

Our Future

[This review of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four* (Harcourt, 1949) appeared in *Analysis*, September 1949, p. 4]

In recent years, many writers have given us their vision of the coming collectivist future. At the turn of the century, neither Edward Bellamy nor H. G. Wells suspected that the collectivist societies of their dreams were so close at hand. As collectivism sprouted following World War I, many keen observers felt that there was a big difference between the idyllic Edens pictured by Bellamy and Wells and the actual conditions of the various "waves of the future."

Notable among these revised forecasts of the world of the future were Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Ayn Rand's *Anthem*. Both of their future worlds, evil as they were, had saving graces. Huxley's future was spiritually dead, but at least the masses were happy; Ayn Rand's dictators were timid, stupid men who permitted a renascent individualist to escape from the strangling collectivist world and begin life anew.

George Orwell's collectivist Utopia has plugged all the loopholes. There is no hope at all for the individual or for humanity, and so the effect on the reader is devastating. Orwell's future is run by a Party whose job is the total exercise of Power, and it goes about its job with diabolic efficiency and ingenuity. The Party represents itself as the embodiment of the principles of Ingsoc, or English Socialism. These principles turn out to be: blind, unquestioning obedience to the Party, and equally blind hatred of any person or group the Party proclaims as its enemy. These emotions are the only ones permitted to anybody; all others, such as personal and family love, are systematically stamped out.

All ideas are of course treasonable and subversive?the only persons permitted to live are those who unthinkingly parrot the Party Line. Any man with a bent for independent thought is subtly encouraged in his heresy by the Thought Police. Then, when he has come to realize the nature of the regime and hates it thoroughly, the Ministry of Love takes over and, via the most horrible forms of torture, burns out of him any spark of human dignity. Finally, the heretic goes to his slaughter convinced of the goodness of his persecutors. He dies loving the Party and its mythical leader, Big Brother. Not even martyrdom is permitted in the inferno of the future.

To accomplish its purpose of destroying the human mind and heart, the Party uses: constant propaganda, inducing all to love Big Brother and hate his enemies; the destruction of truth by continually altering historical records to conform to the ever-changing Party Line?thus history is destroyed and all truth flows from the Party; the destruction of language to make it impossible to think independent thoughts?by confusing the meaning of words and by introducing a new gibberish-language; and the destruction of logic by a process known as doublethink defined as the capacity to hold in one's mind two contradictory beliefs at the same time.

One significant method that the Party uses to remain in power is to contrive to keep its country always

at war with some other country. The other countries are also run by similar parties, though each have different names. By the process of doublethink every loyal Party member believes that his part will ultimately conquer the world, yet also recognizes that all the countries tacitly engage in a war that never becomes too "hot." Thus, each Party has an excuse to starve and terrorize its subjects in the name of military necessity, while its ruler remains secure from any wartime disaster.

"I understand *how*," said Winston Smith, the pathetic heretic of *Nineteen Eight-Four*, "but I don't understand *why*." Why does the Party do all this? One of its leaders explains:

"The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. We are different from all the oligarchies of the past in that we know what we are doing. All the others were cowards and hypocrites. They never had the courage to recognize their motives. 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 persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. How does one man assert his power over another? By making him suffer. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own? 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 own choosing. In our world, there will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph, and self-abasement?a world of fear and treachery and torment. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face?forever."

Orwell's collectivist world of the future is doubtless a nightmare?but is it merely a dream?