

George Orwell's Book 1984

By Stuart Smith

It is now many years since 1984; a year that seemed to George Orwell as far away as 2030 seems to us now.

I would wager that if you have ever read 1984, then it was many years ago. If you have not read it, then this is surely a 'must read' as soon as you possibly can.

The book is ultimately a very depressing one, but a stark reminder of how liberty and freedom can be eliminated in the name of security and safety.

Let me remind you briefly of the story. Some sections I think are spookily relevant today. Remember, this was written in 1949 - **over fifty years ago**.

The World of 1984

Orwell envisions a world in which the West has fallen under the spell of a totalitarian socialist dictator, **Big Brother**. A political demagogue and religious cult leader all rolled into one, Big Brother's power and mystery are so immense that one may wonder if he even exists at all.

Big Brother's Ingsoc Party (English Socialism) has perfected the use of high-level technology to monitor the lives of its populace, and to ensure unswerving loyalty through surveillance, propaganda and brainwashing. (Although we have not yet reached anything like 1984's mass surveillance, we are certainly moving swiftly along that route with our current two million spy cameras, ability to tap any telephone in the country, and plans for compulsory ID cards.)

The government's most brilliant and most appalling project is the deconstruction of the English language into **Newspeak**, the language of the Party. Each successive edition of the *Newspeak Dictionary* has *fewer* words than its predecessor. Thus the words 'terrific', 'wonderful' and 'fantastic' (and many similar) are replaced by their newspeak equivalent of good, doublegood and doubleplusgood. 'Terrible', 'awful', 'appalling' are replaced with ungood, doubleungood, doubleplusungood, and so forth.

By removing subtle meaning and nuance from the vocabulary, the government hopes to eradicate seditious and antisocial thinking before it even has the chance to enter a person's mind. **Without the vocabulary for revolution, there can be no revolution.**

Thought Crime

For those who persist in thinking for themselves, so-called **Thought Criminals**, Ingsoc's storm troopers, the **Thought Police**, are there to intervene, incarcerating the freethinkers in the **Ministry of Love**, where most are vapourised with every trace of their existence removed from the records. Some are re-educated and released for a year or two before then being vapourised.

The most intrusive daily aspect of life in Oceania (as Orwell calls the European/American mega-state) are the omnipresent telescreens; two-way interactive televisions that cannot be turned off, and which give the government a faceless surveillance window into everyone's life. (Again consider the millions of spy cameras installed and currently being installed in every public place...)

Who is on the other side of the telescreens? Are people watching? Is all the monitoring done by machine? All we learn is that members of the Inner Party, the elite, are allowed to turn off their telescreens, if only for a brief period.

Society is constantly at war (compare with ongoing 'war on terrorism') which keeps the population cowed, subservient, sacrificial and willing to accept constant shortages.

Winston Smith, the protagonist of Orwell's novel, becomes a Thought Criminal. He is a minor bureaucrat (an Outer Party member) whose job it is to rewrite the archives of the London Times so that they are consistent with current Ingsoc policy. If Big Brother makes a speech which predicts a victory on the Eastern front, and a small victory occurs instead on the Western front, Winston's job is to retrospectively rewrite the speech to show Big Brother correctly predicting the Western front victory.

When Ingsoc changes its political alliance with another superpower and begins waging war on a former ally, Winston's job is to rewrite all the prior information to show that the old alliance never existed.

So broken are the minds of the people that they don't even realise these changes have been made. A sad, lonely man, Winston is also smart enough to understand the insidious manipulation being perpetrated on the society.

The Sting

Winston becomes a victim of the government's most ingenious trap. He obtains a copy of a banned revolutionary tract by the famous enemy of the State, **Goldstein**. Galvanised and inspired by what he reads, he pursues an illicit love affair with a co-worker, Julia, and seems to find an ally in the person of Inner Party official O'Brien.

Longing for an escape from this terrible world to a better life, he does not realise that he has been set-up. O'Brien is actually the head of the Thought Police. It is he who has written Goldstein's book for the purpose of luring potential revolutionaries out of the closet and into the dreaded Room 101 - a torture chamber where one's worst fears are made real.

Totally broken, brainwashed and reprogrammed (so suggestible that he is even made to agree that "2+2=5"), Winston is returned to society as another harmless devotee of Big Brother. In the chilling final pages of the book, Winston, tears of joy streaming down his face, proclaims his love for Big Brother, all thoughts, hopes or dreams of escape and freedom permanently eradicated from his consciousness.

Here are some quotes from the book, some of which seem chillingly clairvoyant:

Quotes From 1984

"There was a whole chain of separate departments dealing with proletarian literature, music, drama and entertainment generally. Here were produced rubbishy newspapers containing nothing except sport, crime and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs which were composed entirely by mechanical means."

"The Lottery, with its weekly payout of enormous prizes, was the one public event to which the Proles paid serious attention. It was probable that there were some millions of Proles for whom the Lottery was the principal, if not the only reason for staying alive. It was their delight, their folly, their anodyne, their intellectual stimulant. Where the Lottery was concerned, even people who could barely read and write seemed capable of intricate calculations and staggering feats of memory. There was a whole tribe of men who made a living simply by selling systems, forecasts and lucky amulets..."

"Pictures and posters on every corner, reminding citizens of Oceania that Big Brother is always watching them."

"Down in the street, little eddies of wind were whirling dust and torn paper into spirals, and though the sun was shining and the sky a harsh blue, there seemed to be no colour in anything, except the posters that were plastered everywhere."

"Helicopters skimming down between the roofs, a sign of the police patrol, snooping into people's windows."

"Never...quite enough to eat, one never had socks or underclothes that were not full of holes, furniture had always been bad and rickety, rooms under-heated, tube trains crowded, houses falling to pieces, bread dark-coloured... nothing cheap and plentiful. Decaying, dingy cities where underfed people shuffled to and fro in leaky shoes, in patched-up nineteenth-century houses that smelt always of cabbage and bad lavatories."

"Marriages between Party members had to be approved by a committee appointed for the purpose...[and] permission was always refused if the couple concerned gave the impression of being physically attracted to one another."

Here are some more features of that society:

- Most people lived in slums.
- Amid the decaying buildings in London, there is singing, banners, dancing, speeches, drums, trumpets, marching, posters, and films during Hate Week.
- Government is divided into four ministries:

Ministry of Truth (Minitrue): concerned with news, entertainment, education, and the arts.

Ministry of Peace (Minipax): concerned with war.

Ministry of Plenty (Miniplenty): responsible for economic affairs.

Ministry of Love (Miniluv): maintained law and order.

- There are no laws within Oceania but if certain actions are detected they could be punishable by death or by twenty-five years in a forced labour camp.
- Oceanian philosophy is based on Ingsoc, otherwise known as "English Socialism". The sacred principles of Ingsoc are: Newspeak, Doublethink, and the mutability of the past.
- The social structure within Oceania is pyramidal and at the apex of pyramid is Big Brother: infallible, all powerful; given credit for everything.
- Each Party member has a telescreen within their home that monitors every move they make. It cannot be turned off.
- Party members are forced to wear an expression of quiet optimism when facing the telescreen.
- They wear blue overalls, the uniform of the Party.
- They are given a small amount of coupons to trade in for clothing, food, etc.
- They are constantly under the watch of the Thought Police.
- They have to participate in a 'two minute hate' each day. The program varied from day to day but **Goldstein** is always the principal figure of hate. He delivers "usual venomous attack upon the doctrine of the Party...denouncing the dictatorship of the Party". Party members were then expected to break out in rage and leap up and down chanting "B-B...B-B"
- They were always being watched for "symptoms of unorthodoxy."
- Each morning, they awoke to "an ear-piercing whistle" from the telescreen. They were then prompted to take part in various exercises from an instructor on the telescreen. When doing these exercises, known as Physical Jerks, they could never show any dismay or resentment.
- Party members worked in one of the four ministries: Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv, or Miniplenty.

(Winston Smith, worked in Minitrue. His job was to 'rectify' history by rewriting the newspapers.)

- Workers would have a regulation lunch washed down with cheap, oily gin.
- The Party members were brainwashed into believing anything the Party told them to believe. This was achieved through doublethink. They believed what the Party told them, even though they knew that the opposite of what was being told to them existed. The Party lied to them, telling them that the quality of life was increasing, even though they knew it was decreasing. Although they knew the truth, they were forced to believe it. (p62)
- You could not trust anybody for fear that they would report you to the Thought Police and you would be vaporised (p65). This held true within families as well. Children were all members of The Spies - a junior informants league.
- You could not let your thoughts wander in public places or in front of telescreens because facial features may not be perfectly under control. This was known as *facecrime* and could result in arrest. (p65)

Winston described his daily life as "slogging through dreary jobs, fighting for a place on the Tube, darning a worn-out sock, cadging a saccharine tablet, [and] saving a cigarette end."

- Day and night the "telesccreens bruised your ears with statistics that people today [were better] than the filthy people of fifty years ago."
- The Party told its members to reject the evidence of their eyes and ears.
- Party members could not do anything that suggested a liking for solitude. They were expected to be at the Community Centre or participating in some kind of "communal recreation" in their spare time. It was dangerous to have an *ownlife* which, in Newspeak, referred to individualism and eccentricity.
- Party members were forced to believe what the Party told them simply because they didn't understand "the enormity of what was demanded of them." **By lack of understanding, they remained sane.**
- The only purpose for marriage among Party members was to beget children for service of the Party. The Party tried to kill the sex instinct, to distort and dirty it for the purpose of suppressing sexual feelings among Party members.
- **Party members had no privacy.** "Privacy...was a very valuable thing."

What was the nature of life for the Proles?

I have put in bold, items which seem rather relevant today!

- **"Nobody cares what the proles say."**
- The Party does not see them as human beings but rather as animals.
- The "Party taught that the proles were **natural inferiors who must be kept in subjection, like animals, by the application of a few simple rules.**"
- They are expected to work and breed because their other activities were of no importance. As such, they were left to themselves.
- **They were only concerned with "heavy physical work, the care of home and children, petty quarrels with neighbours, films, football, beer and, above all, gambling."**
- **They were not difficult to keep under control** because the Thought Police would move among them spreading false rumours and **marking down** and eliminating people **who were possible threats or becoming dangerous.**
- **They lived with high crime, alcohol and drug use.**
- **They often went to the pubs or "drinking-shops".**
- The younger proles were fooled into buying things that they thought were pornographic and illegal, but which were not and were, in fact, produced by the Party.
- Songs were published for the benefit of the Proles by a subsection of the Music Department without any human intervention but instead by a machine called a versificator. **Songs were simple, meaningless, repetitive, catchy and sung endlessly by the proles. Music was made by a 'comupter'** rather than by a human, illustrating the absence of care from the Party toward the Proles.

They were, above all, expected to continue from generation to generation and from century to century, working, breeding and dying without any impulse to rebel.

Is Big Brother Already Here?

I hope you got the same unsettled feeling which I had when reading through that list. Although not all of these things are features of our society, many are. In particular notice how Big Brother controls the party members in 1984. The most important weapon is the destruction of the rational mind. George Orwell recognised that the rational mind is man's tool of survival. Without it, he either becomes an automaton or perishes.

Big Brother knows that he must subvert a person's individuality. This is why 'doublethink' is one of the central pillars of party doctrine. **Doublethink means thinking the opposite of what your senses and rational mind tells you is true.** (The Party told its members to reject the evidence of their eyes and ears.)

In Orwell's society, individualism is the biggest sin.

How do you destroy a man's sense of self-worth? First you must undermine his rational mind - force him to stop thinking. Tell him that force is love, freedom is slavery, God is truth, poverty is wealth. **Next you must systematically destroy all the things which give him pleasure. The joy of productive work must be corrupted into a meaningless life of tedium and drudgery in which you are never certain if your work has any meaning or value.** Indeed, the results of your work are whisked away into a black hole and you are never allowed to know what happened to your labours, or even if they were used.

There is a parallel with taxation here – **the enforced removal of your life's labours and their redistribution in ways which you neither know or necessarily approve of.**

Sex

What else gives a person pleasure?

Take sex. This is the ultimate selfish act in which two people engage for their own selfish pleasure. If you ever doubt this, imagine trying to enjoy sex out of 'duty' or purely for the pleasure of another. If you want to destroy a person's sense of self-esteem and worth, you *must attack sex*. You cannot leave such an obviously joyful and selfish experience free from attack.

In Orwell's novel, Big Brother knows he must subvert the feelings of joy and self-worth which people feel when making love, so sex is portrayed by the party as dirty and disgusting. Women are encouraged to wear the sash of the Anti Sex League. The only excuse for engaging in sex is out of duty to the party, to provide the next generation of party members. You should not enjoy sex. Indeed, the *less* you feel sexually attracted to your partner, the better and more moral you are in the eyes of the party.

Does this sound anything like any major world religion you know?

What is the intention of Big Brother? To eat away at a man's self esteem. To turn him into cog in the party's machinery, **existing not for his own pleasure, but to serve others**. You cannot force a man to bow his head as long as he can experience the selfish pleasure of sex. You now know the sick motive behind religious exhortations to 'chastity' and to describing 'lust' (= joy) as a major sin. **One can only**

wonder at the pure evil and hatred for all mankind lurking behind such exhortation.

Privacy

How else do you attack a man's mind and prevent him from thinking?

Do not allow him any time alone.

Make sure that as far as possible his every waking moment is filled with *something* otherwise he will have time to think. Thoughts are dangerous, hence the 'Thought Police'. BB realises that any thinking man can see straight through the illusion, smoke and mirrors to the small man operating the levers and dials.

In Orwell's world "Privacy...was a very valuable thing." The plan was not to watch people all the time, for such a thing is technically difficult and very manpower intensive. **You don't need to watch people all the time. It is enough that people know they *could* be watched at any time but will never know exactly when.** Orwell handles this brilliantly. Just as in our society, **there are spy cameras everywhere. Some hidden, some overt.** Are they switched on? Is anybody watching? What percentage of the cameras are in use at any one time? Are there people behind the lenses or machines? Nobody knows, and this is Big Brother's plan exactly. **Because you never know whether you are being watched, you must always behave as though you are.** This ensures BB's total control over the party members.

What are the parallels today?

Obviously we do not have two-way telescreens in everyone's home (yet!), but in Orwell's day there was no such thing as CCTV. Now we live in a society with *millions* of surveillance cameras and similar number of 'speed' cameras. **These cameras monitor and track our movements.** In BB's society, the cameras were there overtly to monitor party loyalty and catch 'thought criminals'. In our society they are there to 'catch criminals' and to monitor us 'just in case' we get up to anything.

Is there any real difference?

How long will it be before our televisions really are two-way?

Already, millions are connected to the Internet and the distinction between your home PC and your television is becoming blurred. With a compulsory National Identity Card relying on iris scan, how long before your TV has an iris scanning device in it linked back to the central government Citizen Monitoring Database? There are many reasons why this might happen. You want to download the latest movie? Put your eye to the screen, get it scanned and it will be charged to your bill. You want to pay for on-line services or goods? Ditto.

Our surveillance is not yet total and we can still snatch some privacy in some public areas; but in a few short years, perhaps even already, we will ask many of the same questions as the Party members asked in 1984. Are we being watched all the time? Which cameras are switched on? **Who, exactly, is watching?**

What next?

Language

You deny a man pleasure and self-esteem, you take up every waking minute of his life in trivial endeavours (watching soaps, violent films etc.?), you deny him privacy and make him deny reality. What else do you need to destroy if you are to prevent a man from thinking?

Language.

Most importantly, sophisticated, subtle language to **allow a person to untangle the complex lies which society passes off as truth**. So Big Brother makes an all-out attack on language, rendering it crude and incapable of expressing complex thoughts.

“By removing meaning and nuance from the vocabulary, the government hopes to eradicate seditious and antisocial thinking before it even has the chance to enter a person’s mind.”

Whilst our language is hugely sophisticated compared to Newspeak, consider the alarming trend towards “Eastenders” English and ‘text speak’ with its crudity, banal clichés and limited vocabulary. It’s just an observation.

The Law

Another frightening parallel is the law.

“There are no laws within Oceania but if certain actions are detected they could be punishable by death or by twenty-five years in a forced labour camp.”

What does this mean? There are no laws, but there are dire consequences for breaking...what?

This is a pure example of a non-objective legal system and a stroke of genius on Orwell’s part to realise that **a society with no laws, but only punishments** represents the ultimate legal evil. A weaker author would have gone for harsh, brutal laws, but Orwell realised that such a system would be preferable to the horror he selected for 1984’s legal system.

If you wanted to invoke fear in the population, certainly you should *not* have a rational set of objective rules with a corresponding set of punishments, no matter how harsh.

Why?

Because this would bring certainty and stability. The legal system would be fair and obvious. Every person would know what the law was, why it was there and what the sanction would be for breaking a law.

Thus people could go about their lawful business, secure in the knowledge that they would be safe from arbitrary government whim, but **this is no good for controlling people**.

There are two ways of inducing fear in people and controlling their behaviour through the law, apart from the obvious and crude example of draconian laws for minor infractions:

1. Like in Oceania, you have NO laws. No written laws, that is. Every man now walks in stark terror of transgressing some **arbitrary unwritten rule or regulation**. He can be arrested and imprisoned on a whim. If he protests, his accuser can say: “You should have known that what you did was wrong. You don't need it spelling out for you. You're an intelligent person. There is only one crime and that is doing **anything which the government does not like**. It is up to you to anticipate what that might be. You are here **to serve the state**, so do not protest at our treatment of you.”

2. Like in our society, you have **thousands upon thousands of laws, many of which are conflicting, arbitrary and plain wrong**. There should be little or no consistency. The average man should have no chance of understanding the law. He should require a ‘high priest’ (lawyer) to mediate between him and the state. **The laws should be written in a way to make them completely incomprehensible**. They should be densely packed into dozens of volumes of small type making them absolutely unapproachable. **No man should know exactly what is legal and exactly what is illegal**. Laws should not be based on principle, but should be based on arbitrary ‘mood of the moment’ whim. Thus it should be illegal to murder your neighbour, but legal to murder some foreigners in their own country as long as you wear the right coloured clothes (uniform). It should be illegal for you to use force to take a person's money, but legal for the government to do the same to you, and illegal for you to resist. It should be legal to take dangerous drugs like alcohol but highly illegal to smoke Pot or take Heroin. It should be legal for two consenting adults to have sex, but illegal to arrange this encounter for payment.

Finally

It has been many years since George Orwell wrote 1984. It is a great pity he chose that title. The year came and went, and now the title seems ‘old’ whereas it was, of course, highly futuristic when it was written (it's like calling a book ‘2050’ now).

Since the year 1984, the book has decreased in popularity, yet the message is truer now than ever. I think we are slipping closer into Orwell's vision of the future.

We are not given much history in the novel (history is not something Party members are encouraged to study, and in any case it has all been rewritten by the Ministry of Truth), but of course **Big Brother did not seize power overnight and telescreens were not installed in a week**.

It would have started with *some* telescreens, just to watch ‘the most dangerous enemies of Big Brother’. This would have been extended to all Party members on the grounds that: “What could any loyal party member possibly fear from such surveillance? Either you are true to Big Brother, or you are not. If you fear the screens then you have something to hide and are a threat to society.”

If I made this analogy with our society, even a few years ago, it would have seemed ludicrous. Yet this would not go amiss if heard, almost word for word, from the lips of a chief constable justifying the latest CCTV camera spying scheme. He

would say something like this: “Only criminals need fear these cameras. Law-abiding citizens have nothing to be afraid of. If you are not up to anything, you will be left alone to get on with your business.”

Orwell has a frightening message for us all. It is a ‘wake up’ call. I urge you to read again this classic work.

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