

Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Treatise on Tyranny

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George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four portrayed the societal antithesis of modern liberalism, and in so doing, established the adjective "Orwellian" in popular use. Orwell's novel thematically represents conceptual frameworks of tyrannical governance. Recently, questions regarding a crisis of democratic liberalism have prompted debate, discussion, and study. This article investigates how Orwell characterises the processes by which totalitarianism develops, delineates the nature of autocratic governance, and describes how totalitarianism achieves continuity. Further, this article parallels the typologies of tyranny, developed in Nineteen Eighty-Four, with the modern world. I seek to detail the ways in which Orwell's novel is a cautionary, critical commentary of totalitarianism relevant to contemporary society.

In his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell satirically critiques totalitarianism through representing, intensifying, and applying the political system's constituent elements. Orwell parodies fascist and communist twentieth-century totalitarian regimes in his forecasted portrayal of Earth, in the year 1984, divided amongst three radicalised superpowers. In keeping, Orwell invokes themes of ideology, state power, liberty, terror, and technology, which serve to advance his critique. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* characterises the processes by which totalitarianism develops, delineates the nature of autocratic governance, and describes how totalitarianism achieves continuity. First, Orwell identifies the agents that erode liberal democratic institutions thereby affording for the emergence of totalitarianism. Second, Orwell's Oceanian archetype of totalitarian rule clarifies typologies of autocratic governance. Third, Orwell represents the instruments of state control through which totalitarian government attains and maintains power. Thus, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* delivers a cautionary, critical commentary of totalitarianism that is relevant to contemporary society.

In his 1944 *Letter to Noel Willmet*, Orwell asserts that totalitarianism forms from the rise of radicalism precipitated by the deterioration of liberal democratic values and institutions. Orwell describes the features of emergent totalitarianism as "emotional nationalism," a loss of "objective truth," and the triumph of an "infallible fuhrer" to supplant fact with idealised prophecy. His 1944 Willmet letter is an early thesis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, authored in 1947. Orwell's dystopia thematically considers the effects of ideology and state power. His work uses Oceania's Party to describe the consequence of surrendering political rights, majority rule, and freedom to an all-powerful governing authority. Orwell portrays the ultra-nationalist, neo-feudal condition of society borne from the weakening of liberal democracy and the

radicalisation affected thereof. Orwell's identification of emergent totalitarianism provides citizens the means to pre-empt the rise of radicalism.

Oceanian ultra-nationalism manifests itself in colonialism, militarism, isolationism, and chauvinism. Oceanian government, the Party, represents the developed forms of these radical agents which underlie totalitarianism. Oceanian colonial interest, for example, is a military imperative. The Party vies to expand in order to exploit the resources and slave labour which lie within the boundaries of a "quadrilateral with its corners at Tangier, Brazzaville, Darwin, and Hong Kong" (Orwell, 195). Apart from territorial conflict, Oceanian isolationism originates from radical economic autarky; Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia possess material self-sufficiency with which they operate "self-contained economies," abandoning trade (194). Indeed, Oceanian subjects rarely see Eurasians or Eastasians outside of propagandised spectacles celebrating militarism (121). Moreover, the Party champions xenophobia to leverage the notion of otherness, and create war hysteria, through which power is cemented. The Party further uses xenophobia to affirm conceptions of national superiority by advancing chauvinist physical ideals similar to Aryanism (63). By these means, the Party endeavours to separate purity and degeneracy both within Oceania and without using the conceptualisation of a master race. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* establishes ultra-nationalism as an essential component in the emergence of totalitarianism.

Oceanian neo-feudalism is described by hierarchy predicated on oppression and state-power. Oceanian hierarchy is pyramidal: Big Brother, the divine father, "infallible and all-powerful" is at the apex (216). The Inner Party class, composing less than two percent of the population, are a privileged elite who govern Oceania in right of Big Brother (263). The Outer Party, ten percent of the population, are bureaucrats who carry out the operations of state, namely to maintain the stability of the regime. Finally, the remaining eighty-five percent of the population form the Proletariat, a class considered to be subhuman by the Party (68). The Proletariat has neither free will nor the means to attain it; the class is subjugated by intellectual oppression and psychological manipulation. Oceanian hierarchy mirrors feudal society with a sovereign ruling by divine right of kings, the loyal nobility administering the state with the assistance of the vassalage which, in turn, oppresses the vast majority of peoples composing an illiterate peasantry (Somerville). The Party, few in number, possess unity and tenacity which allows them to govern the vast majority of Oceania through coercive force and social engineering (72). Class stratification and the charisma of an autocrat undermine majority rule and objective fact in Oceania. Through emphasising the subversion of liberal democratic values and practices, Orwell warns of the emergence of totalitarianism.

According to Orwell's forewarning, the resurgence of ultra-nationalism is liable to precipitate totalitarianism. Radicalisation erodes liberal democratic institutions and values. Indeed, the emergence of Eastern European parliamentary instability and Trumpian populism have jeopardised freedom of speech, rule of law, and responsible government (Kropatcheva, 137). Sixty-thousand persons participated in an ultra-nationalist march to mark Poland's Independence Day on November 11th (Taylor). Moreover, European nationalist parties such as the Austrian Freedom Party, Greece's Golden Dawn, and the National Front in France have made electoral gains (Pazzanese). Refugee migration by the major Eastern Mediterranean by West Balkan route has promoted political radicalisation (Frontex). Europe's ultra-nationalist movement is closely connected with a conception of otherness. Xenophobia and radical reaffirmations of national identity have become normalised through the "White Europe" movement (Noack). Consequently, Europe moves toward isolationism. Hungary, Czechia, Poland, and Slovenia have rejected migrant resettlement quotas and have taken measures to secure their borders. Thus, member states

are retreating from the European Union's liberal principle of free movement (Dunai). Furthermore, in the United States, Donald Trump leveraged the concept of "us versus them" against Mexicans in his promise to construct a wall on the southern border. (Greven, 1). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reflects the modern trends of populism, strong leadership, and a disregard for liberal democratic ideals. Orwell's dystopia portrays how these factors, together, facilitate the emergence of totalitarianism.

Nineteen Eighty-Four's typification of totalitarianism clarifies contemporary scholastic paradigms of tyranny. Orwell framed his dystopia thematically on state control trespassing upon the freedoms and liberties of the citizen (Claeys, 124). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* exhibits the essential form of autocracy in Oceania's portrayal as the antithesis of rational liberalism. Montesquieu's paradigm of autocracy reflects the basic character of Oceanian government by the components of arbitrary rule, self-interested leadership, and the usage of coercive force (Montesquieu, 26). Rule of law is foundational to liberal democratic government; its absence is indicative of autocracy. The Party abolished codified law and the judiciary while continuing to penalise citizens (Orwell, 8). The violation of the principle of *nulla poena sine lege* defines Oceanian autocracy (Dana). Moreover, the Party leadership utilises coercive force to maintain its power through enforced discipline. Oceania's Party describes subsidiary classifications of autocratic government.

Oceanian Party government clarifies the nature of authoritarianism. Limited pluralism, insubstantial ideological conviction, an absent electorate, and the usage of undefined power characterise authoritarian government (Linz, 255). The Party largely parallels Linz's paradigm as it forbids pluralism and individuality. Indeed, the Party promotes ideological uniformity and criminalises freedom of thought or "own-life" (Orwell, 85). Accordingly, Party defector Emmanuel Goldstein terms the Oceanic government structure "oligarchical collectivism" in that the Party is the body to which subjects surrender their individuality (191). Oceania has no electors, for citizens do not exist in Oceania, merely selfless subjects of the Party and Big Brother. Subjects do not possess natural or legal rights as described by liberalism (Locke, 58). However, Linz's paradigm of authoritarianism is not wholly in concert with Party government, as Oceanian autocracy is ideological. Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia govern with radicalised forms of socialism: IngSoc, Neo-Bolshevism, and Death-Worship, respectively (Orwell, 211). Orwell endeavoured to warn of the rise of totalitarianism as an ideological phenomenon distinct from authoritarianism (Orwell, 60).

Friedrich and Brzezinski, in *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, advance a "pattern of interrelated traits" which correlate to Oceania's Party government in fullness (9). Their paradigm expresses totalitarianism by the elements of official ideology, one-party rule, terror as control, centrally planned economies, and state monopolisation of communications and weaponry. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* applies these characteristics in relation to Nazism and communism nine years prior to Friedrich's publication. An official ideology, IngSoc, guides the single Party government in employing violence, central planning, nationalisation, and propaganda as means of domination. IngSoc, therefore, shares similarities with Nazism and communism. All three ideologies adhere to principles of relative equality, selflessness, and state planning. Furthermore, Orwell distinguishes totalitarianism through monism. Nazism and communism are conceptually reduced to race or class, respectively (Dickerson, 289). Comparatively, IngSoc's monism is in power. The Party utilises ideology to attain and maintain "[pure] power entirely for its own sake" (Orwell, 276). Party totalitarianism, unlike nazism or communism, expressly defines power as "inflicting pain and humiliation" (279). Thus, the Party endeavours to create a condition of suffering. Orwell's satirical definition of power alludes to the sadism and brutality with which Hitler and Stalin "kill[ed] millions of

people ... they [knew] to be innocent” (Hynes, 52). *Nineteen Eighty-Four’s* definition of totalitarian power warns of the revolutionaries whose aim is not the improvement of society’s condition, but the maintenance of their rule.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea mirrors Orwell’s satirised totalitarian state. Firstly, North Korea’s supreme leader Kim Jong-un unites individuals beyond familial loyalties by acting as a paternal figure (Armstrong, 383). Kim Jong-un parallels Big Brother as a fatherly, divine leader. In both societies, the family unit is a subsidiary extension of the state; children report their parents’ unorthodoxy to the thought police without hesitation (Orwell, 140). Orwell warns of totalitarianism replacing *Gemeinschaft* with a militarised *Gesellschaft* lead by a charismatic, semi-divine leader. Secondly, North Koreans practise the official ideology of *Juche*, similar to Oceanian IngSoc. North Korean totalitarianism fundamentally reordered society on the *Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System* which emphasises obedience and selflessness (Min). An element of *Juche*, the principle of *Songun*, represents totalitarian militarism. *Songun* establishes the supremacy of war readiness against Western powers above all private and public functions. In the same manner, the Party’s perpetual war advances militarism to stabilise the regime (Orwell, 193). Thirdly, in North Korean isolationism, as in Oceania, the state prohibits contact with foreigners and encourages the hatred of other nationalities (204). Fourthly, both North Korea and Oceania share neo-feudal hierarchies formed around a bureaucratic elite and agrarian collectivisation. Fifthly, North Korean and Oceanian government systems are monistic in their conceptual reduction to absolute power as the ability to inflict pain. Since the 1945 division of Korea, the South has embraced liberal democracy thus improving national quality of life. In 2015, North Korea’s gross domestic product was \$1,700 compared to South Korea’s \$36,900 (Central Intelligence Agency). The Kim regime, therefore, recognises the detrimental effect of totalitarianism but prioritises maintaining power over the welfare of its citizens. North Korea is the epitome of *Nineteen Eighty-Four’s* forewarned totalitarianism.

Nineteen Eighty-Four exhibits the coercive state instruments that maintain the power of autocratic regimes. Orwell develops themes of terror and technology in his critique of totalitarianism. However, coercive power is not unique to autocratic regimes. All states, including liberal democracies, exercise coercion to varying degrees. Autocratic regimes, however, apply coercive force to extremes and without limitation. Totalitarian governments, such as the Oceanian Party, exert state control over their subjects physically, psychologically, and intellectually. Totalitarian regimes maintain control through expansive involvement in all aspects of society.

Nineteen Eighty-Four develops terror in the form of “totalitarianism [which] can destroy the individual and turn him into an automaton” (Thorp, 16). Orwell illustrates the conventional instruments of terror: workcamps, secret police, internal purges, ‘vaporisation’, and torture. Totalitarianism dissolves liberal ideas of the judiciary, due process, and *habeas corpus*. Moreover, to identify and neutralise treasonous citizens, totalitarian regimes require robust state surveillance apparatuses. Jeremy Bentham’s panopticism parallels the Oceanian police state. Bentham devised a penitentiary which permitted for all prisoners to be constantly monitored by guards (Strub, 41). Thus, “Bentham’s theory of panoptical control ... [is the] original conceptualisation for a technology of power” (40). For Orwell, technology furnishes totalitarianism with an extraordinary opportunity for state-control.

Oceania’s Party attains power through force in a revolutionary *coup d’état* but maintains power through social engineering (213). Totalitarian regimes utilise propaganda in order to induce obedience and

militarised socialisation. Liberal democratic governments, however, employ propaganda and surveillance to a relatively moderate extent. The Party uses conventional media, such as posters, to create reverence and fear of Big Brother, or anger and hatred of the other, such as that of the Mongolian races (Orwell, 156). Furthermore, telescreens emit propaganda and misinformation to persuade Oceanians of the Party's greatness and the glory of their leader. When the screens do not advance propaganda, they project military marches designed to induce war fervour (71). Totalitarian states, additionally, form quasi-military children's clubs such as the Party's Spies and Youth League (23). Indoctrination is fundamental to totalitarianism.

The Party's utilisation of terror transcends classic authoritarian oppression. Totalitarianism achieves continuity through "poverty and ignorance" (198). The Party uses public education as a means of indoctrination (83). Education, even in liberal democratic states, contains national bias. For example, Canadian and American historians remain divided over which nation won the War of 1812 (Boswell). However, Orwell feared for the loss of objective fact insofar as those who "control the present" determine historical narratives of the past (37). Freedom of thought is the greatest target of totalitarianism. As language supports reflection and critical analysis, totalitarian regimes target academia. The simplification of language provides the state with the ability to "narrow the range of thought" and therefore, potential opposition (55). The Party systematically alters language, history, and science to assert power. Thus, the Proletariat has no freedom, for it is a product of the Party. For these reasons, intellectual and social state control form a firmer basis of totalitarianism. Freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and an independent judiciary uphold liberal democratic society.

Mass surveillance, privacy, and panopticism have re-emerged as issues with the advent of the internet and cellular phone. Governments across the world, not all of which are totalitarian, employ technology to monitor and collect data on citizens. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* exhibits the abuse of technology as an instrument of state domination. Modern digitisation incrementally advances society toward Party-style surveillance. Indeed, Lawrence Lessig posits the internet and cell phone are a more dangerous variant of the telescreen; for data is permanent and correctly programmed computers never make errors (Gleason, 212). Liberal democratic governments are expanding their surveillance capabilities. Canada's Bill C-51 created an unprecedented expansion of the surveillance mandate of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (Anti-Terrorism Act). Moreover, the United States National Security Agency conducted widespread surveillance of foreign and domestic nationals in its PRISM project (Meyer). State panopticism facilitates the weakening of liberal democratic freedoms to dissent and question. While liberal democratic government ostensibly uses surveillance in order to protect citizens from terrorism, mass surveillance acts as a tool of oppression and persecution. Indeed, totalitarian states have strengthened their surveillance capabilities. China has developed a system for autonomous facial recognition tracking in its closed-circuit network. Moreover, it has created a "social credit score" to measure the political and social virtue of its citizens (Creemers). As per Orwell's prediction, technology has become a primary instrument of state control.

Orwell thematically connects ideology, state power, liberty, terror, and technology to the formation and conservation of totalitarian regimes. He examines the performative elements of radicalism which debase liberal democratic institutions. Moreover, his portrayal of Oceania, as a typification of totalitarianism, clarifies classifications of autocratic governance. Lastly, Orwell's depiction of technology and terror as instruments of state power identifies the coercive means of totalitarian continuity. In keeping, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* satirically portrays the emergence and practise of totalitarianism, the ethos of autocratic governance, and the means by which totalitarianism sustains itself. Orwell's dystopia equips contemporary

readers with the ability to identify emergent autocratic government. And, therefore, Orwell imparts upon the reader a moral duty to preserve and protect the Commonwealth maxim of peace, order and good government where there is totalitarianism.

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