

The Dystopia of Orwell's "1984"

Though gorgeously written in its own right, *1984* also benefitted from the timing of its release, at the very end of the Second World War and at the beginning of the Cold War. Though a delusional love affair existed between the West and the Soviet Union in 1943, disillusionment and reality set in in the few years following the surrenders of Germany and Japan. In 1956, Kirk assessed the power of the novel well.

George Orwell, incidentally, has been incalculably influential, since his death, in turning the minds of Englishmen against collectivistic utopias—more influential by far than ever he was when he lived. The effect of 1984 upon public opinion goes far to refute the argument that ideas merely reflect the great social and material currents of an age.¹

Kirk saw the novel as ushering in a sea change in thought, rendering the arguments of planners suspect at best and horrendous as worst. From a personal standpoint, Kirk realized that his own masterpiece, *The Conservative Mind*, would never have succeeded without *1984* paving the way for it. Whatever the difference in political outlook, Orwell paved the way for an acceptance—or least an interest—in Kirk's ideas. In a November 1984 interview, the Michiganian noted the necessity of *1984* coming before *The Conservative Mind*, as it contributed to "a period of sober reflection," one that caused the West to examine its past relations with the Soviets, considering those relations by the early 1950s as nothing short of betrayal and a time for repentance for having danced with the devil.²

While Orwell layered the novel with meaning, all of which should be explored in depth, two themes must be analyzed

explicitly for our purposes: the corruption and simplification of language; and the loss of time. Famously, Orwell created a form of English, post-ideological and pared down so much that it discouraged or outright abolished freedom of thought, creativity, and imagination. The author called it "Newspeak." Importantly, this carries profound significance in at least two ways. First, the term itself means a language well beyond—or below—modern English, which has evolved almost without any direction or command over centuries and centuries. Perhaps more than any other institution, language has evolved naturally and without a command structure. It has grown spontaneously as the profound political philosopher, Friedrich August von Hayek observed, discovered rather than made. With Newspeak, however, the language evolution ends, and its devolution, limited by the seemingly endless bitterness of the tyrannical society, begins. Its devolutionary trajectory, importantly, will be even sharper than its evolutionary ascension. A longish conversation between the protagonist, Winston Smith (really an anti-hero), and his closest friend (if "friend" can even be used here), Syme, a philologist and party intellectual, filled with a "vapid eagerness," reveals much. Meeting in the cafeteria, Syme enthusiastically explains the eleventh edition of the Newspeak dictionary to Smith.

'It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well. It isn't only the synonyms; there are also the antonyms. After all, what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word? A word contains its opposite in itself. Take "good", for instance. If you have a word like "good", what need is there for a word like "bad"? "Ungood" will do just as well— better, because it's an exact opposite, which the other is not. Or again, if you want a stronger version of "good", what sense is there in having a whole string of vague useless words like "excellent" and "splendid" and all the rest of them? "Plusgood" covers the meaning; or

*“doubleplusgood” if you want something stronger still. Of course we use those forms already, but in the final version of Newspeak there’ll be nothing else. In the end the whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered by only six words— in reality, only one word. Don’t you see the beauty of that, Winston?*³

No reason exists, he continues, for two or three words to linger when one will do.

Of course, one will not do, as English has a massive vocabulary for a reason. English speakers have tended to appreciate specific words for their unique meanings. Unlike German, which combines words to form new works, English has incorporated new words or coined them. While it is perfectly fine in the English language to have several words that might, perhaps, overlap anywhere from fifty to ninety percent in meaning, it has been regarded best to pick the exact term.

Second, though, Newspeak serves the function of propaganda. Orwell is not alone in his worries that the entire western world was sliding away from art and complexity toward simplicity and propaganda in the middle decades of the twentieth century. In the late 1930s, the American public intellectual Walter Lippman feared that nearly all of the western world had politicized and had taken language and art into the sewers of power and power alone. The Anglo-Welsh man of letters, Christopher Dawson, worried in 1946 that politics had subsumed all under its devouring maw. In his deeply moving short story, *Leaf by Niggle*, Tolkien beautifully juxtaposed the nature of art and the subhuman nature of propaganda. While art leavens the dignity of the human person, propaganda, by appealing to the lowest aspects of the human person, seeks conformity and domination.

Choice of vocabulary, Syme correctly realizes in *1984*, leads one to independent thought. “In your heart,” he tells Orwell

over some stale bread, “you’d prefer to stick to Oldspeak, with all its vagueness and shades of meaning. You don’t grasp the beauty of the destruction of words.”⁴ Narrow the vocabulary and you, by necessity, narrow thought. Further, by introducing conflicting ideas such as “crimestop, blackwhite, and doublethink,” a person becomes “unwilling and unable to think too deeply on any subject whatever.”⁵

Fully embracing and utilizing the limitations promoted by Newspeak, Big Brother infamously proclaims: War is Peace; Freedom is Slavery; and Ignorance is Strength. More malleable than previously assumed, the human beings of *1984* have accepted these lies as unquestioned truths, essential to the stability and order of the very essence of society. To question them would mean certain discomfort and almost certain death. As the one character most representative of Big Brother states during his interrogation of Smith: “We are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power, pure power.” After all, he continues, the “object of power is power.” And, further, God, if he exists, is power. “We are the priests of power.”⁶ Real power resides not primarily in the ability to control nature, but to control men.⁷

The other truly fascinating feature about *1984* is Orwell’s use of time and exploration of its subjective nature in a dystopia. As already noted, Big Brother and the party, Ingsoc, must constantly erase the past and even their erasure of the past. This never ends, making it a vital part of state control of society. That Orwell named the novel *1984* is a fascinating aspect of the story, as the protagonist, Smith, really has no idea what year it is. Ingsoc has decreed it the year 1984, and, therefore, it is. But, according to our calendar, it might be 1983 or 1985 or some other year. Smith’s first act of defiance in the actual narrative is his recording of the date in a black-market notebook: “April 4th, 1984.”⁸ With this act,

he has stamped his personality on paper, but he as, vitally, anchored himself, thus giving himself a sense of order and, ultimately, a place within the transcendent realm of justice. This act, after all, means more to him and his personality than to anything else. If he's writing for future generations, he acknowledges, the future will either be the same as the present, oppressive, or it will be free. If the former, he will be ignored. If the latter, "meaningless."⁹

The meaning of time plagues Smith throughout the novel. When he enters an old curio shop, he ventures upstairs and finds "an old-fashioned glass clock with a twelve-hour face."¹⁰ After encountering it, a children's rhyme haunts Smith.

Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clement's

*You owe me three farthings, say the bells of St. Martin's*¹¹

Though the rhyme reminds Smith of a better past, he had come to believe he, like all others in the present, are already dead, simply walking corpses. At one point, he attempts to proffer some form of historical consciousness to his lover, Julia. "History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right."¹² Her response startles and frustrates Smith, as he seeks some purpose even in his walking death. "One knew that it was all rubbish, so why let oneself be worried by it?"¹³ Through their conversations, Smith comes to realize that "the object was not to stay alive but to stay human."¹⁴

Yet, Big Brother catches Smith and Julia, imprisoning and torturing them. Throughout the entire procedure, the detainees refuse to let the prisoners know the hour or the day. Without windows and with irregular feedings, the captives lose all sense of time, not even knowing if it is night or day. Everything has become disordered. During the torture sessions,

Smith is force to repeat the central tenet of the Party: “Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.”¹⁵ The slogan itself is the undoing of the nursery rhyme, “Oranges and Lemons.” Time has no independent liturgy, no seasons, no inevitabilities—except as a tool of power. When Smith resists, holding onto the idea that time does matter and that a future might be better, his torturer states: “If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.”¹⁶

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¹ Kirk, “The Path to Utopia,” *Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*, 181-182.

² Interview with Russell Kirk, November 11, 1984, quoted in Rodden, *Every Intellectual’s Big Brother*, 78.

³ Orwell, 1984, 52-53.

⁴ Orwell, 1984, 53.

⁵ Orwell, 1984, 217.

⁶ Orwell, 1984, 272-273.

⁷ Orwell, 1984, 275.

⁸ Orwell, 1984, 7.

⁹ Orwell, 1984, 7.

¹⁰ Orwell, 1984, 99.

¹¹ Orwell, 1984, 100-101.

¹² Orwell, 1984, 158.

¹³ Orwell, 1984, 159.

¹⁴ Orwell, 1984, 170.

¹⁵ Orwell, 1984, 255.

¹⁶ Orwell, 1984, 277.

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