



George Orwell's Social Vision in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Gaurav Sagwal

Research Scholar, Ph.D

Singhania University, Rajasthan

Abstract

Nineteen Eighty-Four is a dystopian novel published in 1949 by English author George Orwell. The novel is set in Airstrip One, formerly Great Britain, a province of the super state Oceania, whose residents are victims of perpetual war, omnipresent government surveillance and public manipulation. Oceania's political ideology, euphemistically named English Socialism (shortened to "Ingsoc" in Newspeak, the government's invented language that will replace English or Old speak is enforced by the privileged, elite Inner Party. Via the "Thought Police", the Inner Party persecutes individualism and independent thinking, which are regarded as "Thought Crimes". The present novel can be labeled as a dystopian novel in the sense it represents the vision of future to come. Winston Smith, who commits thought crime when he thinks of revolting against the party rules, is tortured mercilessly in room no. 101 until he surrenders O'Brien, an agent of Big Brother.

Key-words: Dystopia, Thought Crime, ideology, Ingsoc, Newspeak, Inner Party.

Paper

Nineteen Eighty-Four is characterised by its dystopian nightmare. Orwell's portrayal of the many vivid, but shocking, dystopian characteristics strikes the reader with terror. As Fredric Warburg wrote in "Publisher's Report" in 1948, "*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is amongst the most terrifying books I have ever read." But as Julian Symons expresses in "Times Literary Supplement" in 1949, "the



picture of society in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has an awful plausibility which is not present in other modern projections of our future.” The first part of this paper concerns itself with explaining the base for the dystopian society, where an attempt has been made to identify three parts that constitute the dystopian society: power, totalitarianism and war. After that the focus will be on explaining the society of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by using Louis Althusser’s theory on Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses. Towards the end of the paper, there will be an emphasis on making a comparative study of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with its dystopian characteristics in comparison with Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. It also discusses the dystopian, but also utopian, qualities in Orwell’s novel.

George Orwell’s social vision in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is characterised by the despotic power regime, the Party. The Party’s most recognizable characteristic is the totalitarian paradigm personified by its dictator Big Brother. The Party further exercises totalitarianism through its quest and use of power. One definition of power by Edgar and Sedgewick states that “Most usually, power is taken to mean the exercise of force or control over individuals or particular groups by other individuals or groups.”¹² Michael Mann “... emphasises ‘four sources of social power: ideological, economic, military and political power’.” We can relate these sources of power in a network where, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we recognize these social powers through the use and abuse of Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses, where ideological power belongs to the former, and economic and military power belongs to the latter, and where political power positions itself both as ideological and repressive in nature. The power of the Party is diffused throughout the bureaucratic ministries.

The Ministry of Truth concerns itself with the ideological power, the Ministry of Plenty with the economic power, the Ministry of Peace with the military power, and the Ministry of Love with the judicial power. All ministries are concerned with sustaining the political power.



A definition of government and its exercises is necessary to understand the political power situation of Oceania. According to Michel Foucault, 'Government' refers... to certain less spontaneous exercises of power over others (to those exercises that are more calculated and considered) and, particularly, to the use and invention of technologies for the regulation of conduct... government, as Foucault describes it, aims to regulate the *conduct* of others or oneself. "The regulation of conduct" is the quintessential element of Party politics. The government "manages" the people of Oceania on the "macro" and "micro" levels. As Foucault argues, "the principles of political action and those of personal conduct can be seen as being intimately related."

The government constructs a reality where the population, in the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, can only choose to accept the absolutism of the Party or else commit "Thought Crime." The Party exercises a distorted pastoral power. In Foucault's terminology there are four stages to pastoral power. Firstly, "it is a form of power whose ultimate aim is to assure individual salvation in the next world."¹⁶ The Party incorporates individuals into the collective, and thus sets them "free" from the pain of individual failure. Timothy Melley terms this "postmodern transference, the moment in which the power of individual agents is imaginatively shifted to corporate entities."

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the collective "frees" the subject from individual restraints through an imposed postmodern transference. Secondly, "pastoral power is not merely a form of power which commands; it must also sacrifice itself for the life and salvation of the flock." The Party's engagement in the perpetual world war is their contribution to the salvation of the population. The Party is "saving" the people from the foreign and domestic threats. Thirdly,



“[pastoral power] is a form of power which does not look after just the whole community but each individual in particular, during his entire life.”

The Party looks after the community and all individuals through the omnipresent surveillance. The population is always watched everywhere. Finally, this form of power cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it.

In this sense, knowledge over others becomes power over others. But what truly constitutes the power discourse of Oceania as a pastoral power is the Party’s seeming ability to extend the repression without giving anything back. “Pastoral power... is concerned more with the welfare of its subjects than with their liberty.” This is also true of how the Party positions itself outward to its subjects. However, the distorted pastoral power of the Party is concerned with the abolishment of welfare of its subjects as well as the complete surrender of liberty. According to Foucault, “power works through discourse to shape popular attitudes... discourses can be used as a powerful tool to restrict alternative ways of thinking or speaking.” Power is, then, shaped by the leading social discourse. In this sense, “... power becomes much like the Althusserian concept of ideology; it apparently has no history and there is no confusing outside it.” Power is thus historical and part of the historical discourse – but it is important to remember that power shapes history, and history shapes power. Where once the power discourse demanded a facilitation of power through democracy, and thus amongst the people, the Party has secured a totalitarian power discourse. The Party has secured an extensive knowledge of prior discourses of power. They know how power worked in the Middle Ages, Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia. More importantly, they know why these previous power discourses failed. O’Brien explains how the Party has studied



the tyrants of the past, discovered their weaknesses, and thus improved. O'Brien explains

In the Middle Ages, there was the Inquisition. It was a failure. It set out to eradicate heresy, and ended by perpetuating it... There were the German Nazis and the Russian Communists... they knew, at any rate, that one must not make martyrs, however, The dead men had become martyrs and their degradation was forgotten... because the confessions that they had made were obviously extorted and untrue. We do not make mistakes of that kind. All the confessions that are uttered here are true. We make them true. And above all we do not allow the dead to rise up against us.

By studying the despotic regimes of the past, the Party has constructed an impenetrable defence for securing its existence. O'Brien, who is our guide to understanding power in the eyes of the Party, explains the brutal, yet simple, power discourse of the Party; they desire power for the sake of power. "We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means, it is an end... The object of power is power." The exercise of power is thus power to undermine and destroy. Power in the eyes of the Party is there to inflict an utter despotic and nightmare version of society. Power, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is only exercised against the population, while the population only exists to further accumulate the Party's power, which again is forced upon the population in the most brutal and inhumane methods possible.

There is no genuine pastoral concern in the Party's regime, only terror. "Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your choosing." The State, or the Party, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is totalitarian. According to Foucault, "the state is envisioned as a kind of political power which ignores individuals, looking only at the interests of the totality or, should I say, of a class or a group among the citizens." The Party only looks after their own



interests. The population suffers under the despotic nightmare constructed by the Party, in which the population only exists to empower the Party. Outer Party members suffer from long working hours, no leisure time, nor any room to gather their strength or thoughts. Totalitarianism is the major characteristic of Orwell's dystopian nightmare.

We recognise these characteristics in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The private sphere is dissolved; self-governing associations and autonomous people are steadily vanishing from the surface of Oceania. Freedom is a vanishing element in Oceania as an inevitable by-product of totalitarianism. In this context, Hannah Arendt argues that Totalitarian domination... aims at abolishing freedom, even at eliminating human spontaneity in general, and by no means at a restriction of freedom no matter how tyrannical.

Nineteen Eighty-Four amplifies the repression in Arendt's conception of a totalitarian regime, as the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* also aims at restricting freedom. Therefore, the Party is more tyrannical than any other regime. Restricting the freedom of Party members is essential for the Party to sustain itself. There can be no freedom amongst Party members, as freedom of action can also create freedom of thought. The power of the Party hinges on an ever increasing restriction of freedom, which is facilitated by the use of the omnipresent surveillance of the tele-screens. In this despotic society, autonomy dwindles and is discouraged. A totalitarian government uses a wide array of controlling mechanisms to control society. Arendt writes: "Totalitarianism in power uses the state administration for its long-range goal of world conquest and for the direction of the branches of the movement; it establishes the secret police as the executors and guardians of its domestic experiment in constantly transforming reality into fiction; and it finally erects concentration camps as special laboratories to carry through its experiment in total domination."

The state administration is identified through the bureaucracy of the ministries. The secret police is recognized as the Thought Police, and



concentration camps and laboratories exist in Oceania for torture and punishment for deviants, under the control of the Ministry of Love. The Party will go to extreme lengths to ensure its dominion. “Orwell’s conception of totalitarianism emphasizes the conjunction of the will to power of a ruling class and the imposition of bureaucratic control over the whole of society...” Everything in Oceania is governed by the Party, even the former “private institutions” such as the family, religion and also schools are now incorporated into the state. We can, then, safely assume that the totalitarian regime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the scaffold for the dystopian society. The Party and the bureaucracy of the ministries constitute the totalitarian and ironic feature of Oceania’s society. We find the contradictories of bureaucratic state power to be liberty, individual freedom, and political democracy, and the contradictories of party dictatorship to be justice, moral community, and social equality.

A dystopian society, which is opposite to utopian society, is characterized by a nightmare vision of society often as one dominated by a totalitarian or technological state. Two of the best known examples are Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

A dystopian society can, then, be characterized by Oceania’s distinguishing features, such as the Party, the panoptic society, Newspeak, Thought crime, the Thought Police, Double Think, and the general bleakness of society. These dystopian characteristics are facilitated, in large, by the perpetual war Oceania is engaged in.

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