

Spectres of Orwell, or, The Impossible Demand of the Subject

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So what if one is accused of being “anti-democratic,” totalitarian ...

– Slavoj Žižek.¹

I.

In *Brave New World Revisited*, published in 1958, Aldous Huxley claimed that the odds were more in favour of the future resembling the brave new world than Orwell's Oceania. History, it seems, is more than ever ratifying his claim (anti-depressants, euthanasia, the cult of youth and the body beautiful, genetic engineering, the culture industry, the hegemony of sex and pleasure, and so forth). In many areas, Orwell has proven somewhat of a false prophet, the most obvious exception perhaps being that of continuous warfare, legitimated in his novel, in much the same way as it is in the current War on Terror, by the slogan “War is Peace.” It still remains, however, that Orwell's vision, and not Huxley's has found a lasting place in ordinary conversation. An analogous situation would perhaps be the difference between Freud and Jung: the new age movement, nature-myths, neo-paganism and deep ecology are surely closer to Jung's writings, and yet not a single of Jung's terms has entered ordinary conversation the way Freud's have (including the Oedipus Complex, “repression,”

“the unconscious” and “neurotic”).

For Hegel, a general conception of the real issue begins with ordinary conversation, by “getting acquainted with general principles and points of view.”² It is then the task of speculative thought to move beyond these general conceptions, to negate and to preserve them. Once the speculative dialectic has penetrated common-sense notions, this new knowledge is then supposed to be returned to its place in ordinary conversation. Just as it is important to resist the reduction of psychoanalysis to a general conception of it, Freud as “the mere efficiency expert of the inner life,”³ it is also important to move beyond the general conception of Orwell’s novel as an allegory for Stalinism. To put this in more hermeneutic terms, while one must not read Freud solely in the context of the Viennese middle classes, a similar reduction of Orwell’s work to its own twofold historical context – English capitalism as much as Soviet Communism, but also the rise of Fascism in Germany, Italy and Franco’s Spain – must also be avoided if his work is to retain any importance as a principle by which to work up a general conception of our own time – that is, in other words, to treat Orwell’s novel precisely as futuristic. This is not to deny the novel’s historical relationship to Stalinism, but merely to claim that this relationship tends to obscure rather than illuminate the real issue. Interpretation must always move beyond this narrow historical context, which, as Fredric Jameson pointed out in *The Political Unconscious*, yields not interpretation as such, but at best only its preconditions.⁴ Which Orwell is it that speaks to us today, for example, if the “spectre of communism” no longer haunts the globe? This paper will argue for the necessity of a continuing engagement with the spectres of Orwell as a critique not only of the manifest horrors of totalitarianism, but also of the latent horrors of social democracy, to borrow Louis Althusser’s suggestive phrase.

More recently, both Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben have argued for the tendentiousness of the distinction between totalitarianism and liberal democracy. For Žižek, even to accept the word totalitarianism is to locate oneself firmly within the liberal-democratic horizon. Agamben, on the other hand, claims that we can accept the distinction so long as it does not imply anything like a radical break:

The contiguity between mass democracy and totalitarian states does not have the form of a sudden transformation; the river of biopolitics runs its course in a hidden but continuous fashion. It is almost as if, starting from a certain point, every decisive political event were double sided.⁵

Hence the ambiguity of the collapse of the Party that occurs at the end of

Nineteen Eighty-Four, an ambiguity concealed, rather than revealed, by the “political unconscious” (to use Jameson’s term) of the novel itself

With these considerations in mind, the message of Orwell’s novel might be that there will come a time when – like the good animals in the final scene of *Animal Farm* who look from man to pig and from pig to man – we look from totalitarianism to democracy and back again, “but already it will be impossible to say which is which.” The concentration camp, as Agamben has remarked, “will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity, whose metamorphoses and disguises we will have to learn to recognize.”⁶ Žižek, however, is more critical of this position, and suggests that theories of contiguity between fascist states and liberal democracy have become typical and even fashionable in so-called radical academia since The Frankfurt School. Žižek’s position is more deconstructive (despite his invective against the deconstructionist doxa of “structural undecidability”): the problem is how to avoid the deadlock of the binary logic totalitarianism/liberal democracy without positing any continuity between them. The danger of such theories of continuity is not that they tend to conflate liberal democracy with totalitarianism, but that this conflation leads to a rejection of totalitarianism as a solution to the problems of liberal democracy. On the other hand, theories of radical difference, in which such continuities are rejected outright as “totalitarian,” recast totalitarianism as an “ideological stopgap” to thinking outside of the liberal democratic hegemony. “The first thing to do,” Žižek writes, “is fearlessly violate these liberal taboos: So *what* if one is accused of being ‘anti-democratic’, ‘totalitarian’.”⁷

II.

In his article “Framing Catastrophe,” Andrew Milner points out the importance of understanding *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a frame narrative. The novel does not end at “The End,” but continues for a further fourteen pages in the form of an appendix. This appendix tells us that the reign of the Party and of Big Brother has come to an end. It does this not explicitly, but through the use of formal devices: on the one hand, the past tense, and on the other, plain English instead of Newspeak. The appendix opens with the sentence: “Newspeak was the official language of Oceania.” This is the Utopian moment of the novel, and yet of this Utopia itself, only two things can be said with certainty: that language and individuality have survived (the appendix does actually tell us something else, that the Party, whose reign was to be “forever,” collapsed less than seventy years after the first entry in Winston’s diary, sometime before 2050). One can take this anyway

one likes: there is nothing in the appendix to suggest that life in the new world is any better or worse than life in the old. Even life under the old regime cannot be effectively evaluated. Winston makes several attempts to reconstruct life before the catastrophe in order that history validate the mute protest he feels in his bones. They all end in predictable failure: history is under the complete control of the Party. The junk shop, where Winston acquires his diary and which is later revealed as a front for the Thought Police, contains a harsh lesson: history too can be a trap. This is the lesson not only of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," but also of Žižek's critique of so-called Left or Radical academia's imperative to constantly historicise:

One of these unwritten rules concerns the unquestioned ubiquity of the need to contextualize or situate one's position: the easiest way to score points automatically in a debate is to claim that the opponent's position is not properly situated in a historical context.⁸

One of the first prohibitions imposed by Left academia is precisely against thinking outside the historical context. This privileging of the particular over the universal, rather than escaping "ideological" generalisations, "occludes the social reality of the reign of 'real abstraction'."⁹ History, in the narrow sense of the "context" or "situation," is not the remedy for the abstracting power of Capital, but a symptom of it. The more criticism moves away from particulars toward the general, the closer it comes to the concrete.

It would be a feature, then, of our own political unconscious if we were to read this appendix as the triumph over disaster, rather than another instance of disaster triumphant. The dialectic of ideology and Utopia, through which the political unconscious is revealed, means that ideology is elevated to Utopia, while Utopia is degraded to the level of ideology. By framing catastrophe – which, as Milner rightly suggests, is intended to "blunt the force of dystopian inevitability"¹⁰ in Orwell's novel – dystopia in fact becomes inevitable. The "place where there is no darkness," which Winston mistakes for the Golden Country of the future, ends up being the torture chamber in the ministry of love, the image of the fully enlightened world. For Jameson, framing functions as a particular form of ideological closure. It works both formally and intellectually, as a feature both of the text and of interpretation, and strategically contains or limits any radical elements. The text is not a unified body, but a libidinal apparatus, a "quasi-material" object that is the site of fantasy investments of all kinds.¹¹

Complicity with the dominant reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* points to complicity with a new form of domination. Empathy with Winston, the novel's anti-hero, indicates at best empathy with a reactionary socialism,

“half echo of the past, half menace of the future,” as Marx and Engels put it, “but always ludicrous in its incapacity to understand the march of modern history.”¹² To capitalism with the face of Big Brother is opposed capitalism with a human face. Winston’s own unreflective critique of the Party leaves him vulnerable to its propaganda. He thus realises the Party’s slogan he otherwise abjures: “Ignorance is Strength.” When Julia suggests the government launched the rocket bombs that were raining down over London against its own people (and such theories were not uncommon in the wake of September 11), Winston concedes that the idea “had literally never occurred to him.”¹³ Likewise, his unflinching belief in the rumours of an underground resistance movement, the Brotherhood, later revealed to have been circulated by the Party itself, mark him out as the perfectly interpellated subject: even resistance is fully administered. Julia, by contrast, appears as the voice of reason: “One knew that it was all rubbish, so why let it oneself be worried by it?”¹⁴ The accusation levelled at her by Winston, that she is interested in politics only insofar as it affects her personally, becomes a moot point in an age when politics has been abolished. She is transformed into the ideal of the petty bourgeois individualist first recognised by Marx, who, out of self-interest, is ready to throw their lot in with any cause. Driven by the same self-interest but expressed in social terms as injustice, Winston would permit any injustice as the price of his individuality. For truth in the media, he would sacrifice housing and employment for all; for the Procrustean aggressivity of fashion he would denounce the grey uniform of the Party. His passionate claim that he is the last relic of humanity shows him up to be the Beautiful Soul that he is: O’Brien responds by merely playing a recording of the atrocities Winston claimed he was willing to commit as a member of the resistance (throwing acid in a child’s face and so forth).

If his reactionary arguments are easy to refute, so too are his abortive attempts to make sense of the reasoning behind domination when the profit motive is obscured: “I understand HOW,” he writes in his diary. “I do not understand WHY.”¹⁵ Even the exemplary luxury of O’Brien’s apartment, when compared not only with his own but with the slum housing of the proles, gives him no indication. O’Brien himself only deepens the deception in the Ministry of Love when he transforms power into an end in itself: “Now I will tell you the answer to my question,” O’Brien says to Winston in one of the final scenes in the Ministry of Love. “It is this. The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power.”¹⁶ At the same time, and paradoxically, O’Brien’s remark holds the key to the collapse of the regime: power has become cynical – that is, intolerable.

In volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault writes: “power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its mechanisms.”¹⁷ It is possible to summarise Foucault’s position in this way: we accept power only because we see it as a mere limit placed on our desire, leaving always a measure of freedom. What is problematic about this model of power, however, is that it remains in the realm of political philosophy, or in Marxist terms, at the level of the superstructure or ideology. Foucault’s biopolitics, or power nexus, and Agamben’s camp as model, like Winston’s refrain, understand how, but not necessarily why. In this respect, Adorno can perhaps stand as their dialectical completion: the logic of the camp today cannot be separated from the total logic of capital, from the world whose law is universal individual profit: “There is no getting out of this,” Adorno writes, “any more than out of the electrified barbed wire around the camps.”¹⁸

III.

How then, to read the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* if not as the end of totalitarianism? There are a few ways. First, it is possible to see Orwell’s novel simply as modernist allegory for the situation of the artist in society, and particularly of Orwell’s own struggles as a writer, which he discusses at some length in *Why I Write*. Winston himself is a budding writer; he is modernist, a surrealist even, and practices a kind of “automatic” or “stream of consciousness” writing. This also points to Orwell’s satirical approach to the avant-garde (one of his reasons for writing was to try and change the world). Secondly, it is possible, in postmodernity, to read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a nostalgia novel, recalling the good old days when there was something tangible to rebel against, and where actions still had some kind of political meaning (most obviously, promiscuity – “sex crime” as it is known in the novel). This nostalgia is something the film version emphasises, particularly with its overtly art-deco aesthetic, which it combines with a modern pop soundtrack. Another possible reading is the psychoanalytic, in which O’Brien figures as the paradigm of the Lacanian analyst who helps Winston to understand an important truth: that sometimes two plus two *does* equal five.

I would argue, however, for a political reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in the broadest sense Jameson has given to this term.¹⁹ In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson puts the question this way: “Can we separate anti-Utopianism in Orwell from anti-communism? Or, in other words, is his work a testimony to the inextricable ways in which these two phenomena have become conflated?”²⁰ I would like to conclude by suggesting a provisional

answer to this question: these two aspects, anti-communism and anti-Utopianism can be separated, but only as a hermeneutic act; only, that is, by moving beyond contingent events to address the more baleful vision of class allegory.²¹ What needs to be applied to the ending of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the same three questions Marx addressed to Bruno Bauer in "On the Jewish Question":²² Ask not who should be liberated, nor who should do the liberating? Ask rather, liberated to what? What kind of liberation are we talking about? What is in question is not the end of the novel, or the beginning of the appendix, but the space in between the two, a literal void into which are projected our deepest fantasies of what constitutes the good life.

After all, is Orwell's Oceania such a bad place to live? Everyone gets a flat, a job, a pair of overalls; they are provided with food, gin, cigarettes, and chocolate²³ – and all that is asked of them in return is a little orthodoxy. Not too much orthodoxy, since the fanatic as much as the dissident is the target of the Party purges and ultimately suffers the same terrible fate. What is required is something we already have in abundance: self-interest. It is only necessary, as Marx has pointed out, that this self-interest becomes enlightened: "If enlightened self-interest is the principle of all morality, it is necessary for the private interest of each individual to coincide with the general interest of humanity."²⁴ For Marx – and this is a paradox not easily understood – to realise one's individuality, one first has to realise the social conditions for its emergence. The victory over himself, which Winston finally wins at the end of the *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is the absolute demand such a meagre future would place on each and every one of us.

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NOTES

- ¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (London and New York: Verso, 2001) 3.
- ² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans A V Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 6.
- ³ Theodor W Adorno, *Prisms*, trans Samuel and Shierry Weber, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981) 74.
- ⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1983) 4.
- ⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 93.

- ⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 102.
- ⁷ Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* 3.
- ⁸ Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* 1.
- ⁹ Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* 2.
- ¹⁰ Andrew Milner, "Framing Catastrophe: The Problem of Ending in Dystopian Fiction," in *Imagining the Future: Utopia and Dystopia*, eds Andrew Milner, Matthew Ryan and Robert Savage, *Arena Journal New Series* 25/26 (2006) 102.
- ¹¹ Fredric Jameson, "The Ideology of the Text," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Volume One* (London: Routledge, 1988) 49.
- ¹² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed Lewis Feuer (London: Fontana, 1969) 58.
- ¹³ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Fairfield: 1st World Publishing) 192.
- ¹⁴ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 196.
- ¹⁵ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 326.
- ¹⁶ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 329.
- ¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, trans Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1984) 84.
- ¹⁸ Theodor W Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans E B Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973) 321.
- ¹⁹ See particularly "On Interpretation," chapter one of *The Political Unconscious*.
- ²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2005) 84.
- ²¹ This movement is itself central to Jameson's own hermeneutic model in *The Political Unconscious*, where it is staged as a movement between the expanding horizons or concentric circles of political history, class, and the mode of production.
- ²² Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question" [1844], *Marxists Internet Archive*, date of access: 3 April 2009, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question>>.
- ²³ Even the proles are guaranteed these things, no matter how substandard, which is a great improvement on the current situation.
- ²⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family*, trans R Dixon (Foreign Languages Publishing House: Moscow, 1956) 29.