

1. The shallow reading: authoritarian society

Many authors have been more quoted in the course of world history than George Orwell: the authors behind the major religious scriptures, Marx, Mao Zedong to mention some. But a visitor from Mars observing us terrestrials today would conclude that Orwell is the key <sup>world</sup> author and 1984 the year of reckoning in world history, the year we all took stock to see where we stand relative to Orwell's vision. The world has used Orwell inspite of his deeply unpleasant message the same way we use an income tax return: to find out whether we are in the black or in the red, to take stock. Black and red, those are the colors of authoritarian/totalitarian capitalism and socialism. So, where are we on the way to totalitarianism? Was Orwell right? Did he get the year right? Or - are these just the weird speculations of an ailing <sup>basically anarchist</sup> author, disappointed with life in general and Communism and women in particular?

Certainly not. Orwell was a genius, with an almost incredible intuition for this latter half of the twentieth century. But to see this Orwell has to be read with some care to understand his theory of advanced totalitarian society, for his is an advanced theory of totalitarian society, not a running commentary on latter-day Stalinism, inspired by the apocalyptic events accompanying the downfall of Hitlerism. Orwell saw deeper.

Of course, there are those, many, who content themselves with a reading of Orwell at the superficial level, the level we ~~understand~~. The level of Big Brother watches you, with television screens piercing the shields of privacy and enormous amounts of information on the members of this nightmarish society, what they do, say and seem to think. Computers in the background, or on the horizon! Spies, informants everywhere - everybody spying and reporting on everybody. And as the ultimate punishment: Room 101 down there in "minilove", in the Ministry of Love where they can produce custom-tailored torture, delivering the worst pain any deviant can imagine.

"Do it to Julia, not to me!" cries Winston, the anti-hero in a "society" where nobody any longer can become a hero, literally faced with starving, blood-thirsty rats, aiming at his eyes, his tongue. So he betrays his secret love as she betrays him and Winston ends up where the system wants him. He learns to love Big Brother.

All of this we know. Our century has witnessed both Hitler and Stalin in the roles of Big Brother, police surveillance, spies and informers, Nazi KZs and Gulag. An incredible, insane amount of professionalized human sadism. We wrap it up in a word, "torture"; this systematic mutilation of body, mind and spirit of those suspected of subversion of social systems that serve the interests of only some very few at the top. Orwell got that right. He even understood a particular feature of the 1980s: evaporation, people who simply disappear because they were, are or could be dangerous to the system, leaving no trace behind till the regime changes and tombs are found and bodies are exhumed. Orwell predicted the Americas, bestiality in the South, often in the interest of the North.

And yet we feel: this is not us, not here, not now. The action of the book takes place in a part of the world called Oceania, possibly Western Europe with North America; more particularly in Airstrip 1 - Orwell's incredibly prescient name for England - the unsinkable hangarship of airbases, in 1984 also Cruise missiles - and most particularly in London. London, lovely London, the capital of democracy, parliament, the theatre world, serious, decadent, frivolous, greedy - the London of Samuel Johnson and Dickens, the London of Marx, of the Beatles, with Manhattan ambitions - whatever one likes. But not Orwell. Scotland Yard and FBI, MI and CIA not to mention the National Security Agency know much. But there is still much privacy around, probably more than in most village societies; and there is also more action, speech and thought around, again more than in most villages.

So, Orwell was wrong, then? Not at all, this is Orwell read superficially. His understanding of totalitarian society lies at a much deeper level, for Orwell is not content with a description

of terror and torture and repression. Orwell is not banale. However frightening his description of terror from above we nevertheless feel that this power has its limits. Big Brother has television screens like any department store today. So did the Shah of Iran. He had something like 27 TV cameras placed at key points in Tehran to watch the mood of the people - the problem of all autarchs. But the people knew where the cameras were and at one point in the struggle burnt photos of the shah in front of most of them. That sight, well televised on most of his consoles, must have been less than edifying, and serves to illustrate how an instrument of power can be turned the other way. In a sense the movie WarGames is built over the same theme: a little boy, with the help of his girl friend, breaks into the war computer and unmasks the deadly game of adult their Mannerspiele.  
males, <sup>A</sup> People are resourceful, power is not only <sup>a</sup> one way street. Somehow we trust that this will repeat itself in the future, that sooner or later sanity will prevail, people power will overturn authoritarian power, whatever the mask worn by the authority. Repression can be fought, history is reversible, normal society can be restored.

2. The deeper reading: authoritarian society made irreversible

And this is precisely where the deeper reading of Orwell's book hits us, in the deeper levels of our political consciousness because we know his message to be true. And his message is this: There are ways of making authoritarian society irreversible, by making it truly totalitarian. No way back! And this is no <sup>superficial</sup> <sup>A</sup> question of whether all or parts of the economy are run by market or planning forces, or both. Orwell's analysis of how irreversibility can be built into the system is truly chilling, making Hitler and Stalin look like amateurs.

More precisely, he points to four methods, and the first of them has, strangely enough, been missed by most commentators on Orwell. What is the structure of Orwell's society?

It is a three tier society. At the bottom are the proles, the proletariat, by far the majority. They lead their

little lives, controlled by scarcity and rationing, and by police methods, of course. They are lorded over by the second layer, the Party, and are to the Party much like the cattle to the farmer, an anonymous mass, herded, totally dependent on the master for food and shelter, serving the master by yielding work or food and otherwise pretty much left to their own devices. "The proles are the only hope!" according to Winston, they are still human. Maybe. But they are so hopelessly dependent, so powerless!

The Party members are not. They are the elite, but they are, in turn, totally controlled by the Inner Party, hated and feared, nobody knows who they are, presumably Big Brother is at their very center. The Party is like a monastic order: to symbolize their total devotion to the system they renounce on sex, even denounce it. Which, also like monastic orders, does not mean its total elimination. Julia enjoys it, more than Winston, but only with Party members, not with proles - they are too vulgar, at most for instant satisfaction - and never, never with the Inner Party. This is Orwell's society: the Party controlling the proles mainly by making them totally dependent for their basic needs, <sup>and</sup> the Inner Party controlling the Party not only through dependency, but through the most brutal force and fear of it, and through spiritual repression.

And here Method No. 1 is to deprive the Party, and implicitly the whole society, of History. History is recreated all the time; Winston has his little piece of that job. History is rewritten so that the Present becomes its logical implication; the Future is seen as a progressive continuation of the Present. What Orwell says is that control over the Past is even more important than control over the Present. For the Past is that endless source of insight in alternatives, it was once like that, hence at least some of it might once more be - - And History is that <sup>raw</sup> material out of which identity is forged, this is the reason why loss of memory is so threatening to the individual. And this is the reason why it is a major task of African peoples, American indians, women everywhere

and others to find their History, challenging history as written by white colonizer and by men to legitimize their supremacy. "Tell me who you were and I shall tell you who you are" is not the whole truth but a good part of the truth.

The minitruth, Ministry of Truth, meaning of disinformation, destroys and changes and creates the **sources** on which historians work. Nowhere, nowhere is what we might call the true sources available, they - and their successors, first, second and so on generation of forgeries - have disappeared in the Memory Hole. In a sense worse than being without a history: these people live in a forged history, and even worse, they do not know it. One of the most touching scenes in the book is Winston's expedition to the proles, not for sex but in search of history, finding that they perceive it rather dimly, there are glimpses through the mist, but not enough to form anything like a clear image. And what is more: soon the last carriers of some real memory will be dead - -

But, does this not also apply to us? Are we not creating and recreating history all the time, sometimes as the triumph of Western civilization, then as a jumpy walk through the Stufengang, the stages of Karl Marx (primitive communism-slavery-feudalism-capitalism-socialism-communism), then as stages of economic growth with take-off and mass consumption (and presumably no crash landing). True. But we try to preserve the sources - a major implication of Orwell should be increased funding of libraries, archives, museums! Ready for use by the next effort to rewrite history.

Method No. 2 goes even deeper: manipulation of the language itself, the creation of Newspeak. If you have time for nothing else, read at least the appendix to Orwell's book, his masterly essay on totalitarian linguistics. To the extent that language is the mother of thought control of the language is the control of the thought. Eliminate words like justice, morality, democracy and

certain thoughts can only be thought with great difficulty. I would like to use an example from own experience: the difference between inequality [much difference between rich and poor] and inequity [that the rich are rich because the poor are poor, and vice versa; in other words that there is exploitation]. In England one discusses with ease how inequity generates inequality, how the welfare state may produce more equality [or less inequality] but on top of enormous inequity. For instance, workers may take out only, say, one tenth of the <sup>produce</sup> value they produce as salary and have little or no say over the rest. About this one can have many views and proposals. But the problem in the United States is that the problem is often not even understood because "exploitation" means something like "making use of" - for instance oil deposits - and "equity" is a banking term. Similarly, Indo-European languages are good for precise, linear, analytical thinking and Chinese/Japanese much better for double meanings, doubts, the fleeting and flowing - a reason why many Japanese put in a perhaps/vielleicht/peut-être when they talk European languages. Change the language and you change not only what can be thought but also how one thinks about everything.

Method No. 3 adds to this the control of the deeper layers of the human being, the personality. Again the implication is terrible. We have assumed that even under totalitarian conditions the personality remains untouched if the person only keeps his/her thoughts as a personal secret, a migration into the inside, with secret exchanges with others when nobody watches. The higher the pressure from the outside the richer inner life, the more brutal macro society, the more comforting, solidary, mutual aid oriented the micro society of family and friends. Nazi occupation produced enormous solidarity and great friendships and much inner richness, like in a prisoner who has only one source of mobility left, that of his own imagination and conjures up the most vivid images, more colorful the greyer the prison cell.

Orwell shows how this can all be destroyed. All those small defensive units, the hidden beta society of any social structure, are brutally pierced by spies. Friendships, meaning solidarity also in bad weather, no longer exist. Humour disappears together with warmth. Political jokes ~~is~~ becomes ~~is~~ impossible, self-protection through irony is no longer there when there is nobody to share it with. The fine tissues of society are cut, the rest is idiotic jobs and schools in hatred of those who are different.

So, here is the picture: robots with some anatomical human traits, desperately frightened, deprived of their own history, deprived of their own language, deprived of personality - meaning that rich network of images and emotions, stretching out to other people and to things, touching the personalities of others, sometimes in a lasting way called friendship, sometimes as a lightning called love - sometimes both. What is left? 1984.

But this is 1984, and we have already survived a couple of months! And still we have a fair amount of history, language and personality around, enough to give would-be totalitarians considerable head-aches! True, but let us nonetheless ask the questions that bother us, not so much whether or where this exists today, but how it might come into being? What would be the scenario for the society Orwell depicts - and are there any signs that we are on the way?

Of course there are signs of advanced totalitarianism around. The world itself is a three tier society of the type mentioned: vast masses of desperately poor and dependent people, a middle layer of governments busy making their countries strong and modern, developing elites and countries rather than people, and behind it all a hidden "inner party" of experts, technocrats and partocrats, on top of ruling technocracy and ruling party respectively, pushing administrators and politicians in front. But it is all vast and relatively amorphous, not nearly so coherent, so crystallized as in Orwell's dystopia. And many societies are like this, with a party up front and the inner party back stage, but not with the same means of control. Efforts at history rewriting are also relatively amateurish compared with Orwell, even when Stalin was removing Trotsky (and people after Stalin tried to remove Stalin, and made an extra long article about the Bering strait in the Soviet Encyclopedia to get rid of his hated and feared security boss, Berija). Or - when Deng Xiaopeng was suddenly no longer "renegade and scab". But these are crude and easily uncovered small tricks.

Much worse is what happens to language in the sense of linguistic competence in a society feeding people pictures only, interrupted by political and economic propaganda (slogans and commercials) so stupid that they tell about the contempt their authors have for people in general. Interrupted: what effect does it have on people when no train of thought, no sequence with some logic built into it can last more than three minutes before a new interruption? And when the language where real competence is developed is to talk with computers, appropriately called BASIC (among others)? Is it not to be expected that this will compete with live languages and together with all the photos and films reduce English to Basic English and so on with other languages?



And what about all those fine tissues referred to above, personality and the many small groups -- when society becomes so mobile that people become shallow in their interhuman competence, when "I am your friend" means "I am now acting as if I am your friend, the way I read about in some old-fashioned books" and "I love you" means "I am playing the "I love you" game" -- in either case because it may serve my interests? Does this not mean shallow people, with little to mobilize as defense against totalitarianism, with little to offer in terms of identity, new ideas, strong personalities?

I feel that Orwell saw much of this; he might have seen more today. Curiously enough, he might have come to the conclusion that a repressive country like the Soviet Union fosters a tremendous search for identity and interest in genuine history, a linguistic delight more than ever, and that inner warmth; whereas the countries of the West, those sometimes referred to as the countries of "repressive tolerance", are navigating in uncharted waters, unguided by any sense of history, by a set of technocrats talking some unintelligible lingo, and not exactly exuding inner warmth. But be that as it may, this is not a match in political mud-slinging, trying to glue the Orwell sticker on anybody just because he is around.

### 3. Orwellian society and nuclear war

Rather, let me conclude with some remarks on what could bring Orwell's society into being. Orwell is on purpose vague: some type of disaster, something terrible that blurs the collective and individual memory. He seems to think of some horrible war and revolutionary upheaval. So, let me try to complete Orwell who wrote his book in 1948 when only two nuclear bombs had hit: a nuclear holocaust. Which would create a society of desperately dependent people, for just about everything. Ruled by party/technocrats, themselves

terrified by the inner party still in bunkers after the war, self-sufficient, with storage and reserves for decades, generations. With history erased by the holocaust itself -- no museums, no archives and no (what horror for an author!) no libraries where the books of the past are stored. With language reduced to the most basic to survive. With people leading subnormal lives, hit by radiation, fearing, feeling the growth of cancers and the damage through the whole system of reproduction, not knowing what kind of monsters they will give birth to.

Orwell was a genius. As futurist he is without equals. His tool was a novel which permitted him to depict totalities, not only some little trend which some little research bureaucrat can draw into the future, aided by his equally unthinking computer. He saw totalities, and they were totalitarian. Only one thing did he - in my view - miss: that today the military systems and the moves towards wars of the most devastating kind are even more dangerous than the totalitarian machineries taking shape in our midst, in the form of authoritarian societies and excessive gadgetry in the hands of the System. So, let us be grateful for this prophet of doom -- and do our best lest his prophecy should one day come true.