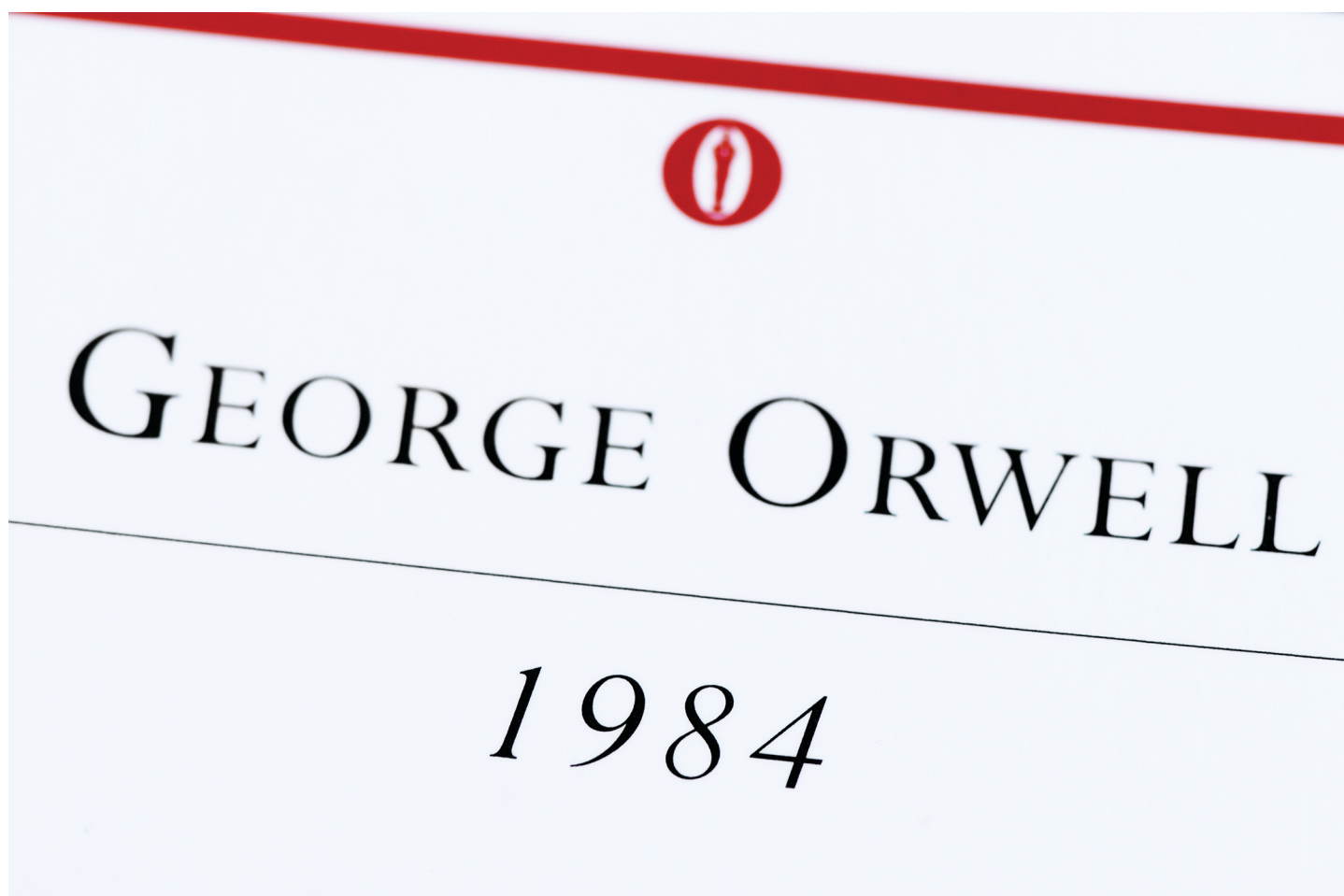


George Orwell and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*



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Introduction

It is now over 70 years since the publication of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – a terrifying dystopian novel in which a totalitarian state maintains psychological and physical control over a joyless, fearful population.

Totalitarianism

Totalitarianism is a political system in which order is imposed on the population through ideological manipulation and the systematic use of state terror. A totalitarian state is a one-party state in which dissent is ruthlessly suppressed. The term has been used to describe both Hitler's Germany (a fascist totalitarian state) and Stalin's Soviet Union (a communist totalitarian state).

In an era of 'post-truth', in which people are routinely subjected to new pervasive forms of surveillance, and a world in which many politicians and others in positions of power no longer even pretend that 'ordinary rules' apply to them, many would claim that the messages of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have acquired a new contemporary relevance. Is it any coincidence that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* went to the top of the Amazon bestsellers list in the US in 2013 when the story of Ed Snowden as the NSA 'whistle blower' first broke, and again in early 2017, just as the newly elected Donald Trump (with his insistence that any inconvenient facts or criticism constituted 'fake news') took office? Many people will also have reached for their copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* after hearing Kellyanne Conway (then one of Trump's senior aides) use the phrase 'alternative facts' in defence of the White House press secretary's (disputed) claim about the size of the crowds lining the National Mall in Washington DC to witness Trump's inauguration in January 2017 (Swaine, 2017).

This free short course will provide you with an introduction to the main themes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. You will focus on the distinctive language and terminology Orwell used. You will understand the connections between some key events in Orwell's life and the political ideas which underpin *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. You will also see how Orwell foreshadowed some of the issues that we now face in contemporary society. The course will be taught through a mixture of text and audio material.

This course will be an ideal accompaniment to the novel. You will also gain some insight into the historical and political context in which the novel was written and published. To get full benefit from this course and the activities in particular, it is suggested that you either read the book as you progress through the course or read it before you start the course. Reading the book is not included in the course study time.

This OpenLearn course is produced in association with The Open University course [DD316 Modern political ideas](#). It was written by Dr Susan Allen. Susan Allen has been employed as an Associate Lecturer at The Open University since 1999. Her academic and research interests lay within the disciplines of politics and international relations.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- appreciate and recognise the distinctive language and terminology of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
- understand the historical and political context of Orwell's writing
- understand how political language, including concepts and ideas, is used
- appreciate the contemporary relevance of Orwell's novel and the reasons for its enduring appeal.

1 Orwell's route to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Nineteen Eighty-Four centres around totalitarianism. Despite this, George Orwell did not have any first-hand knowledge of living in a totalitarian state. He paid just one visit to Germany (in 1945, at the end of the Second World War) and he never visited the Soviet Union. Like others, Orwell had watched from afar as Germany descended from democracy to totalitarianism after Hitler came to power in 1933. Orwell was also aware of reports of Stalin's purges and the 'show trials' of the 1930s (although the full horror of the Stalin era was not revealed until years later), but Orwell's defining first-hand political experiences were in Spain. There, in July 1936, civil war had broken out following an attempted right-wing military coup against the recently (democratically) elected left-leaning Republican coalition 'Popular Front' government.

The Spanish Civil War was to become a highly symbolic *cause celebre* for idealistic left-wing sympathisers from outside Spain. Orwell travelled to Spain as a journalist at the end of 1936. On arrival, however, he enlisted in an Independent Labour Party Republican unit and was sent to fight on the relatively quiet Aragon Front. He fought in Spain for six months before being badly wounded by a sniper's bullet. On his return to England in 1937, Orwell set down his partial, impressionistic accounts of what he had seen in Spain – including his disillusionment after witnessing the in-fighting and often brutal factionalism within the pro- and anti- Stalinist communist left in Barcelona.

Orwell's experiences in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, which is now regarded as a curtain raiser for the Second World War, also convinced him that ideology – of both the far right and the far left – taken to extremes may lead to evil. It was in Spain that Orwell began to think seriously about what were to become the key underlying themes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: the importance of objective 'truth', the role of propaganda, what it would be like to live under an authoritarian regime, and why democracy should never be taken for granted.

Many critics have argued that, in terms of plot, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not entirely original. For example, it draws comparisons with an earlier political novel, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, (written in the early 1920s) which, like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, was banned in the Soviet Union until 1988. Zamyatin – who had initially supported the 1917 Russian Revolution – portrays a world far into the future, ruled by an all-seeing and all-knowing 'Benefactor'. Zamyatin's novel's influence on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as well as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, is clear.



Figure 1 *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was first published in 1949

Neither was Orwell especially original in his depiction of technology – both HG Wells and EM Forster (to name but two) had already depicted future societies in which people's lives are ruled by machines and other technologies. Other critics have argued that as a work of literature some of Orwell's characterisation is thin. But does this matter? Most people

would say 'no' because of the sheer power of the novel: Orwell's opening sentence 'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen' (Orwell, 1949) remains one of the most famous in modern English literature. Likewise, the adjective 'Orwellian' (first used by the novelist Mary McCarthy in 1950) has now passed into the English language. Few people who have read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ever forget it.

Before going on to study *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in more depth, you will first explore more about Orwell himself – and the political experiences which informed so much of his writing.

2 Who was George Orwell?

To begin to get a greater understanding of who George Orwell was, now listen to Geoff Andrews of The Open University's politics department interview D. J. Taylor, a writer and biographer, and the author of *Orwell: A Life*. Listen to Audio 1 a couple of times (which was originally recorded as a video) and then complete Activity 1.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 1

Activity 1

Having listened to the discussion between Geoff Andrews and D. J. Taylor, note down what you see as being the key influences in Orwell's early life which may have set him aware of some political themes. What were these and how significant do you think they were?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You may have come up with the following:

- The significance of his private school upbringing on developing suspicion of authority.
- His experience of fighting in the Spanish Civil War and suspicion of Russian communists he met.
- A critique of left-wing intellectuals for their political orthodoxies. In particular he was becoming suspicious of the power of political parties and the power of language. This is something he took into his later writing, notably *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

To add to D. J. Taylor's comments in Audio 1, you should recognise that George Orwell (educated at Eton) saw himself as a democratic socialist, but never a communist.

Socialism

Socialism as an ideology emerged in the West during the early 19th century as a reaction to the economic and social inequalities generated by industrial capitalism. A core aim of socialism is to advance the interests of the working classes by promoting social and economic equality. However, there are a number of strands and divisions within socialism, and each 'sees' the means for attaining social and economic equality differently. So-called 'hard' variants of socialism (those within the communist tradition) advocate the complete abolition of the capitalist system through revolution. In contrast, 'softer' versions (such as

those within the democratic socialist tradition) aim to achieve necessary reform through democratic means (the ballot box). The 'softest' version of all (social democracy) does not seek to provide an alternative to capitalism. Rather, it aims to modify capitalism (e.g. through the provision of a mixed economy and a welfare state).

The Labour Party (which emerged out of the trades union movement at the very end of the 19th century) was never a revolutionary socialist party. The Labour Party has always been a 'broad Church' with some members and MPs on the extreme left, while others occupy a position just to the left of centre. Under Attlee, the Labour Party (after gaining office in 1945 following a landslide election victory) was responsible for the implementation of an extensive welfare state, including the establishment of the NHS.

2.1 Orwell and socialism

What lay behind Orwell's socialism? Orwell's 'conversion' to (democratic) socialism dated from the mid-1930s and was prompted, in large part, by his investigation into the poverty and living conditions of the northern working class (a commissioned work of reportage published, in 1936, as *The Road to Wigan Pier*). Britain, in Orwell's view, was a country governed by the rich and ridden with outdated class privileges. He likened Britain to 'a family with the wrong members in control' (Orwell, 1941, p.35). For Orwell, socialism was about addressing social and economic injustices and improving the lives of ordinary people. Orwell had little (if any) interest in political theory itself. He was suspicious of ideology, which in the wrong hands could become what he famously called 'smelly little orthodoxies'. Orwell, then, was no ideologue.

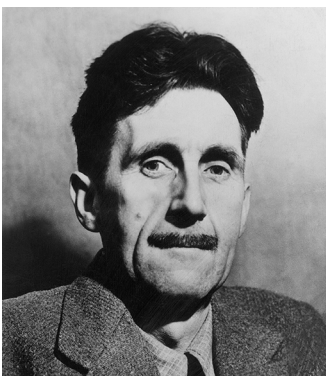


Figure 2 George Orwell (1903–1950)

For Orwell, socialism was first and foremost about 'common decency' (a phrase he used often). His views on the Soviet Union set him apart from the left-wing 'establishment' at the time. Unlike many other writers and public intellectuals in the 1930s, Orwell was neither beguiled by the Soviet Union (as a 'pioneer' socialist state) nor a (pragmatic) apologist for Stalin. He never believed that the 'ends' justified the 'means'. His suspicions of the British Communist Party as mere 'dupes' of Moscow were confirmed in August 1939 when, after loudly demanding that Britain stand up to Hitler, the Party was, on instructions from Moscow, forced into an embarrassing *volte face* after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop (Nazi-Soviet) pact. The Party refused to support Britain's declaration of war in September 1939 on the grounds it was an 'imperialist' war – a line it maintained until Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Orwell's outspoken criticisms of communist factionalism and abuses of power that he had witnessed in Spain had already alienated much of the British left (gathered as it was around the *New Statesman* magazine and Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club). Orwell's critics accused him of attempting to undermine the credibility of the Republican popular front. Later, in 1944, Orwell was surprised and angered when Gollancz (who had published Orwell's work in the early 1930s and had gone on to commission *The Road to Wigan Pier*) declined the manuscript of Orwell's satirical 'fairy tale' of the Russian Revolution, *Animal Farm*, because it was critical of Soviet-style communism. Other publishers also refused the manuscript on the grounds that the war against Germany was not yet won, and the Soviet Union remained a vital ally.

Orwell and Englishness

Orwell's sense of 'Englishness' informed much of his writing. He had admired the 'quiet' patriotism he'd found within working class communities. In *The Lion and the Unicorn* (written in London in 1941 when Blitz was at its height), Orwell was adamant about the need for political change. However, he had more faith in the patriotic decency of the 'common people' than in the 'Europeanised' English intelligentsia who, Orwell claimed, 'took their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow' (Orwell, 1941, p. 48). Orwell set out an agenda for a very 'English' political revolution.

Writing in 1941 (when the end of the Second World War was still four years away), Orwell believed that the working classes would continue to make the necessary sacrifices just so long as they believed that they and their children could look forward to a better life when the war ended. The sort of socialist revolution that Orwell hoped to see (and which he believed would be necessary to build a just post-war society) would not be led by communists and it would not involve the hoisting of red flags or street fighting. Instead, it would require a fundamental shift of power – achieved through democratic means.

In 1941, Orwell did not believe that communism exerted any sort of popular appeal in Britain, but he was concerned that the appeal of fascism might be greater – as it had proved to be in civilised countries such as Germany and Italy. Orwell believed that a democratic socialist movement, which could win the support of the mass of working people, was the best guarantee against fascism taking hold in Britain.

3 Summary of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the world is divided into three perpetually warring super states – Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia. Britain (following a long-forgotten atomic war) is now known as Airstrip One – a province of Oceania – and London is its chief city. The state (the Party) presided over by the omniscient ‘Big Brother’ uses technology to exert total control over everything and everyone. Tele-screens are positioned in people’s homes as a means of surveillance. Posters on walls warn that ‘Big Brother is watching you’. No one can escape the scrutiny of the Thought Police, and ‘spies and saboteurs’ will be rooted out. The Party is even in the process of transforming existing standard English, *Oldspeak*, into a new simplified official language, *Newspeak*. Once *Newspeak* has finally superseded *Oldspeak*, there will be no vocabulary for the expression of ‘heretic’ thoughts or ideas.



Figure 3 ‘Big Brother is watching you’

Nineteen Eighty-Four depicts a fearful, atomised society in which a spurious unity is forged through a compulsory ‘love’ of Big Brother and the brief collective disinhibited hysteria of the daily ritual of the ‘Two Minutes Hate’ – directed at the tele-screened image of the ‘arch-traitor’ Emmanuel Goldstein (the ‘Enemy of the People’). This is a society in which young children are encouraged to denounce their parents and people may disappear (*vaporised*) overnight. Only the ‘proles’ (the uneducated masses) live relatively ‘free’ lives – deemed too unimportant and too indolent to threaten the power of the Party.

In the novel, the main character, Winston Smith, a minor civil servant in his 30s, is employed in the Records Department of one of the four branches of government – the so-called Ministry of Truth. In reality, the Ministry of Truth, concerns itself with lies. The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war. The windowless Ministry of Love maintains order through terror, and the Ministry of Plenty presides over a society of permanent scarcity. One of the functions of the Ministry of Truth is to rewrite the past according to the whims of the Party. Winston’s job is to alter (or in the official phrase, to ‘rectify’) figures and other inconvenient facts in back numbers of newspapers, books, and other documents. It is, nonetheless, routine work within a large department and Winston is an insignificant member of the ‘Outer Party’ (a group not admitted to the privileged ‘Inner Party’).

Winston lives alone in a small, dingy flat in Victory Mansions, a nondescript apartment block in central London. As the novel opens, Winston is harbouring subversive thoughts. As an act of rebellion, he has purchased a notebook with the intention of keeping a diary – an act punishable by death or, at the very least, 25 years in a forced labour camp.

Activity 2

What significance do you attach to Orwell’s terminology here: ‘the Ministry of Truth’ and ‘the Ministry of Peace’?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This is, of course, an example of how Orwell uses irony in the novel. Each of the four government ministries operates in a manner that is the direct opposite of what their names would imply. In the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, however, 'reality' is what the totalitarian state says it is.

Orwell's novel is a far from comforting read, but it is also one that helps many people make sense of what is happening in the world. After the end of the Cold War, and the subsequent implosion of the Soviet Union (1989–91), it might have been assumed that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would soon lose its relevance. When Berlin Wall fell, it was a common assumption (in the West at least) that the world could only move in one (progressive) direction – more open, more liberal, more democratic. Now, over 30 years later, it is only too evident that such optimism was misplaced. Liberal democracy is now under considerable strain and new forms of authoritarianism are on the rise around the world.

4 The publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Orwell suffered from poor health throughout his life and was already seriously ill (with an incurable form of tuberculosis) when he was writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The cultural and political impact of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was immediate. It was published in June 1949 – against the backdrop of the beginning of the Cold War and amid increasing anti-communist hysteria on both sides of the Atlantic. Orwell's critique of totalitarian and monolithic party systems and dominant ideologies was eagerly adopted by opponents of communism (and by those who were suspicious of 'the left' more generally).

McCarthyism

While there was a tendency in Britain to fear 'reds under the beds', communists (and alleged communists or sympathisers) were rooted out far more systematically in the US during the early 1950s in what became known as 'McCarthyism'.

Senator Joseph McCarthy led a series of investigations of those suspected of coming under communist influence. McCarthy's targets were mainly people working in US government departments and the film and entertainment industry. Many of McCarthy's charges were unsubstantiated and little real evidence was offered. Since then, the term 'McCarthyism' has been used for a politically motivated witch hunt.

In the US and Britain, those on the political right seized upon the novel as a thinly veiled criticism of the 'statism' of the Labour government. This distressed Orwell. In July 1949, a month after the novel was published, he issued a statement making it clear that the novel was neither an attack on the Labour Party in Britain nor on democratic socialism. It was an attack on the dangers posed by both communism and fascism – and the strength of his argument in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that it could apply to a range of totalitarian systems. Orwell died in January 1950, just seven months after the novel was published. He did not live long enough to engage with the various interpretations of the 'meaning' of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or the significance of its 'Appendix' (which takes the form of a 'scholarly' article written at an unspecified time well into the future). Clearly though (whatever else he may have had in mind), Orwell intended *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a satirical warning against a descent into totalitarianism.

5 The language of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

It is a measure of the power and influence of the novel that several words and phrases, together with an adjective 'Orwellian', have now passed into the English language.

Activity 3

In the box below, note down as many words and phrases from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that are now used in the English language. For each word or phrase, you should give an example of its usage. Which term or phrase used by Orwell do you think is the most relevant for today's society?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Even if you have not yet read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, you will probably have come across the following words and phrases:

- Big Brother
- Room 101
- Thought Police
- Thought crime
- Newspeak
- Unperson
- Memory hole
- Doublethink
- Crimestop

What does 'Orwellian' mean to you?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

On the one hand, the term 'Orwellian' is often used to describe an authoritarian dystopia – a repressive society which exercises total control. It may also be used to refer to the ways in which language may be used to manipulate and control people.

The language used by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is one example of how the novel has stood the test of time. In the next section, you will explore its continuing relevance in today's society.

6 The continuing relevance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

In this section, you will move to an assessment of the current relevance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by following three key themes of the novel: surveillance, free speech, and post-truth.



Figure 4 In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell foreshadowed some of the issues that we now face in contemporary society

6.1 Surveillance

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston Smith is constantly aware that Big Brother is watching him. A key theme of the novel is the extent to which the state (or The Party) keeps the population under control by using surveillance to suppress dissident ideas or internal criticism of the party. This is, of course, routine in non-democratic states. For example, you can see parallels in contemporary China which is a one-party state in which the Chinese Communist Party allows its citizens 'freedom' as consumers, but otherwise exerts total political control over their lives. However, even in a democratic country such as the UK, the government also holds an enormous amount of data on its population. In Activity 4, you will explore contemporary examples of the novel's continuing significance by considering this in more detail.

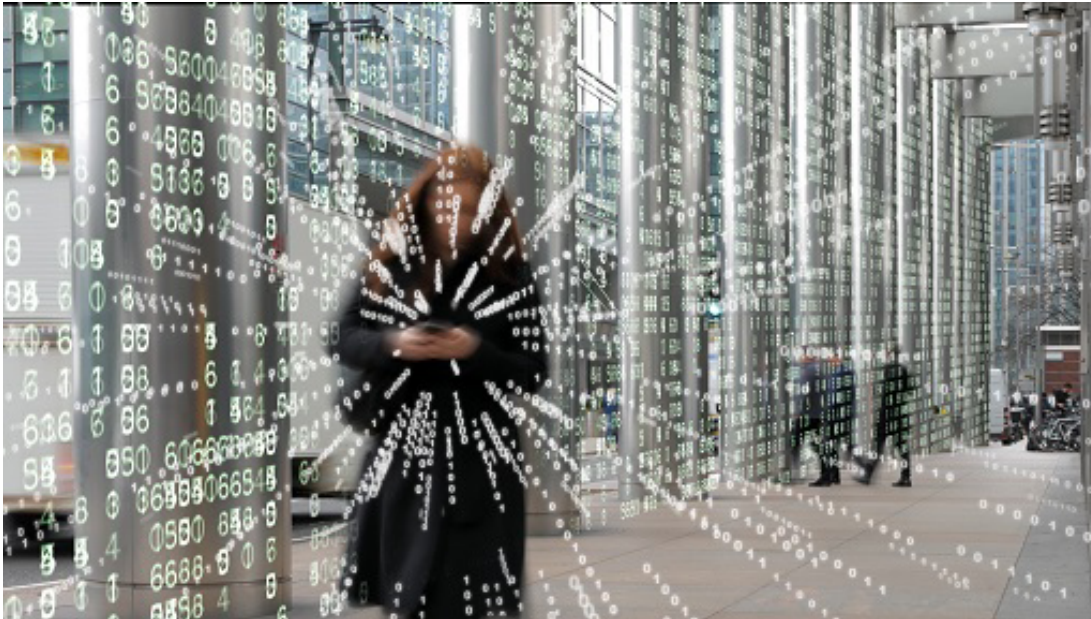


Figure 5 Surveillance is a key theme in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Activity 4

In the box below, note down what information the UK government (or government of any other democratic country) holds about its population and how information can be traced.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Your date and place of birth; details of income for tax purposes; your medical records, driving records, and any criminal convictions you may have are just a few of the details that are held on central databases. You can be traced through the numbers on your driving licence or the number plates on your car. You can be traced through the numbers on your passport, your National Insurance cards, or your NHS medical cards.

All British passports issued in the last ten years include a microchip which holds biometric information that allows a machine at passport control to scan the passport and match data on it to enable facial recognition. More recently, the COVID-19 epidemic has raised the possibilities of people in the UK being issued with passports to prove their vaccination status.

Finally, if you are out and about, then your movements are often captured by CCTV.

Do you think that the amount of personal data held by the government is necessary for the effective governance of a modern society such as the UK? Or do you think there is cause for concern? Note down your thoughts in the box below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

In the UK, there are data protection laws. Many people would argue that the sort of personal data held by democratic states is necessary for effective law enforcement, the maintenance of public health and, more generally, to manage the complexities of

modern society. Others, however, may express reservations that the huge amount of information held by the state poses a threat to individual freedom and the right to privacy.

However, even if people are relatively happy about the government holding so much of their personal information, they may not necessarily feel the same about the extent to which many of the world's biggest private companies (such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google) hold such vast amounts of personal data – whether encrypted or not. Neither can it be assumed that big companies hold data securely. For example, in 2018, after a 'whistle blower' raised the alarm, the data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica (where the former Trump aide, Steve Bannon was a board member) was shown to have used personal data harvested (improperly) from Facebook in 2015 to target millions of US voters during the 2016 US presidential election (Cadwaladr, 2018).

Over the course of a typical week, how often do you provide third parties with your personal details or give out other personal information? Make a note in the box below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Whenever you make online purchases, you are supplying a third party with your name, address, email address, phone number and bank details. If you have joined Facebook or another social media platform, you may post photographs, or details about where you have been and who you were with. It is reasonable to assume that Orwell be astonished at how easily many of us voluntarily surrender our personal data on a daily basis. And even if you think you are careful about protecting your personal information, you do not know the true extent to which big communications companies are handing over private data to the state or to other parties. In 2013, this was one of the issues Ed Snowden (the NSA 'whistle blower') drew attention to.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, people's lives are monitored by a 'telescreen'. Many people have drawn an analogy between Orwell's depiction of the telescreen and how smart phones are used in contemporary society. Of course, the comparison is not exact. Winston Smith was unable to turn his telescreen off. We can, of course, switch our phones off. However, many of us rarely do so, because we have become so used to the instant communications that phones offer (whatever time of day or night). Many of us use our phones for instant messaging, to search for information online, for entertainment, to take and store photographs and so on. If your phone is switched on, it is also possible for you to track the movements of others – and for others to track your movements. Every time you use your phone, you are also (whether you choose to or not) providing data (of one sort or another) to a third party. Smart phones, then, have become ubiquitous in modern Britain. If you have used public transport in the last few years, you will probably have noticed that many of your fellow passengers spent at least part of the journey looking at their phones.

6.2 Free speech

A key theme of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is freedom of speech and the use of language. In the novel, people are not free to speak out or even to think certain thoughts. The use (and

misuse) of language is now also a feature of contemporary politics. Threats to free speech and ‘de-platforming’ those whose views are thought to be ‘disagreeable’ or cause ‘offence’ are now at the frontline of today’s ‘culture wars’. On one side are those who argue that in a democracy people must be allowed to speak freely – even if that means airing views that might offend others. On the other side are those who defend their right ‘not to be offended’ – and who argue that what one group claims as the right to free speech is more about that group maintaining its power and privilege.



Figure 6 In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* people are not free to speak out or even to think certain thoughts

The terms ‘troll’ and ‘Twitterstorm’ are recent additions to our vocabulary. Social media allows many people to connect with others in positive ways. However, social media also disinhibits. When you encounter ‘strangers’ in person, your behaviour towards them (and theirs towards you) is governed by widely understood norms and customs – the ‘unwritten’ rules of civility which help to order society. These norms and customs are largely absent from social media.

Free speech was important to Orwell as a writer. Does everyone have an equal right to speak out on any topic? Has Twitter, for example, democratised politics and allowed more people to have a voice? Or has it fuelled a tribal regressive politics which encourages the censorship of speech and ideas and a mob outrage more reminiscent of the ‘two minutes hate’?

Activity 5

What do you think Orwell would make of today’s ‘free speech wars’?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

In ‘The Prevention of Literature’, an essay written in 1946 when he was still formulating his ideas for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell wrote the following:

There is no such thing as a genuinely non-political literature, and least of all in an age like our own, when fears, hatreds, and loyalties of a directly political kind are near to the surface of everyone’s consciousness. Even a single tabu can have an all-round crippling effect upon the mind, because there is always the danger that any thought which is freely followed up may lead to a forbidden thought.

(Orwell, 1946, 1947)

6.3 Post-truth

In many ways *Nineteen Eighty-Four* anticipated the current phenomenon of *post-truth*. Post-truth may be defined as:

The circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

(Oxford English Dictionary, 2017 quoted in D'Ancona, 2017, p. 9)

... a phenomenon... where emotional response and emotional resonance matter more than facts and evidence in decision making and in political discourse.

(D'Ancona, 2017, p. 9)

In the following interview, Matthew D'Ancona, a *Guardian* columnist, sets out what he means by the term and the impact he thinks it will have on the future of politics.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 2

Post-truth can be compared to the concept of *doublethink*, a term Orwell introduced in Chapter III of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them both to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to repudiate morality while laying claim to it

(Orwell, 1949, pp.40–41)

Doublethink, then, forces people to ignore an objective reality and accept an alternative 'truth'. The concept of *doublespeak* also allows you to reflect on the ways in which conspiracy theories and the spread of 'fake news' are a characteristic of a post-truth society. Once again, it can be argued that this is enabled by social media – which often serves as an echo chamber and enables lies to spread quickly. One recent example is the ways in which the anti-vaccine lobby was able to perpetrate false claims and stories about the provenance and safety of the various COVID-19 vaccines. Twitter, Facebook and so on now use software to catch automated accounts (known as bots) but many more 'sophisticated' bots escape attention. Therefore, another serious concern is the apparent ease by which it is still possible to create 'fake' social media accounts (often from so-called troll farms), which can fabricate posts and amplify deliberate lies and other forms of 'disinformation' so that they are seen, believed, and passed on by more 'real people'.



Figure 7 Today's use of social media enables the spread of fake news

Authoritarian states such as Russia and China appear to routinely manipulate social media platforms to neutralise domestic dissent. However, in recent years there have been credible claims that Russia has used Western social media platforms to attempt to destabilise Western democratic institutions or influence the outcome of certain elections. For example, there were accusations of Russian involvement in the US presidential election of 2016 and the UK pro-Brexit campaign. However, the manipulation of social media is not confined to authoritarian states. Social media is a low-cost method of campaigning. Some would claim that this is a democratising development because it allows more direct forms of democracy. However, critics would also point out that by enabling politicians to bypass the traditional media (the press, radio, and television), it also allows them to bypass its editorial controls as well. The one-time Trump aide, Steve Bannon once claimed that the mainstream media was the 'real opposition' to Donald Trump (Gambino, 2017).

Orwell set great store by the 'truth'. Of course, many politicians have always relied on lying as a strategy to get themselves out of difficult situations. However, what Orwell termed 'organised lying' (Orwell, 1946, 1947, p. 383) is not the same as spur of the moment expediency. It is, as Orwell pointed out, systematic and integral to totalitarianism. Totalitarian regimes create their own history by 'rewriting the past' because it is necessary for the past to be re-shaped to suit the needs of the regime. It was in Spain that Orwell first realised how deliberate, systematic lies may be used as political weapons and how readily those lies will be accepted. In a totalitarian society, only one version of the 'truth' is allowed at any given moment. In 'post-truth' society there are many versions of the 'truth' circulating at any one time. However, if there is less regard for 'objective facts' in a post-truth society, does that make it easier for authoritarianism (which may lead to totalitarianism) to gain a foothold?

What is also new about the new era of post-truth is the extent to which it demonstrates how standards in public life have changed. Where it was once obligatory for a politician caught out by a major lie or cover up to resign from office or suffer the consequences, it no longer seems to be an automatic disqualification. Tony Blair's political career never recovered from the fall-out from the 2003 invasion of Iraq because the so-called 'dodgy dossier' still mattered to the electorate. Nick Clegg's reputation among younger voters was irrevocably tainted by his failure to keep a promise on tuition fees made in the 2010 Liberal Democrat election manifesto. However, the Boris Johnson premiership from 2019 encompassed several scandals without leading to resignations.

7 Orwell and totalitarianism

Orwell intended *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a warning, rather than a prophecy. He was writing on the verge of the Cold War and his critique of totalitarian regimes, monolithic party systems and dominant ideologies was eagerly adopted by opponents of communism, particularly during what became known as the era of McCarthyism. However, the strength of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that the regime he described could apply to a range of totalitarian systems.

As Orwell wrote, in 1942, in response to those who believed that totalitarianism 'could not happen here':

Before writing off the totalitarian world as a nightmare that can't come true, just remember that in 1925 the world of today would have seemed a nightmare that couldn't come true. Against that shifting phantasmagoric world in which black may be white tomorrow and yesterday's weather can be changed by decree, there are really only two safeguards. One is that however much you deny the truth, the truth goes on existing, as it were, behind your back, and you consequently can't violate it in ways that imply military efficiency. The other is that so long as some parts of the earth remain unconquered, the liberal tradition can be kept alive.... We in England underrate the danger of this kind of thing because our traditions and our past security have given us a sentimental belief that it all comes right in the end and the thing you most fear never happens. Nourished for hundreds of years on a literature in which Right invariably triumphs in the last chapter, we believe half-instinctively that evil always defeats itself in the long run.... But why should it?

(Orwell, 1942)

Activity 6

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as well as his broader writings have been used to explain the meaning of totalitarianism, its main features and the situations in which it could arise.

Listen to this audio taken from The Open University course *Modern Political Ideas*, in which Dr Richard Heffernan discusses the meaning of totalitarianism today. Listen to the audio at least twice then, when you have done so, note down your thoughts in response to the following questions.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 3

1. What was the significance of 'the party' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?
2. What are the six main features of totalitarianism?
3. How important is the 'cult of personality' for totalitarian regimes?

4. What restrictions on freedom did totalitarian regimes impose?
5. What distinguished totalitarianism under Hitler from totalitarianism under Stalin?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

1. You will have seen that the Party was all-powerful in demanding conformity and orthodoxy and through the state was able to exercise control.
2. The six main features of totalitarianism are:
 1. an elaborate and totalising guiding ideology
 2. a single party committed to this ideology directing the state, typically led by a dictator
 3. the use of systemic terror and political violence, and the use of secret police
 4. the state possessing a total monopoly on the possession of weapons
 5. the state having a complete monopoly on the means of communication and the provision of information
 6. the state having central control and planning of the economy through state direction.
3. The 'cult of personality', including many myths of personal prowess and achievements, featured in both Nazi/fascist and communist examples of totalitarianism as a way of connecting leaders to the people.
4. You probably found that denial of free speech, the right to protest and of movement, or to criticise those in power were most common.
5. Left and right totalitarianisms had common features; for the right, ideas of racial superiority were often dominant; for the left, impositions on property featured. However, the role of the state and the party within it shared some core aspects.

Conclusion

In this free short course you have studied one of the key novels of the twentieth century. You have reflected on its longevity, the continuing relevance of its language, and reflected on its political context and consequences. We hope this has inspired an interest in Orwell and modern political ideas more widely.

You should now be able to:

- appreciate and recognise the distinctive language and terminology of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
- understand the historical and political context of Orwell's writing
- understand how political language, including concepts and ideas, is used
- appreciate the contemporary relevance of Orwell's novel and the reasons for its enduring appeal.

This OpenLearn course is produced in association with The Open University course [DD316 Modern political ideas](#).

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Further reading

Orwell wrote regularly for the Observer from 1942 until 1948. *Orwell: The Observer Years* (published in 2004 by Atlantic Books) is a selection of Orwell's news reporting, book reviews and opinion pieces.

Orwell's letters, essays and the full text of *Homage to Catalonia*, are brought together in a single volume *Orwell in Spain* (published in 2001 by Penguin Classics).

Orwell political writing including essays, and journalism and the full text of *Animal Farm* are brought together in a single volume *Orwell and Politics* (published in 2001 by Penguin Classics).

Orwell's impressionistic account of working-class life in industrial Yorkshire and Lancashire, *The Road to Wigan Pier* was first published in 1937 and was re-published by Penguin Classics in 2001.

Orwell: The Life by DJ Taylor and *George Orwell* by George Bowker were both first published in 2003. Both authors provide a detailed account of Orwell's time in Spain.

The Ministry of Truth by Dorian Lynskey was published in 2019. Lynskey's focus is on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. He explores Orwell's motivations and influences and he explores the novel itself from a number of angles – and the novel's enduring appeal.

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