

Is 1984 Becoming a Reality?

George Orwell's Warning to the World

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In 1940 George Orwell wrote:

“Almost certainly we are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships – an age in which freedom of thought will be at first a deadly sin and later on a meaningless abstraction. The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence.”

George Orwell, Inside the Whale

George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984 is a work of fiction, but much that is depicted in it reflects the political realities of many nations, past and present.

“...at least three-quarters of what Orwell narrates is not negative Utopia, but history.”

Umberto Eco

Referring to his time spent in Belgrade under Communist Rule, Lawrence Durrell wrote that: “Reading [1984] in a Communist country is really an experience because one can see it all around one.”

In this video, we are going to explore some of the similarities between the totalitarian systems of the 20th century and Orwell's 1984, and as will become evident many of these totalitarian traits are re-emerging in the modern world. This investigation will be conducted in the recognition that totalitarianism relies on mass support, and so, contemporary societies desperately need more people to withdraw their support of this brutal form of rule. Shortly after 1984 was published, Orwell explained:

“The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one. Don't let it happen. It depends on you.” — *George Orwell*

Totalitarianism is a political system whereby a centralized state apparatus attempts to control virtually all aspects of life. “Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.”, the Italian dictator Mussolini succinctly put it.

While totalitarianism can emerge under the guise of various political ideologies, in the 20th century it was communism and fascism that provided the ideological support for this type of rule. Communism and fascism are often viewed as being on opposite ends of the political spectrum, but in the manner they were put into practice in the 20th century both of these systems display the characteristics of the totalized, all-controlling state. Both use force and propaganda to attain power, crush economic and civil liberties, smother culture, partake in mass-surveillance, and terrorize the citizenry with psychological warfare and eventually mass-imprisonment and mass-murder. Speaking of Stalin's Communist Russia and Hitler's Nazi Germany, Orwell explained:

“The two regimes, having started from opposite ends, are rapidly evolving towards the same system—a form of oligarchical collectivism.” — *George Orwell*

In the communist and fascist political systems of the 20th century, and in 1984, the totalitarian regime maintained a tight grip of control on the populace through the use of manufactured fear.

“Totalitarian leaders, whether of the right or of the left, know better than anyone else how to make use of...fear...They thrive on chaos and bewilderment... The strategy of fear is one of their most valuable tactics.” — *Joost Meerloo, Rape of the Mind*

Constant surveillance of all of the citizens was an additional tool in the arsenal of the totalitarian regime of 1984. Surveillance not only allowed for more effective overt control of the citizenry but it also induced paranoia which made it less likely that any citizen would even dare step out of line. This surveillance was achieved, firstly, through the technology of the telescreen which was installed in everyone’s home and throughout the streets, and as Orwell explained:

“The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously...There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment...It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinised.” — *George Orwell, 1984*

Secondly, mass-surveillance of the citizenry was conducted by the citizens of 1984 themselves. Each person watched everyone else, and each person was, in turn, watched by everyone else. The most innocent of expressions, an innocuous statement, or a subtle look of disapproval when Big Brother appeared on the telescreen, was reported to the Thought Police and treated as a “thoughtcrime” or a “facecrime” – as evidence that one was disloyal and had something to hide.

“It is intolerable to us that an erroneous thought should exist anywhere in the world, however secret and powerless it may be.”, Orwell has the character O’Brien explain.

George Orwell, 1984

In Stalinist Russia, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn noted that one could never be sure whether one’s neighbours, friends, co-workers, the postman, or even in some cases one’s own family, would report to the secret police a slip of the tongue, a criticism of Stalin or of Communism. For if one was reported their fate was usually sealed: the police would knock at the door in the middle of the night and soon after one would be given the standard sentence of a “tenner” – that is, 10 years in the slave labor gulag prison camps. This form of surveillance created social conditions wherein most citizens adopted hypocrisy and lying as a way of life, or as Solzhenitsyn explains in *The Gulag Archipelago*:

“The permanent lie becomes the only safe form of existence....Every wag of the tongue can be overheard by someone, every facial expression observed by someone. Therefore every word, if it does not have to be a direct lie, is nonetheless obliged not to contradict the general, common lie. There exists a collection of ready-made phrases, of labels, a selection of ready-made lies.”

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Gulag Archipelago

In addition to a ubiquitous state of fear, in totalitarianism there exists a widespread state of confusion and mental disorientation amongst the citizenry. Joost Meerloo explained:

“Many victims of totalitarianism have told me in interviews that the most upsetting experience they faced...was the feeling of loss of logic, the state of confusion into which they had been brought—the state in which nothing had any validity...they simply did not know what was what.” — *Joost Meerloo, Rape of the Mind*

In 1984, widespread mental disorientation was stimulated via the falsification of history, and the negation of the concept of objective truth. The Ministry of Truth was the institution which falsified history.

“Everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth.” — *George Orwell, 1984*

One of the reasons totalitarian regimes attempt to alter history is because it rids the society of any past reference points, or standards of comparison, which might remind the citizens that life in the past was so much better than it is in the sterile and oppressive present.

“Within twenty years at the most...the huge and simple question, ‘Was life better before the Revolution than it is now?’ would have ceased once and for all to be answerable.”

George Orwell, 1984

But another reason history is falsified by totalitarians is to ensure there are no historical roots to which the citizen can anchor and find truth, sustenance and strength. In totalitarianism there can be no historical information which contradicts or puts into question the reigning political ideology, nor any institution, such as a religion, which offers the individual a refuge from the influence of the State. For a totalitarian regime to condition the citizenry to accept the proverbial boot stamping on its face, it needs to control the past, and so as Orwell wrote in 1984:

“Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been re-written, every picture has been re-painted, every statue and street and building has been re-named, every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right.”

George Orwell, 1984

Along with destroying or falsifying the past, widespread mental disorientation is further cultivated by destroying the belief in objective truth. This is done through a program of psychological warfare. Incessant and intentionally confusing propaganda, conflicting reports and blatant lies, are pumped out in “official reports” and through the mass media at all hours of the day. What is said today has no bearing on what may be said tomorrow, for as Orwell explained:

“...the totalitarian state...sets up unquestionable dogmas, and it alters them from day to day. It needs the dogmas, because it needs absolute obedience from its subjects, but it cannot avoid the changes, which are dictated by the needs of power politics.”

George Orwell, Literature and Totalitarianism

In 1984, for example, the Ministry of Plenty put out a bulletin that they were increasing the chocolate ration to twenty grammes a week. Orwell writes:

“And only yesterday, [Winston] reflected, it had been announced that the ration was to be reduced to twenty grammes a week. Was it possible that [the citizens] could swallow that, after only twenty-four hours? Yes, they swallowed it...Was he, then, alone in the possession of a memory?” — *George Orwell, 1984*

In addition, contradictions, hypocrisies and lies form the foundation of the totalitarian ideology. The totalitarian system presents the enslavement of the individual as his or her liberation; censoring information is called protecting the truth; the destruction of culture or the economy is called its development; the military occupation of other countries is labeled as the furtherance of freedom and peace. In 1984, the Ministry of Peace instigated wars, the Ministry of Truth manufactured propaganda, and the Ministry of Plenty created shortages. On the enormous pyramidal structure of the Ministry of Truth hung the words:

“WAR IS PEACE. FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.”

“The official ideology abounds with contradictions even where there is no practical reason for them...These contradictions are not accidental.”

George Orwell, 1984

The purpose of this all-encompassing program of psychological warfare is to bewilder the mind of the average citizen. For when the citizen is bombarded with contradictions and lies and lives in what Orwell called “that shifting phantasmagoric world in which black may be white tomorrow and yesterday’s weather can be changed by decree”, he or she eventually ceases to know what to think, or even how to think. The distinction between up and down, fact and fiction, truth and falsity, is not only blurred, but loses significance. The belief in objective truth disappears, and the average citizen becomes completely dependent on authority figures to feed him ideas, and thus, is ready to assent to lies and to believe the most absurd things – so long as those in the political class deem it to be true.

The Soviet official Gyorgy Pyatakov explained that the “true Bolshevik”:

“...would be ready to believe that black was white, and white was black, if the Party required it...there was no particle left inside him which was not at one with the Party, did not belong to it.” — *Gyorgy Pyatakov*

In an essay titled *Totalitarianism and the Lie*, Leszek Kolakowski, a philosopher who was exiled from Poland for his criticisms of Communism and Marxism, wrote:

“This is what totalitarian regimes keep unceasingly trying to achieve. People whose memory—personal or collective—has been nationalized, has become state-owned and perfectly malleable, totally controllable, are entirely at the mercy of their rulers; they have been deprived of their identity; they are helpless and incapable of questioning anything they are told to believe. They will never revolt, never think, never create; they have been transformed into dead objects.”

Leszek Kolakowski, Totalitarianism and the Lie

In 1984, the main character Winston manages for most of the book to stand psychologically outside the grasp of the Party, and its leader Big Brother, despite the widespread fear and mental disorientation which swirls around him. “Down with Big Brother”, he writes in his diary, early in the book. However, after being arrested by the Thought Police and subjected to “re-education”, Winston abdicates his reason and conscience and begins to accept the lies. He joins the totalitarian cult and becomes another brick in the wall of the all-powerful state. Referring to Winston, Orwell writes:

“He could not fight against the Party any longer. Besides, the Party was in the right...It was merely a question of learning to think as they thought...The pencil felt thick and awkward in [Winston’s] fingers. He began to write down the thoughts that came into his head. He wrote first in large clumsy capitals: FREEDOM IS SLAVERY. Then almost without a pause he wrote beneath it: TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE...the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.” — *George Orwell, 1984*

Some have taken this ending as sign of Orwell’s pessimism, as an indication that humanity is doomed to a totalitarian future. Yet Orwell’s motive for writing this book was not to depress nor promote a fatalistic apathy, but to warn and rouse to action as many people as possible. For Orwell understood as well as anyone that in the battle between totalitarianism and freedom, no one can afford to stand aside. The fate of each and every one of us hangs in the balance.

“Don’t let it happen. It depends on you.”

George Orwell