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On *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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Introduction

ABBOTT GLEASON AND MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

I

GEORGE ORWELL remains at the center of modern political life, just when we might have expected him to depart. In the popular mind, Orwell is the great dramatizer of Cold War values, as seen from an anti-Soviet viewpoint. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1949, right at the start of the Cold War, has come to be regarded as one of the great exposés of the horrors of Stalinism. Countless American schoolchildren, required to read the novel in high school, identified with its depiction of the struggle of the lone individual against an omnipresent, omnivigilant state that conducts a systematic and relentless assault against truth, against history, against normal human relationships, and, above all, against the very existence of the individual will. The novel's chilling ending, in which Winston Smith comes to love Big Brother, and thus ceases to be himself, has been seen as a morality tale of the grim future that was possibly in the works for all denizens of the planet, a future involving nothing less than extinction of humanity itself.

But Orwell did not lose his power with the collapse of the Soviet system. Indeed, the new era of ever-vigilant technology seemed to give new relevance to his ideas, just when their specific political occasion had apparently vanished. The conference from which the papers in this volume derive, held in 1999 to celebrate the novel's fiftieth anniversary, set out to ask what it is in the novel that has enabled it to transcend its occasion, what enduring suggestions for our present and future it offers. Starting from the novel's continued ubiquity as a linchpin of popular culture, it set out to probe beyond the Cold War reading of the novel to ask what themes have attached it so securely to the American unconscious, and whether, in fact, it does remain of relevance to our thinking in a changed world situation. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published simultaneously in England and the United States in 1949. It has been continuously in print in English from that day to this and has been translated into virtually every European and Asian language. It must be among the most widely read books in the history of the world.

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This volume, like the conference, is not an exercise in Orwell criticism. Indeed, we quite deliberately did not include recognized Orwell scholars, and we did not seek standard literary interpretations of the novel. Instead, we asked a wide-ranging group of writers, all with their own agendas in social science, law, and the humanities, to give their own take on the novel, telling a general audience what it does offer us as we try to think about our future. We sought contentious and idiosyncratic papers, leaving open the possibility that they would tell us that Orwell has nothing to offer or is seriously in error in some respect. Almost all our authors, however, feel that the novel merits its central place in our culture. Even when it appears to go wrong in this or that respect, it stimulates our thinking in valuable ways.

Five themes in the novel seemed salient to its continued relevance. First, the novel's role in our culture raises the very general issue of the role of the literary imagination in politics, an issue that was important to Orwell throughout his career. What would lead a social thinker to write fiction, and what, if anything, does fiction offer to an understanding of social events? Second, the novel is preoccupied with the issue of truth and its connection to the possibility of liberal politics. What, if any, is the connection between a belief in the availability of truth (in science, in history) and the ability of liberal democratic societies to sustain themselves? Third, the novel is famously a story of tyranny through technology, and we are living in an era in which possibilities of surveillance and control outstrip even what Orwell could imagine. Have his fears been fulfilled, are they likely to be in the future, or are there features of technology itself that ought to assuage the worries he raises? Fourth, the novel concerns torture and thought control, and we now know a good deal more than we knew in 1949 about how these operate. What do historical experience and psychological research tell us about Orwell's nightmarish idea that humanity itself can be extinguished by psychological techniques? Fifth and finally, there is the theme of sex, which pervades the novel. Orwell's account of the affair of Winston and Julia connects sexual passion with political rebellion, sexual repression with totalitarianism. On what grounds are these connections made, and how successful are they? How helpful is the novel as a starting point for reflection about issues of sexual regulation and the eroticism of politics?

Those were the themes we set out to investigate; as will be no surprise, we got divergent answers, both with respect to the nature of Orwell's contribution and with respect to its value.

Meanwhile, the world continued to change even more radically. From the post-Cold War time of 1999 we have now moved abruptly, post-9/11, into what appears to be a very different era. The remnants of Cold War politics that continued to organize U.S. foreign relations even in the

early days of the Bush administration (Russia is still our enemy, freedom is under siege from totalitarianism) have now quite suddenly been replaced by a sharply divergent image of the world, in which the enemy is not an all-powerful state but terrorists, who elude location and identification, and who operate without any easily grasped center or map of connections. We always knew, or at least could vaguely imagine, what the end of the Cold War would look like—one side would win, and that side's economic and political system would be imposed on the other. But it seems impossible even to imagine what the end of this "new war" would look like: would terrorists cease to exist? come to love America? In this changed world, it seems necessary to ask once again, are Orwell's ideas still relevant?

And yet, changed though the world seems to be, we still cannot help finding Orwell in it. Think, for example, of the phrase "America's New War," and of the constant harping on the fact that we are at war. When the president had a colonoscopy (June 2002), it seemed necessary for him to transfer powers to the vice president, despite the fact that he was undergoing mild sedation for a procedure that lasted twenty minutes, even though all presidents sleep during the night and even nap during the day without such a transfer, and even though much more serious medical procedures, during other presidencies, had not led to such a transfer. Why the emergency atmosphere? Because, we were told, we are at war, and it is crucial to let the world see that we have an orderly system for the transfer of power.

In short, the sense of emergency is retained from the Cold War and has simply been reconfigured to fit the new world situation in which the enemy is not single but diffuse. And, in a most Orwellian fashion, the sense of emergency is used to underwrite measures in the area of constitutional law and civil liberty that might otherwise look questionable. Albeit in a changed world, Orwell's ideas survive and help reflection.

Orwell knew that in time of fear and emergency people look for comfort, solidarity, and solace. One striking example of how little our political life has actually departed from the Cold War was given by the recent public and political commotion over the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. Those words were introduced at the height of the Cold War, with reference to the need to show how we differ from "godless communism." Then as now, their presence raises serious constitutional issues. They lead schoolchildren to connect loyalty to the United States with belief in God, despite the fact that many highly moral people in this nation do not believe in God. (Some of them are atheists, some agnostics, some adherents of nontheistic religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism. The Supreme Court, in deciding what personal creeds count as "religion" for the purpose of military exemptions, has long recognized that "reli-

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gion” does not require a belief in God.) The subtle coercion and pressure on children, when they are told that they have an “opt-out” and yet the vast majority are reciting the words, has also long been recognized as a salient constitutional issue. So, in the rush to affirm the words “under God” without calm discussion of issues such as the importance of defending minorities, we see an extension of Cold War thinking. Instead of godless communism, godless terrorism. Here again, Orwell’s political psychology is a shrewd guide to our present situation.

II

Part I: Politics and the Literary Imagination

The volume opens with a section addressing its most general overarching theme, the relationship between politics and the literary imagination. In “A Defense of Poesy,” literary scholar and political thinker Elaine Scarry addresses this theme through a surprising extension of the novel’s own literary resources. Her essay takes the form of an epistolary treatise from Julia to Winston, arguing that the human ability to think is as dependent on imaginative literature as on history. There is the deepest kind of linkage between the ability to identify “what is the case” and the practice of entering mentally into “what is not the case”; these abilities also link Julia to Winston. In Oceania both the factual and the imaginative counterfactual have been subverted and must be restored together. Great works of art, Julia argues, are independent of the world yet connected to it at its boundaries. Imaginative literature simultaneously provides a density of fact and a liberation from the factual. The counterfactual helps us to penetrate the world more deeply by focusing our attention on selected aspects of it; by revealing to us what is hidden in ordinary life; and by enabling us to think about the most difficult things without risk or penalty.

Homi K. Bhabha’s “Doublespeak and the Minority of One” seeks to refute the idea commonly held, with particular relevance to the case of Orwell, that virtuous people should not be “virtuosos.” He argues that in fact Orwell is not the plainspoken figure frequently evoked in the vast literature about him, but is in his own way a virtuoso, particularly when he “narrates the vicious.” Orwell’s language, Bhabha argues, directed against totalitarianism, is itself “suffused with the imagination of totalitarian violence.” Orwell turns into a paranoiac in the service of a good cause precisely when he “is at his most inventive and insightful.” In order for Orwell to defend Winston Smith’s commitment to being at the end of the day “a minority of one” in defense of the truth, there has to be another

party that denies the truth. Winston's longed-for relationship with O'Brien is an essential aspect of his struggle for the representation of reality, which can be achieved only by dialogic discourse.

In "Of Beasts and Men: Orwell on Beastliness," novelist and critic Margaret Drabble focuses on a central paradox in Orwell's work: Orwell's belief in the goodness of beasts and the beastliness of human beings. The word "beastly" appears to have been his first word, and it contained fairly direct links, through his mother, to a violent, "farmyard" view of sexuality. A related paradox: Orwell was fond of animals, yet "like a true Englishman" he was fond of killing them. Drabble's essay deals with both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, whose central narrative device is "the transformation of man into animal" (and vice versa). Drabble concludes that it was above all in Orwell's animal fables that he could express openly and convincingly the essential humanity and decency that he wished to defend and preserve; and even more significantly, perhaps, "write with tenderness." Orwell pitied men, women, and beasts, but he could more easily pity beasts than men, for pity toward men involved pity of himself, and "toward himself he was relentless and unsparing."

Richard A. Epstein, a law professor who has written widely about social issues from a libertarian perspective, closes this section of the book with an essay that is skeptical of the relevance of Orwell's literary work for social theory. Epstein maintains that the normative messages in Orwell's fiction were based too heavily on Orwell's idiosyncratic, and thus unrepresentative, experiences. For this reason, Epstein contends, Orwell's fiction failed to teach us much about the social institutions he criticized. "A literary rendition may well teach someone to be sensitive to the ravages of poverty," Epstein argues, "but it will not indicate whether poverty is in decline or on the increase." Epstein believes that such tasks are best served by the tools of economics and related disciplines. He acknowledges that the literary imagination has "a certain working advantage over a quantitative social science" in explaining deviant behavior, and he deems Orwell to be at his best in identifying and exposing twisted personalities and totalitarian excess. But he insists that Orwell specifically, and writers of fiction in general, are ill-suited to explain complex social systems or to make recommendations for their reform.

Part II: Truth, Objectivity, and Propaganda

Abbott Gleason has written widely on twentieth-century Soviet history and the history of the Cold War. His essay, "Puritanism and Power Politics during the Cold War: George Orwell and Historical Objectivity," focuses

on Orwell's passionate defense of historical objectivity in the approximate decade between the Spanish civil war and the first years of the Cold War, a period when Orwell was concerned above all with the issue of totalitarianism. He argues that Orwell's defense of historical objectivity was less an epistemological position than a defense of a variety of other commitments that played a role in his struggle against totalitarianism: to a historically derived Protestant individualism; to the relevance of history; to sincerity and fair-mindedness in literature; and to opposing theory insufficiently rooted in the materiality of the world. He sees an autobiographical element in Orwell's anguished depiction of O'Brien's total victory over Winston Smith at the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which suggests Orwell's pessimism about the ability of his most deeply held values to endure in what he regarded as the Age of Totalitarianism.

In "Rorty and Orwell on Truth," philosopher James Conant confronts the relationship between Orwell's views of truth and currently fashionable assaults on truth and objectivity. Taking as his focus philosopher Richard Rorty, who has argued that the norm of solidarity ought to replace a striving for truth in the politics of liberalism, Conant scrutinizes Rorty's attempt to appeal to Orwell as an ally in his assault on truth. He argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* shows clearly that Rorty and Orwell are not in alliance, but profoundly at odds. Orwell insists that liberal freedom depends on a strong distinction between truth and mere solidarity. The "really frightening thing about totalitarianism" is not its cruelty but its assault on the concept of objective truth. Insofar as Rorty's position is represented in the novel, it is the position of O'Brien.

Edward S. Herman, an economist and media analyst, looks critically at the relationship between Orwell's Oceania and some aspects of contemporary U.S. politics. In "From *Ingsoc* and *Newspeak* to *Amcap*, *Amerigoood*, and *Marketspeak*," he argues that although *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was created to dramatize the threat of the Soviet Union, it contains the germs of a powerful critique of U.S. practice. He argues that propaganda is in fact a more important means of social control in the United States than it is in a closed society like the former Soviet Union. In the United States, the elite does allow controversy, but only within limited bounds. The notion of the United States committing aggression, for instance, is "outside the pale of comprehensible thought." Freedom generally means "freedom of markets" in the American realm of *Marketspeak*, rather than political freedom. Just as individuals become "unpeople" in *Ingsoc*, entire populations disappear from the pages of mainstream American media in wartime; unlike American casualties, they have no political cost, and thus large-scale killing of them is permitted. In this and other ways, *Amcap* is an even more effective means of social control than *Ingsoc*.

Part III: Political Coercion

Our third section deals with political control and coercion, one of the novel's most famous and enduring themes. Philip G. Zimbardo, a psychology professor who has done widely recognized research on violence, evil persuasion, and hypnosis (among other things), focuses on the ways that torture can succeed in shaping thought and mind. After reviewing Orwell's conception of human nature and of the techniques of torture, Zimbardo explains the dimensions along which human minds are subject to control and manipulation. He then illustrates how Orwell's mind control techniques have been "embraced, extended, and made more powerful" by modern actors, including the CIA. Zimbardo concludes with a fascinating account of how the Jim Jones–orchestrated mass suicide and murders of 912 U.S. citizens in Guyana in 1978 were modeled directly on the strategies and tactics of mind control outlined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The essay by Darius Rejali, a political scientist and expert on torture's relation to modernity, focuses on two torture-related themes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: the relationship between torture and betrayal, and the various modes of resisting torture. Rejali distinguishes between "great betrayals" (betrayals of great causes and important persons) and "ordinary betrayals" (betrayals at an atomic level in ordinary life). Most accounts of torture focus on great betrayals, and most accounts of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* focus on Winston's great betrayals, especially his betrayal of Julia. Rejali maintains that Orwell was also sensitive to how torture leads to and is shaped by ordinary betrayals. In the course of comparing Orwell's account of betrayal to that of Jean Amery, who was tortured in Auschwitz, Rejali argues that ordinary betrayals are what make surviving torture so difficult and complicated. In the second part of his essay, Rejali classifies various modes of resisting torture and concludes that—in contrast to what *Nineteen Eighty-Four* suggests—present and future torture technologies will never render resistance futile and will never be able to reprogram human beings.

Part IV: Technology and Privacy

When the adjective "Orwellian" is used, the most common meaning is that of an all-seeing state that has totally effaced personal privacy. Our next group of essays investigates the relevance of Orwell's treatment of that theme, in an age when increasing surveillance of all aspects of people's lives is no mere possibility.

The essay by Richard A. Posner, a founding father of the law and economics movement who has also written widely on the connection between

law and literature, compares Orwell's treatment of the relationship between privacy and technology in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with Aldous Huxley's in *Brave New World*. Posner's essay is wide-ranging and contains many interesting claims growing out of the comparison. He acknowledges that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* successfully recognizes that the human desire for solitude is inimical to totalitarianism, and that the suppression of thought and inquiry are inimical to scientific and technological progress. But beyond these points, Posner thinks that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* do not teach us much—or even try to teach us much—about privacy or what it means to live in an age of technological progress. For Posner views the novels as satires rather than as predictions about the future. Posner concludes his essay by arguing, with Epstein, for an aesthetic approach to literature rather than one that tries to mine literature for political or economic significance.

Lawrence Lessig, a law professor and leading Internet authority, demonstrates the Internet's potential threat to privacy by comparing it with Orwell's telescreen. Orwell hated technology and tells us very little in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* about how the telescreen actually worked. But Lessig maintains that it would not have been a particularly useful tool for totalitarianism, for two reasons. First, the telescreen was transparent in the sense that one knew when and where one was being monitored. And second, telescreen monitoring was necessarily imperfect, for it depended (or appeared to depend) on infallible human observers who could misperceive, or forget, what they watched. In these two ways, Lessig argues, the telescreen was more privacy-protecting (or less privacy-invading) than the Internet. For the Internet gathers data beyond our sight and knowledge. And the Internet is a perfect monitor—it stores all data, and it never forgets. Lessig does not believe that these features of the Net are inevitable. To the contrary, he criticizes Orwell for his technological essentialism and closes his essay by suggesting how the Net's architecture could be modified to become, like the telescreen, more transparent and more forgetful.

David Brin's essay suggests a different solution. Brin is a prolific science fiction novelist and the author of the well-received nonfiction book *The Transparent Society: Will Technology Force Us to Choose between Privacy and Freedom?* Unlike Lessig, Brin believes that the erosion of privacy is inevitable; technology is developing, and will continue to develop, in ways that allow "elites" (governments, corporations, criminals, etc.) to monitor every aspect of everyday activity. Brin believes it is futile to put up a wall between the watchers and the watched. He argues that we can best protect privacy by reversing the telescreen and ensuring that those who monitor and observe are subject to monitoring and observation by any citizen. The optimal way to protect privacy in the modern world, Brin

argues, is to make observation tools a public resource to ensure that elites do not abuse their powers of observation.

Part V: Sex and Politics

Orwell's novel is a story of sexual passion at odds with totalitarianism; it contains many suggestions about the likely relationship, in general, between political repression and sexual repression. Three essays ponder this theme of the novel, in very different ways. In "Sexual Freedom and Political Freedom," Cass R. Sunstein, a legal scholar and political theorist, looks critically at the assumptions that lie behind Orwell's account of the Party's control over sexuality. Orwell appears to support the Party's view that sexual energy, repressed, can be transformed into "war fever and leader worship." For Orwell, totalitarianism thrives on the repression of sexual drives; chastity supports political orthodoxy. It is for this reason that the choice to have sex outside the Party's narrow strictures can be connected, as it is in the novel, with political freedom. Sunstein argues that these connections are too neat and easy, and, in particular, that Orwell is insensitive to the domination of women that is frequently linked to movements of sexual liberation. The novel's inadequacy in this area is compounded by Orwell's account of Julia, who is less a full person than an adolescent male fantasy. There is a link worth pondering between totalitarianism and the repression of *women*, but Orwell has nothing to say about it.

In "Sex, Law, Power, and Community," feminist legal theorist Robin West makes a related criticism of the novel's vision of the politics of sexuality. Orwell, she argues, is naive in suggesting that sex is a simple opposite to power, and that state power is the worst threat we face. Thinking about the threats to liberty posed by private power (for example, economic power, power in the family) gives law a different direction from that suggested by Orwell's single-minded focus on the state. She then argues that Orwell expresses a different and richer set of ideas about social control in his biographical and literary essays. There we find Orwell aligning himself with Charles Dickens to espouse a "humanistic" politics that places the expansion of human sympathy at its core. West explores the implications of Orwell's critique of power, when combined with this humanistic vision, for contemporary law.

Philosopher John Haldane, a leading conservative ethical thinker in the Roman Catholic tradition, explores connections between Orwell's ideas about sex and some aspects of Roman Catholic thought, in which Orwell had a serious, albeit overtly hostile, interest. Haldane argues that the novel's relationship to Catholicism is actually very complicated. Although

Orwell expressed the view that Catholicism, like totalitarianism, was a threat to the autonomous individual, the novel itself associates religion not with the totalitarian institutions of Oceania but with the counterculture associated with Goldstein and his dissident following. So too, Haldane argues, the novel's portrayal of sexuality shows surprising sympathy with Catholic ideas of which Orwell was well aware. Winston and Julia's passion is quickly transformed into a quasi-marital domesticity, and the mode of their lovemaking similarly changes, from sadism to tender concern. If we have a sufficiently nuanced understanding of Catholic teaching, moreover, it advocates not body-hating puritanism but the loving and passionate marriage to which Winston and Julia were plainly moving when the Party intervened.

Conclusion

Our conference took place in 1999. During the intervening time, developments in world politics and in the United States's relation to the world have done much to reinforce the novel's continuing timeliness and richness. In a concluding essay, Martha C. Nussbaum contributes a post-9/11 reflection on one little-noticed theme of the novel, the relationship between Oceanian politics and the death of pity. Examining the connection between the emotion of compassion or (tragic) pity and the underpinnings of liberalism, she argues that liberalism requires a public psychology that transcends narcissism, that is, the fantasy of personal invulnerability and omnipotent control. Examining Winston's failure to remain the sort of person who has compassion for others, she argues that his retreat into narcissism does not suggest that all human beings can be so broken: for Winston has some weaknesses that make him far from a "best case" of the human spirit. On the other hand, there are aspects of social life in the contemporary United States that spell danger for the future of compassion, and, hence, for the future of the open and freedom-based society to which we are rightly attached.