



GEORGE ORWELL AND THE MODERN POLITICAL DYSTOPIA

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In popular culture, the term ‘Orwellian’ has come to be known as that which describes instances of the dystopic milieu in George Orwell’s final novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This seminal text, which presents a vision of a nation taken over by a totalitarian government wherein its leaders exercise absolute power over its citizens, is undoubtedly one of Orwell’s most famous works. The text is cemented in the secondary/middle school curricula and inspires the possibilities of resistance despite the tyrannical forces of ‘Big Brother’ leadership. Interestingly, what users of the term ‘Orwellian’ may not recognize is that Orwell himself would have resented the use of his name in this way. The manipulation of his name confirms a celebrative legacy and euphemizes, as opposed to critically deconstructs, complex thought – the result of which is an insincerity and evasiveness to politics. Now, a year after the world witnessed the attacks on Capitol Hill in the United States, this evasiveness related to the Orwell’s work is especially horrifying and would surely turn the author over in his grave. As we celebrate the death anniversary of George Orwell today, January 21st, let us remember that Orwell provided a literary warning against the inherently oppressive underpinnings of dictatorial social structures and dominant powers. George Orwell’s body of work consistently returns to his anti-Fascist, anti-war, anti-totalitarian sentiments, and exposes the complexities of despotic regimes lurking behind the euphemistic language of politics.

George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair on June 25, 1903, in Eastern India and raised by his mother in Oxfordshire, England. He obtained his education at St. Cyprian’s in East Sussex and later earned a King’s scholarship to Eton, where he corroborated with various famous scholars such as A. S. F. Gow and Aldous Huxley. His first exposure to oppressive political forces, which planted the seeds of his anti-authoritarianism, occurred when he was a police officer in Burma, now present-day



Myanmar. He states, “[I] was in the police, which was to say, I was part of the machinery of despotism.” (Durlacher 2003) Watching the inhumanity (lynching, faulty arrests, pillaging) naturalized by his occupation galvanized Orwell’s anti-authoritarian texts. For example, in his book, *Burmese Days*, Orwell examines the life of a lonely protagonist who becomes trapped in an oppressive system and cannot escape. Moreover, his distaste of capitalism is expressed in his text *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which is a work about his travel to Industrial Britain and his reported observations on the distress of the working class. Indeed, the dichotomy between oppressor and victim as part of a network of dehumanizing power structures inspired publications and carried with them anti-establishment political sentiments common among his works.

Orwell’s contribution to the Spanish-Civil War begins with his participation in POUM militia (Worker’s Party of Marxist Unification) of the Republican army. The victory of the Spanish workers in 1936 inspired Orwell to join forces against Franco’s fascist counterrevolution. In 1937, he arrived in Barcelona, where communists demanded absolute allegiance from citizens. It was there where he would acquire his first experience with totalitarianism, ironically, from his former allies on the Left. The popular government fell to fascists, and indeed, “The betrayal of the Spanish Revolution by the Community Party and the Hit-Stalin Pact signed the following year cemented Orwell’s bitter disgust with Stalinism.” (Wengraf 2003, 8) After this experience, Orwell admits, every piece of writing that he’s written since 1936, whether directly or indirectly, was directed against totalitarianism. (Orwell 1948)

Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, published in 1945, marries his political purposes with his artistic purposes, and indeed, succeeds in turning political writing into an art form of its own. The text recounts the Russian Communist Revolution through an anthropomorphic allegory about a group of farm animals who rebel against their human farmers. The ending of this novel, which saw its once revered Napoleon leader turn dictator with absolute authority, confirms a cyclicity to oppressive regimes such as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. In other words, the novel teaches us that acquiring power in an oppressive system does not equate the elimination of the oppression as praxis; it simply duplicates and displaces oppressive power. Orwell’s inspiration for using fable-like elements to this novel—chiefly, the decision to tell the story through animals on a farm—was the recognition that our relationship to animals symbolizes the power relations constituting the capitalist class system: “If animals were aware of their strength,” Orwell notes, “we would lose power over them. People exploits animals, in the same way that the rich exploit the proletariat.” (Durlacher 2003) Keeping the masses passive and under control is to reduce them to their animal functions. Any understanding of one’s innate abilities beyond that, including the capacity to think or overthrow the leading powers, would mean destruction.



Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has made a deep impression on culture and society and its influence is confirmed in the popular use of phrases such as 'Big Brother is watching you,' 'double-think,' 'newspeak', and 'thought police.' The novel, published in 1949, depicts a bleak totalitarian regime thirty-five years into the future, one highlighted by the extreme state surveillance and combined with a pessimism for failed revolutions. The reader follows Winston Smith's burgeoning self-awareness regarding the oppressive power of Oceania and his position within it. His doubt is met with the rebellious and liberative nature of Julia, his love interest throughout the story. Their forbidden affair, which takes place in a society where sex is reduced to its procreative purposes, affirms their opposition to the Party and engenders their search for a way out of the system, where freedom, love, and humanity exist. However, their plan is discovered, and they are punished not simply with physical abuse, but with psychological torture that obliterates their rebellious consciousness and, therefore, the resurgence of their obedience to the Party. Since its publication, *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* impact on the cultural consciousness is such that one need not even read it to feel its indelible mark on society. The phrases and concepts that Orwell coined have become requisites of political language and are still applicable after decades of use.

How has the meaning of the word 'Orwellian' diverted from its original role since its creation in 1950, the year of the creator's death? For one thing, it has been coopted by conservative groups, despite its primary application in liberal and Leftist critiques of society. Nick Bentley considers this in his examination of the term's use in the letter from conservative Brexiteers Boris and Johnson to then-Prime Minister Teresa May. The letter contained a set of demands on how to reconcile Britain's exit from the European Union, describing an unnamed minister as "Orwellian." (Bentley 2017) Bentley argues against this distortion of the term, which in this case, meant to mean "sinister" as opposed to its more traditional term as "despotic." (Bentley 2017) This throw-around of the word Orwellian, especially among conservative, right-wing sects, lends credence to Orwell's disdain for euphemisms. Recall Donald Trump Jr.'s tweet after his father's ban from Twitter following the January 6th insurrection on the Capitol, "We are living in Orwell's 1984. Free speech no longer exists in America." Indeed, among American conservatives, the term is invoked in instances where they feel their freedom of speech is being infringed upon. This instance reoccurs in Simon & Schuster's decision to not publish Senator Hawley's book after the news came out of his involvement in the MAGA attack in Washington D.C. Hawley retorted, again using Orwell to contextualize the limitations that the publishing house put on his freedom of speech. As Hanna Pham argues, his claim might very well be rooted in anti-authoritarian sentiments overlapping with Orwell's political underpinnings. The irony, as the writer agrees, is the senator "being Orwellian himself by utilizing political jargon [to] promote a false reality." (Pham 2021) In that context, both Trump Jr.,



Hawley, and even conservative political commentators like Tucker Carlson do not use 'Orwellian' in the sense of describing an unfree country, but rather a disablement of political tyranny.

Since its publication, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been periodically banned in several societies, such as Soviet Union before its dismantling, and up until recently, Communist China. It has also been nearly banned in school districts across the United States. In 1981, for example, the county of Jackson, Florida, challenged the teaching of the book, stating that it was "pro-communist and contained explicit sexual matter." (Munday 2021) What this provocation helps us understand is the power of the book's language, and the written word's ability to provoke thought and question, and more importantly, denaturalize what we have been socially internalized. It is likely that these groups considered the book anti-communist or anti-government, or as such, inspired the citizens to question their passivity to the law and order. Ironically, the banning of the book proves its message as correct. The book's meaning, and by extension, the cultural term 'Orwellian,' changes readerly concern depending on the point in history during which they live. Cold War paranoia isolated the book's meaning to that of totalitarianism. A 1984 *New York Times* article claimed that "In [a] large part of our world, [Orwell] did succeed, through the management of the news and the censorship of the written and spoken word, in severely impairing man's ability to think freely." (van Den Bossche 1984) Today, most notably, it is fair to say that Orwell's work can be viewed as a defense of truth, an invaluable fictional take that heeds a warning against patriotism, total order, rule, and a world of alternative facts.

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SUGGESTED CITATION: Lorraine Reyes, Fe. 2022. "George Orwell and the Modern Political Dystopia." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published January 21.