the Party. For example, supposing that the weekly individual chocolate ration was 30 grams and the Party decides to drop it to 20 grams, then what the Ministry of Truth does, is to modify all the past written, or otherwise kept, documents (from official declarations to papers and so on) so as to appear that it had always been 20 grams. In other words to erase the modification. Why? Because modifying, i.e. adapting to new and unforeseen circumstances, implies inability to foresee the future, which amounts to a certain degree of fallibility.<sup>2</sup> And the Party cannot allow itself to be seen as fallible in any respect whatsoever, especially in relation to time.

Furthermore, *private* individuals are not allowed to keep any biographic records (i.e. photos, diaries etc.), in order for their personal memory to become fuzzy and malleable enough for the party propaganda system to mold it as it fancies. After all, Winston's first and worst crime was starting to keep a diary.

In a nutshell the Party controls time, or at least this is how it wants to portray itself. Why and how?

It might be argued that temporality, i.e. our ability to retain and perceive the past, correspondingly understand our present and projectively direct our existence into the future is what makes us human, both individually and collectively. This is, among others, Heidegger's point in *Being and Time*: time is *the great unfold of Being*. Consequently, by controlling temporality one can control human consciousness and action.

As to the 'how', the answer would be: By tapping into what some, Gadamer among others, like to call *the textuality of reality*, i.e. the idea that our entire reality is understandable as a text. Basically, the main steps of this thesis would be the following:

- (1) Reality means being perceived.
- (2) We perceive through our subjectivity.

(3) The nature and structure of our subjectivity is not a priori but culturally determined: the specific configuration of meanings within our culture determine what *we see*.

(4) Meanings are expressed and configured through texts and other documentary artefacts (pictures, music, statues etc.).

(5) Our relation to the past (i.e. our history) is also retained in texts or artifacts treatable as such.

(6) Who controls texts about the past, controls the present and the future, i.e. time itself.

(7) Who controls time, controls reality.

It might be argued that the Party's attempt to ideologically reform language through the so called *Newspeak* is subservient to the same purpose, given that language is, among others, a great repository of history, both past and future. Moreover, the way linguistic terms connote and denote and their syntactic articulation is both descriptive and prescriptive with respect to the way we think and act individually. So by ensnaring language, one can, supposedly, control both cultural and existential time, therefore, again, reality.

Orwell's observation in this respect is keen and much in line with the actual behavior of modern totalitarian parties. The Soviet Communist Party, for example, contended that the dynamics of history follows a set of objective laws, scientifically known to the Party, fact which allegedly allowed it to control the evolution of the entire society, potentially of the entire world. This is the essence of the Bolshevik version of the *scientific historical materialism*: the Party is the *Great Hermeneut* of history.

Complementarily, we have to consider that, existentially speaking, self-consciousness is a *temporal self-transcending transcendental faculty*, in more lay terms, that we come to know of our existence by projecting ourselves mentally through time: we perceive our present being only as a convergence point between a self-reflection originating in some future (projected ~ *pro-imaginary*) point, on the one hand, and a self-reflection originating in a past (retained ~ *retro-imaginary*) point. This is what we could call, somewhat along with Heidegger, the *co-constitutivity of the temporal ecstases* (past, future and present) and, in its ouroboric ontological dynamics, the retained past [Gewesene] determines the future [Zukunft] that determines the present [Gegenwart]:

“‘Historicality’ stands for the state of Being that is constitutive for Dasein’s ‘historizing’ as such; only on the basis of such ‘historizing’ is anything like ‘world-history’ possible or can anything belong historically to world-history. In its factual Being, any Dasein is as it already was and it is ‘what’ it already was. It *is* its past, whether explicitly or not. And this is so not only in that its past is, as it were, pushing itself along ‘behind’ it, and that Dasein possesses what is past as a property which is still present-at-hand and which sometimes has after-effects upon it: Dasein ‘is’ its past in the way of *its* own Being, which, to put it roughly, ‘historizes’ out of its future on each occasion. Whatever the way of being it may have at the time, and thus whatever understanding of Being it may possess, Dasein has grown up both into and in a traditional way of interpreting itself: in terms of this it understands itself proximally and, within a certain range, constantly. Its own past – and this always means the past of its ‘generation – is not something which *follows along after* Dasein, but something which already goes ahead of it.” (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 41)

One of the Party's main slogans mirrors precisely this: “Who controls the past, controls the future. Who controls the present, controls the past.” (Orwell, 1996, pp. 194)

So in order to systematically induce depersonalization, the Party taps into the most profound individual fear, respectively hope: the fear of death, respectively hope of individual survival beyond it. As Heidegger would put it, *each Dasein is ontologically bound to die his/her own death* and this realization, provided one is ready and able personally to assume the correlative Angst, can be a great individualizing force with respect to projecting, building and leading a life in keeping with one's own existential specificity. But as an unavoidable personal possibility, Death is always (and inherently) a *thing of the future* (given that, *as a present matter of fact*, one is no longer there to live it). As such, only by taking upon oneself one's Being-towards-death can one presently start living for his/her (other) future possibilities, i.e. become *a being of and for the future*, namely authentically individuated.

"I think, I exist...I am conscious of my own identity. I was born and I shall die." (Orwell, 1996, pp. 205) defyingly says Winston to O'Brian during the 'pedagogic sessions'.

Conversely, by fleeing from one's Being-towards-death, one becomes exclusively a being of the past. Differently put, the hope of surviving one's Being-towards-death is inherently bound to articulate itself in terms of a pre-given collectivistic ethical model. Consequently, therein, Dasein must live *this life* in keeping with this model's criteria, lest *he/she* gets shunned from among those worthy of after-death survival. Big Brother's Party offers precisely a secularized version thereof, in which those that survive their own death are no longer transcendently, but rather immanently delivered: the ideological community, the Party as such is the one that grants them exemption from death. All Dasein has to renounce is the benefit of the realization of his/her Being-towards-death: his/her own individuality. The Party promises collective salvation at the cost of *personal depersonalization*. Individuals come and go, the Party goes on forever:

"The first thing you must realize is that power is collective. The individual only has power in so far as he ceases to be an individual. You know the Party slogan: Freedom is Slavery. Has it ever occurred to you that it is reversible? Slavery is freedom. Alone—free—the human being is always defeated. It must be so, because every human being is doomed to die, which is the greatest of all failures. But if he can make complete, utter submission, if he can escape from his identity, if he can merge himself in the Party so that he IS the Party, then he is all-powerful and immortal." (Orwell, 1996, pp. 209)

This is precisely what Winston becomes after his reeducation: *collectively immortal*, i.e. *atemporal and identityless*.

## Conclusion

As stated, I have sought to provide an existential-hermeneutic reconstruction of Orwell's 1984. This is by no means the only possible or correct approach. Several other ideological, psychological, sociological or purely literary accounts can be provided therefor. However, this approach is best suited, I think, for bringing out the *temporal ontology* of the novel, i.e. not its narrative development, which is rather straightforward, but, for better or worse, its account and use of temporality as a basic horizon of human existence and the derivative political consequences thereof. As noted, I have relied strongly, in this respect, on Heidegger's conceptualization of existential time as displayed in his *Being and Time* (1927). In addition, with respect to the socio-cultural aspects of temporality and the critique of technological (Post-)modernity, I have drawn upon some of his later texts such as *Overcoming Metaphysics* (1938/1939) and

*The Question Concerning Technology* (1954). I have supplemented the Heideggerian bibliography with some aspects of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960), a work which is somewhat more explicit with respect to the textual nature of reality and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), on account of his edifying analyses of the psycho-cultural aetiology, dynamics and pathology of power. As noted, I have also drawn upon some of Plato's and Nietzsche's considerations with respect to the ontology of power.

As such, I have analyzed the totalitarian phenomenon as displayed in Orwell's novel as the self-undermining unwitting collective product of the existential flight from the Being-towards-death. Beyond the existentialist jargon, what I have claimed was that anguished by the perspective of its own future undetermined but unavoidable demise, the individual seeks shelter in massive socio-political Leviathans like the ones portrayed by Orwell. The stake of this existential *quid pro quo* is post-death survival: the individual receives from the *mass-body* (the Party) the illusory guarantee of post-death survival, at the cost of his/her own individuality: the mass-body does not die, only the individual does, so as long as the individual becomes one with the mass-body, he/she apparently avoids death as well.

What this amounts to in terms of temporality is that Dasein renounces his/her own future and, along with it, his/her own past and present. This is displayed in the novel by the Party's attempt to subdue time, both existentially and historically. However, by renouncing time, Dasein renounces Being and becomes an atemporal *undead* entity, much akin to the Cumaean Sybil who, being granted eternal life without eternal youth, withered away eternally, without ever dying. Shrinking evermore, so the story goes, she ended up being kept in a jar.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As a side-note, Sadomasochism basically amounts to precisely the same principle and this is what O'Brien says to Winston as he was torturing him, while viewing his abuse as a paideic act.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, this is also a recurrent theme in Medieval scholastic theology, i.e. the idea that God could not modify anything, neither Himself nor anything else, as the need to modify something would amount to a certain degree of imperfection in His foresight, ergo His omniscience.

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