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NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR: A CONTEMPORARY ASSESSMENT OF A 20TH CENTURY CLASSIC

BOOK REVIEW

Nineteen Eighty-Four, by George Orwell – first published 1949 by Martin Secker & Warburg, several paperback editions in print, approx 251pp

One of the best-known classic novels of the 20th century, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, by George Orwell (real name Eric Arthur Blair), has just celebrated the 60th anniversary of its publication. Orwell wrote the book in 1948, and its title came from the transposition of the year's last two digits.

Orwell, who was born in India in 1903, was a writer of astonishing originality illustrated by the fact that two of his inventions, Big Brother and Thought Police, are concepts which still appear regularly in newspaper headlines and have entered the understanding of the entire British nation.

Reviews seldom appear so long after a book is first published, but the far-sightedness and enduring relevance of Orwell's warnings in this extreme and brutal novel justify a fresh assessment, 25 years after the year in question. Orwell died of tuberculosis in 1950, and so did not live to know whether any of his warnings were valid or not.

Orwell's fears for future western society were the product of his passionate opposition to totalitarianism. A prolific writer, it was said of him that everything he wrote in the last 16 years of his life amounted in one way or another to an attack on totalitarianism. He was a true democrat, who cared how the succeeding generation, emergent from the recent World War, would reconstruct itself, politically and socially.

Without scruple, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* gives us the anatomy of a society ruled by a regime driven by insatiable desire to exercise and maintain political power. It shows us the furthest edge of political extremism, and on the way there indicates the characteristics it holds to be the inevitable consequences or accompaniments of such power.

Taken as a whole, the plot of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, set in London, is more than a little far-fetched. A more useful approach is to single out some particular elements which Orwell identifies.

Three of these characteristics are particularly worthy of attention in 2009:

- State control and loss of private freedom
- The State's manipulation of communication, language and information
- The extinction of all 'humanity' – e.g. religion, values and human virtues, such as kindness

These are three massive themes with major implications for the theory and practice of government and the arrangement of public society. As we look at them, we will see that Orwell had indeed captured a truth, rather than rolled out a fiction.

Orwell's was the vision of the seer, rather than the pundit. He was not speculating over the extent to which known features of 1948 society would develop. He was not seeing buds and imagining flowers. The Britain in which Orwell lived in 1948 was emerging from War and economically impoverished, but in spite of the austerity, it was a society at peace and with strong, shared values. The police were community friends, not the engine of the State, and no-one in England would for a moment have thought otherwise. The society Orwell was depicting in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* amounted therefore to rain out of a blue sky.

State control and loss of private freedom

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Big Brother is watching everything, and no area of life is private or sacrosanct. It wasn't only that the State was able to intrude into every aspect of life; it had also established the unquestioned right of scrutiny and control of everything. Individuals had no private rights or status or permitted personal agenda. They were subservient to the interests of the State.

In the real 1948, Britain was still a 'small State' society, the vast majority of private actions being unmonitored and freedoms unrestricted. In 2009, while there is still freedom of employment, leisure activity and movement, Big Brother has stowed away a vast amount of information about everyone, and is not ashamed of his appetite to possess even more. The new National Children's Database is said to be adding 300 children a day to its records, and in April 2009 the Home Office announced that it would be going ahead with plans to track every phone call, email, text message and web site visit made by the public, as part of the campaign strategy against terrorists and other criminals.

More fundamental, and more subtle than these obvious intrusions into private life – disturbing though they are – is the question of who *owns* information. In former days, information about individuals belonged to the individual, rather than to the State. Today the State presumes that it is entitled to gather in, generate or keep any amount of information about everyone, and is effectively the owner of that hoard of knowledge.

In 2003 the General Register Office published a consultation document entitled *Civil Registration: Delivering Vital Change*. It proposed comprehensive changes to the current civil registration system, one of which was to move from paper records of births, marriages and deaths, to an electronic system. The

consultation document unambiguously stated: 'The move to an electronic system would allow the use of paper certificates to be phased out.' For unconnected reasons, the core proposals of this Consultation were later abandoned, and the old system is still in place. However, similar proposals could re-emerge in the future.

If and when they do, the issue of who owns the information will need to be confronted. Paper birth, marriage and death certificates, are essentially not the property of the State, even though the State has possession, at local register offices, of the original hand-written documents. Replacing this with a system of records kept on a national electronic database would automatically transfer the effective ownership of this information to the State. Private individuals would be the *subjects* of the information stored, but not the *owners* – a giant step towards the kind of information monopoly which Orwell imagines in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In addition to government ownership of information, Orwell feared that the State would keep all genuine information to itself, and merely pour out its own propaganda. This latter fear, in the UK at least, has proved groundless. The Freedom of Information Act 2000, which from January 2005 has been a significant protection against the manipulation or concealment by the State of publicly-held information, would take him pleasingly by surprise.

Under the Act, by the simplest of procedures, any individual or organisation has the right to seek any information held by most public authorities. As long as the request is in writing (including email), gives the name and address of the person or body asking for the information, describes clearly the information sought, and is not vexatious or repetitious, the applicant is obliged to receive a reply within 20 days. Most requests will be processed free of charge.

There are some exemptions to a public authority's obligation to supply information, such as some requests about private individuals or which threaten national security. Most requests are not exempt, however, and will be answered fully. For instance, when Parliament tried to keep back information about MPs' expenses claims, the High Court ruled that under the Freedom of Information Act, these details were not exempt.

The provisions of the Act have been extensively used by newspapers and other media, lobby groups and individuals. In fact, so extensively is the Act used that some public bodies have an 'FOI section' where staff do nothing else but answer FOI information requests.

The FOI Act has strengthened the public perception that information belongs to everyone, rather than being the special property of the government and its agencies. It may be one of very few bright stars in the recent legislative universe, but we can be grateful for it nonetheless.

State manipulation of communication and language

Under Big Brother's rule, the importance of words lies in the way they are used, rather than their technical meaning. Their purpose is not to engage the intellect, but to subdue it. As weapons of State, they unleash a relentless bombardment upon the popular mind. It doesn't matter what words say, as

long as they work. Whether emblazoned on the side of buildings, or assaulting the ears of the multitude from loud-speakers and telescreens, words are emptied of the capacity to be intellectually understood, while, paradoxically, moulding the mind of the nation.

Orwell warns against reducing the precision of word meanings, the number of words officially recognised, and the over-simplification of language. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* powerfully contrasts explicit terminology, whose essence is its substance, with soundbites, whose essence is their effect. The slogans which epitomised Big Brother's State were intellectually nonsensical and banal, but through the force and frequency of their message, were powerful and effective:

WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

From a literal perspective, these slogans are absurd, but that is Orwell's point. The first conveys the idea that any means is OK, the second that there is nothing to aspire to, and the third that 'we are strong.' In different ways these three conclusions all inhibit scruples, enterprise and incentive.

How does this compare with the dominant public message resonant in the Britain of 2009? From the underlying assumptions of contemporary public policy, one could draw up a parallel list of slogans which would fit:

BELIEF IS BIGOTRY
UNIFORMITY IS DIVERSITY
FREEDOM IS DISCRIMINATION
VARIETY IS INEQUALITY
IGNORANCE IS CHOICE

This article doesn't have space to explain or prove the aptness of these slogans – only to ask the reader to ponder them carefully.

Another concern of Orwell's is what might be described as dictionary reductionism. For *Nineteen Eighty-four* he invented a language called Newspeak, consisting, 'for political purposes,' of 'short clipped words of unmistakable meaning which could be uttered rapidly and which roused the minimum of echoes in the speaker's mind.' The expectation was that 'with the passage of time the distinguishing characteristics of Newspeak would become more and more pronounced – its words growing fewer and fewer.'

Translating all the existing works of English into Newspeak was clearly a task of daunting proportions, and so, alarmingly, Orwell indicates that 'it was chiefly in order to allow time for the preliminary work of translation that the final adoption of Newspeak had been fixed for so late a date as 2050.'

The centrality of the 'revised dictionary project' is illustrated by the following extract from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

'How is the Dictionary getting on?' said Winston, raising his voice to overcome the noise.

‘Slowly,’ said Syme. ‘I’m on the adjectives. It’s fascinating.’

He had brightened up immediately at the mention of Newspeak.

‘The Eleventh Edition is the definitive edition,’ he said. ‘We’re getting the language into its final shape – the shape it’s going to have when nobody speaks anything else. When we’ve finished with it, people like you will have to learn it all over again. You think, I dare say, that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We’re destroying words – scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We’re cutting the language down to the bone.’

Against this background, consider what might seem an innocuous event in Britain – the publication by Oxford University Press in December 2008 of its 10,000-word Oxford Junior Dictionary. It was immediately criticised for having removed words associated with British history, Christianity, the monarchy and the countryside and replaced them with words linked with entertainment, new technology and multicultural issues.

Words excluded are ecclesiastical words such as *abbey, altar, bishop, chapel, minister, monastery, parish, pew, pulpit, vicar*; biblical concepts such as *devil, disciple, saint, sin*; historical words such as *empire, monarch, coronation, duchess*; and words which evoke the nature and beauty of the countryside, such as *cygnet, heron, kingfisher, lark, minnow weasel, bluebell, brook, buttercup, primrose, cowslip, crocus*.

New words taking their place include *allergic, analogue, apparatus, attachment, biodegradable, blog, boisterous, brainy, broadband, celebrity, chatroom, childhood, citizenship, classify, colloquial, compulsory, curriculum, database, donate, emotion, endangered, negotiate, vandalism, voicemail*.

The significance of one new dictionary can certainly be over-stated. In a dictionary restricted to 10,000 words, many well-known words have to be left out. It can also be contended that all the words remain in the many larger single-volume dictionaries available inexpensively in High Street bookshops. The *Oxford School Dictionary* and the *Collins School Dictionary* still include the word *sin*, and a worthy definition of it. On its own, the publication of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* does not represent a decisive shift of the tectonic plates of cultural earth.

However, these arguments provide no answer to two significant issues:

- *The omission of so many words which belong to the same subject areas, and the inclusion for the first time of so many words from new subject areas is not an accident of linguistic usage. It is a deliberate decision as to what is or should be important and central. As such it contributes to a re-definition of our culture.*
- *The words newly included are depressingly functional, lacking the beauty and substance of the words which have been omitted. The evocative has been replaced by the utilitarian, effectively dumbing-down both the English language and the life experience to which it seeks to aspire. As when there is a sudden fall on the Stock Market, it is as though significant value has been wiped off our cultural reserves.*

Focusing on words which are merely functional deprives the language of its range and of its power to stretch the mind and the imagination. In other words, it fulfils Orwell’s definition of Newspeak – ‘words growing fewer and fewer, their meanings more and more rigid.’ Quite what familiar words will be missing from the Newspeak English dictionaries of 2050 remains to be seen.

The extinction of all ‘humanity’ – e.g. religion, values and human virtues, such as kindness

At one point in the novel, Winston Smith, its hero, reflects in 1984 on a time almost 30 years earlier, maybe 1955, when he was 10 or 11 years of age. Smith describes these childhood days as ‘a time when there was still privacy, love and friendship, and when the members of a family stood by each other without needing to know the reason.’

Smith went on to conclude (in 1984): ‘Such things could not happen today. Tragedy, he perceived, belonged to the ancient time (1955). Today there was fear, hatred and pain, but no dignity of emotion, no deep or complex sorrows.’

At another point in the narrative, Smith, in his secret diary, describes the present day (1984) as ‘the age of uniformity, the age of solitude, the age of Big Brother...’ He writes to his diary *from* that age, but more significantly he writes *to* another age, in these words:

‘To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another, and do not live alone – to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone.’

The London of *Nineteen-eighty-four* is a religion-free zone imagined by Orwell in 1948. Whatever had existed before, all religion had vanished without trace, and all the fruits and trappings of religion had gone with it, as the sections I have quoted show.

Come forward to the real world of February 2009. Here, Mrs Caroline Petrie, aged 45, a community nurse from Weston-super-Mare, is reported by *The Daily Telegraph* (7 February 2009) as having been removed from her duties in December 2008 after ‘asking an elderly patient if she wanted to pray for her.’ Mrs Petrie, said the *Telegraph*, was suspended on suspicion of failing to ‘demonstrate a personal and professional commitment to equality and diversity’ while an investigation was held.

After the investigation, Mrs Petrie was re-instated, a statement by the North Somerset Primary Care Trust indicating: ‘Nurses like Caroline do not have to set aside their faith, but personal beliefs and practices should be secondary to the needs and beliefs of the patient and the requirements of professional practice.’

In Orwell’s 1984 society, everyone would, of course, ‘have to set aside their faith.’ The Thought Police would see to that. In 2009 a Primary Care Trust unashamedly believes it to be within its remit to determine whether or not nurses ‘have to set aside their faith.’ Condescendingly, the Trust concludes that they don’t, but in 1955 it would never have occurred to any public authority to ask the question. Nor would any member of the public have regarded an offer of prayer as anything other than a kind and sympathetic gesture. In the 1950s, the staff at Dr Barnardos prayed with the children at bedtime, and no-one complained. In 2009, prayer is viewed as a ‘personal belief and practice’ which should be ranked as ‘secondary to the.... requirements of professional practice.’

There is worse. *The Daily Telegraph* reported that the 79-year-old woman for whom Mrs Petrie offered to pray was not offended, but was ‘taken aback’ by the suggestion and reported the comment to her carer. In fact it was this third party, not the patient, who reported the incident to the Trust.

In 2009, we find a disciplinary process which can be triggered by people not involved in an incident, acting on behalf of people not offended by an incident. Official channels have been created which presume that prayer is potentially so harmful that a mechanism needs to exist by which a Primary Care Trust can be informed whenever it seems to be occurring. The complainant in the case of Mrs Petrie must also have assumed that offering to pray for patients was either already banned, or that it was high time it ought to be. In this 2009 world-view the ideal is a society devoid of religion – the very canvas which Orwell painted.

There is still worse. Mrs Petrie was originally suspended on suspicion of failing to demonstrate ‘a personal and professional commitment to equality and diversity.’ The 2009 mind-set is that equality and diversity can only properly exist where religious practice has been frozen out. The thinking behind this is that the introduction of any non-universal value into the interactions which ordinarily occur in everyday life constitutes an offence against the totemic values of ‘equality’ and ‘diversity.’

What all this means is that Orwell was right on two counts. He was right when Smith described *Nineteen-eighty-four* as the ‘age of uniformity.’ Public policy in 2009 is based on the ideal that everyone must have and be the same – an ideal promoted and under-pinned by box-ticking, targeting, formal regulations, published guidance and diversity courses.

He was also right in mourning the loss of the world where ‘thought is free and men are different from one another.’

The world of 1955 could cope with difference, since it recognised humanity. The world of 2009, in which ‘equality and diversity’ rules, is afraid of, and cannot handle, anything other than uniformity. There is no room for the variety which is the essential characteristic of humanity. In common with Smith in 1984, we look back from 2009 and recognise with sadness the loss of ‘privacy, love and friendship,’ ‘dignity of emotion’ and ‘deep or complex sorrows’ which has occurred over the last 60 years.

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Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.