

TECHNOCRACY AND HUMAN CONTROL IN GEORGE ORWELL'S *NINETEEN EIGHTY FOUR*

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Abstract: Human control using technology has been a topic of debate in the twentieth century that witnessed the rise and fall of various political movements such as Communism, Fascism and Nazism. This paper attempts to analyse George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* with emphasis on the mode of governance described by him. It has become popular for its criticism of the contemporary political climate in the guise of a nightmarish future. This gloomy prognosis of the evils of totalitarianism has Big Brother, the leader of the Party, as a symbol of political power and is relevant even today. The way patriotic fervour is used by Big Brother for preventing people from critical thinking by constantly engaging war with other countries has been happening in reality in all eras. However, there is no ocular proof about the existence of him and the novel suggests that the government of Oceania is actually run by technocrats, the Inner Party members, whose main concern is to ensure the continuation of the power equation. But this article suggests that even this apparent dystopia offers a ray of hope and Orwell's intention is not to terrorize people but only to warn them to act rationally from preventing such a nightmarish future. Further, it emphasizes the inevitable role of technology in governing human beings thereby requesting the technocrats and policy makers to ensure that technology is used to govern the country with effectiveness and help humanity.

Keywords: Dystopia, governance, power equation, technocrats, totalitarianism.

INTRODUCTION

History reveals that, despite the social and cultural differences, the rulers of the past as well as the present resort to various methods to control their citizens. Since the effectiveness of a ruler heavily depends on the use of either coercive or discursive means to make the citizens accept their social status without complaining, they tend to use different modes of governance to achieve their end. With the rapid developments in science and technology, especially during the twentieth century, the use of technology to govern the citizens and even control their behaviour became popular. In fact, the rule of intelligentsia was envisaged by Plato in *The Republic* (380 BC) which serves as a model for the future writers to portray a government run with the help of technology. This article attempts to analyse George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1948) focussing on the method of governance in Oceania. It also reveals that the nightmarish world portrayed by the writer has contemporary relevance and cannot be dismissed as a mere figment of imagination.

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While reviewing Zamyatin's *We* (1923), Orwell expresses that despite not having any direct references to the contemporary politics, this fantasy set in the twenty-sixth century AD was denied publication only because it was "ideologically unacceptable" (*The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* 72) to the rulers. Perhaps it might have inspired Orwell to attempt a similar novel that deals with the oppression of citizens. *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the novel about a nightmarish totalitarianism of the future, exhibits Orwell's dissent about the socio-political scenario of the Russia and England as well during the Mid-War years. His disappointment with the failure of Communism to deliver its promise in Russia prompted him to parody the social and political scenario of the Western countries. The understanding of the expectation of writers of the past about the different governances will help us to analyse *Nineteen Eighty Four* with greater clarity.

MODE OF GOVERNANCE & WRITERS' CONCERN

Echoing the ideas of Plato in *The Republic* about the role of intelligent people in governing the citizens and ensure their welfare, Cicero, in *De Re Publica* (52 BC), emphasized the need for an ideal state based on justice and reason in his discussions about the different types of governments. Later, Thomas More projected such an ideal society free from social evils such as inequality, poor governance and lack of morality in *The Utopia* (1516). Likewise, Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1624) depicts an imaginary island Bensalem where the citizens, with their quest for scientific inquiries, strive to create an ideal society. Stephen A. McKnight quotes the words of Howard B. White who affirmed that the purpose of Bacon was to transform the human quest from search of God or God's creations into "a pursuit to understand what humans can make of themselves" ("Francis Bacon's God," 85). Bacon firmly believed that the intelligence of man would be a catalyst in establishing better mode of governance.

However, not all writers shared Bacon's optimistic view that the knowledge of science and the application of technology could be used for creating a utopian society. For instance, scientists became the satirical targets of Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666). Such narratives, according to Brian Stableford, paved that way for "anti-science fiction whose reliance, similar motifs and narrative strategies have always resulted in the subsumption within the genre whose ambitions it opposes" (Quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* 15). Similarly Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) is a satirical portrayal of the contemporary politics and made the readers look at politics and politicians from a new perspective.

Since literature is a product of the social, cultural and political factors that shape the consciousness of the writers, it has become an instrument either to accept and even or question the mode of governance. For example, the Long Depression and the social and political turmoil in America influenced Edward Bellamy, in *Looking*

Backward (1888), to envisage a futuristic world from which the solutions for the contemporary problems were suggested. He professes the emergence of a society dominated by the labour force and enriched by equitable distribution of the produce as the solution for the social ailment.

Another writer who has expressed his political views and the creation of a utopian society was H. G. Wells. Envisaging the need for a socialist society, he emphasized the need for the “abolition of social barriers” and also advocated the “free competition between individuals in society regardless of their social backgrounds” (“H.G. Wells: A Political Life” 519). But such optimistic attitude about the role of science and technology as tools for the rulers to enrich human life turned to be pessimistic during the World Wars.

Aldous Huxley was satirical about the concept of One-World Government and cautioned the possible abuse of science and technology in *Brave New World* (1932). But his former student at Eton, Orwell, did not think that Huxley’s prediction about the future would be a possibility. Instead, being a democratic socialist, he was more concerned with the welfare of the working class and at first firmly believed that Communism would establish equality among the citizens. After witnessing the squalid living as well as working conditions of the industrial workers of the Northern England he expressed his anger in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). According to T.R. Fyvel, it is definitely “an angry book, unique in English political writing of the time” (*George Orwell: A Personal Memoir* 63). *Animal Farm* (1944) by Orwell exposes the dangers of extreme stances in politics. But his call for freedom of the individual in a political climate which resorted coercion to make the citizens amenable to the national policies is fully felt in *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949). This process is effectively implemented by the use of technology by the ruling elite. Technocracy is broadly defined as “rule by experts” (*Technocracy at Work* 2) and was a preferred term of its advocates when the politicians and financial experts failed to find solutions for the social and economic problems during the Great Depression. Such an ideal governance, however, did not happen and writers and artists in fact questioned the validity of such a proposition. Orwell, disappointed with the failure of Communism to deliver its promise in Russia, has pointed out the possibility of using technology in governance may even lead to exploitation of the people.

NINETEEN EIGHTY FOUR: A TECHNOCRATIC DYSTOPIA

Nineteen Eighty Four depicts the loss of human values in a society where the technological wonders are actually used for surveillance and help the ruler, here the Party, to perpetuate their own powers. According to Craig L. Carr, Orwell’s “medium is literature but the message is political” (*Orwell, Politics, and Power* 1). Set in London, the chief city of Airstrip One, it presents a society built on strict hierarchy consisting Big Brother, who is at the helm of affairs, Inner Party members, Outer Party members and the inconsequential Proles. Big Brother, the leader of

the Parry, is chosen by it to project itself to the world. The citizens, wherever they go, watch his probing face, of course in posters, looking at them intently for any possible action or sign of disapproval on their part against the Party ideals. Further, they are made to work like machines without even aware of the nature of it. By chance anybody understands the nature of the work they never had the opportunity to express it. Winston Smith, the protagonist, and his lover, Julia, try to escape the clutches of the powerful Party in an attempt to seek their own identity. But their failure to achieve it eventually makes the novel pessimistic as it poses an important question: “Can the individual survive in the face of the collective power of the modern State?” (*The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*).

The Party was able to rule with incisiveness because of the use of technology in controlling human behaviour. But the word ‘technology’, according to John Street, is not confined only to computers or nuclear power. “It extends, for example, to hedgerows, trees and walls” (*Politics and Technology 2*). According to him,

The row of trees outside the American Embassy in London was not planted out of commitment to natural beauty, but to break up student demonstrations, just as the Paris streets were designed to frustrate the revolutionary mobs...even the most mundane technologies have a political dimension. (*Politics and Technology 2*)

The political dimension of the acts or things which seems to be quite natural to a naked eye is highlighted by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty Four*. In fact, the four Ministries of Oceania act quite contrary to what their names suggest. Ministry of Truth where Winston the protagonist works is concerned with forging records and rigging the truth. Ministry of Peace, instead of upholding peace, is concerned with making the people believe that Oceania is always at any point of time is at war with one of its neighbouring countries Eurasia or Eastasia. The reason for instigating the patriotic fervour of people is actually to make them forget their daily problems and not to give them an opportunity to even think about it. Ministry of Plenty serves as an organ of the government that propagates the Party ideals. It also ensures that people live in a false sense of pride that their living condition is always getting better. If an individual shows dissent and disapproval against the ideology of the Party and the way of its functioning Ministry of Love acts to either make him accept the national policies through coercion or “vapourize” him. Winston and Julia, in the novel, were able to understand the flaws of this system and even gained courage to act against it but ultimately succumbed to it. Thus the citizens who are immune to the propaganda of the Party are transformed into ideal citizens amenable to the national policies and eliminated after that. Technocrats, here the sophisticated Inner Party members, are apathetic to the plight of the Outer Party members. But it tends to make us think why technocrats can’t help the common man solve their problems? It is not possible, according to Massimiano Bucchi because of the “communicative

short circuit" (*Beyond Technocracy: Science, Politics and Citizens* 73) created by the policy makers. When this communicative short circuit is rectified technocracy has a major role to play in establishing the welfare of the nation.

THE CONCEPT OF EQUALITY AND ITS IMPLICATION

Orwell, having witnessed the agony of the oppressed in Burma, and the exploitation of the mine labourers in England, expressed his disgust of inequality, in his novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*. In *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the Party came to power promising equality, but equality among people was never established as it was detrimental to the very existence of the Party as the controlling factor. On the other hand, inequality is established by the creation of a hierarchical society. In *Nineteen Eighty Four*, Goldstein, branded as a traitor by the Party, explains the failure of all political systems in establishing equality.

In the novel, "The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism", an imaginary book written by Goldstein, he explains the real purpose of having such a hierarchical society. The world is divided into three groups—High, Middle and Low. Whenever the High are ineffective they are overthrown by the Middle with the support of Low by promising them to establish equality and liberty. Once getting power, the Middle make the Low go back to their old position of servitude, thereby themselves becoming the High.

In the past, the need for a hierarchical society was preached by kings and aristocrats, and by priests, lawyers and others 'who were parasitical upon them.' (*Nineteen Eighty Four* 202) They are able to convince the Middle and the Lower classes by promising compensation in an imaginary world beyond grave.' (*Nineteen Eighty Four* 202). Similarly, in the past, the middle class used the terms such as 'equality, liberty and freedom' to topple the High and get power. But after getting power they established new tyrannies.

The new Middle groups in effect proclaimed their tyranny beforehand. Socialism, a theory which appeared in the early nineteenth century and was the last link in a chain of thought stretching back to the slave rebellions of antiquity, was still deeply infected by the Utopianism of past ages. But in each variant of Socialism... the aim of establishing liberty and equality was more and more openly abandoned... Ingsoc in Oceania, Neo-Bolshevism in Eurasia, Death Worship, as it is commonly called, in Eastasia, had the conscious aim of perpetuating UNfreedom and INequality. (*Nineteen Eighty Four* 203)

PROPAGANDA

Propaganda is the method through which the rulers condition the people to accept, or to force them to accept, their designs. Hence it is an important tool for all types of rulers. In totalitarian countries propaganda is done through coercive methods.

People never protest against it as they have to live in fear of punishment. In capitalist countries it is done through discursive methods. The real motive behind such propaganda stands unrevealed. It requires critical thinking on the part of the common people to understand the real nature of it.

All governments have been using propaganda as an instrument to convert the dissenters into ideal citizens. But it was effectively used during the Nazi regime in Germany during the twentieth century. Goebbels, the Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda in Hitler's ministry, while outlining the role of his ministry to the German press on March 15, 1933 reiterates that press is like a "piano in the hands of the Government on which the Government can play ...[and] an instrument of mass influence that the government can make use of..." (*Modern European History: 1871-2000 - A Documentary Reader* 131,132). What Goebbels said is not confined only to the German press and transcends spatio-temporal and geopolitical barriers making it universal in its application. In fact, Orwell was disappointed with the failure of Communism when his comrades in the militia were "vilified as Trotskyites and even Fascist collaborators, and their leaders were imprisoned or killed and the entire take over of power was misrepresented by Communist party propaganda" (*The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell* 52). Orwell highlighted the process of propaganda with Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty Four*.

A new language called 'Newspeak' was created by the government in *Nineteen Eighty Four* to minimize the use of words, and thereby limiting the process of thought itself. Newspeak, the official language of Oceania, was created with an intention to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc or English Socialism. Though in the year 1984 it was not used by all as the sole means of communication, in speech or in writing, newspaper articles were written in it with the help of a specialist. Newspeak is to provide mediums of expression, and also 'to make all other modes of thought impossible.' (*Nineteen Eighty Four* 299). This is a significant medium of thought control.

Newspeak is created by the Party in order to annihilate the past. JasbirJain traces Machiavellian motif in the creation of the new language. "It is aimed at destroying the polysemic nature of language, every concept being expressed by exactly one word...It is a Machiavellian move towards the attainment and perfection of power" (*George Orwell: Witness of an Age* 49)

Two Minutes Hate is a programme conducted to channelize the fear and anger of the people towards Emmanuel Goldstein, who is considered a traitor of the Party. Once he was a leading figure of the Party, on par with Big Brother, and then he indulged in counter- revolutionary activities for which he was condemned to death.

SURVEILLANCE: A POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Michel Foucault's concept of panoptic vision as a means of perpetuating power is better understood in *Nineteen Eighty Four*. People afraid of the Thought Police and an instrument called telescreen, which transmits and receives simultaneously, is used by the Thought Police to monitor the movements of the people. Any sound produced by the people above the level of a low whisper can be picked up by it. People can never know whether they are being watched at any given moment. 'You had to live— from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every moment scrutinized.' (*Nineteen Eighty Four* 3) Not only does the Party watches the words and actions of the citizens and eliminate those who act against the government. Even a sign of disapproval or discontentment is sufficient to "vapourize" them.

However the tremendous growth of technology especially in the internet era has democratized surveillance and today our computers act as telescreens. In fact, whenever we use internet in general and social media in particular we leave our digital footprints to enable others track our whereabouts and understand our preferences. As long as the data about individuals is used positively such surveillances help humanity and connect the people and diminish the national boundaries. But history indicates that there is always a possibility of misusing technology by the ruling elite for perpetuation of its own power. Orwell is concerned more with the freedom of humans than with the progress of technology. In fact, Huxley proved to be a writer inclined to record the possible growth of science in *Brave New World* (1932). But Orwell remained a champion of freedom of individuals and focussed only on it. He firmly believed that the attitude of the writers and artists in uplifting the "spirit of liberalism" partly decides the governance of the State (*The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of Georg Orwell* 407). But his dissatisfaction with the status quo and the fear about a technocratic future where even the thought process of the citizens can be controlled are portrayed in his novel.

NATIONAL BOUNDARIES

The striking feature of this novel is the use of nationalistic fervour to the advantage of the rulers. For this reason, the peaceful of coexistence of the nations is disrupted and it is ensured that at any given point of time they are always at war with any one of their neighbours. But the enemy keeps changing according the political climate prevalent at that time. In the novel, the world was divided into three major forces, Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia, and the Ministry of Truth is responsible for conditioning the minds of the people to accept either Eastasia or Eurasia as an enemy. The hatred of people, as demonstrated in *Two Week Hate*, is focussed on a common target only to make them oblivion of the reality.

The citizens' minds are crammed with unverifiable statistics about the good work one by the Party. They are also made to believe that the Party is the only means of saving them from their enemies, Eurasia and Eastasia. For example, the manner in which the Party's stand is conveyed to the people is expressed during Hate Week. The crowd waiting anxiously for the hanging of two thousand Eurasian soldiers is told all of a sudden that Eurasia is the ally of Oceania.

Nothing altered in his voice or manner, or in the content of what he was saying, but suddenly the names were different. Immediately there is commotion and the crowd is made to think that it is Goldstein's work. Then the Hate continued exactly as before except that the target had been changed. (*Nineteen Eighty Four* 181)

It clearly indicates that how the Party has finally acquired control over the citizens of Oceania. In the twenty-first century it may be an irrelevant and even impossible idea. But such a control over human beings is achieved nowadays by discursive methods.

RAY OF HOPE

Nineteen Eighty Four is usually considered a pessimistic novel that envisages a nightmarish future without any ray of hope. Fredric Warburg, an English publisher associated with Orwell, even before its publication concludes that, "Orwell has no hope, or at least he allows his readers no tiny flickering of hope" (*George Orwell: Nineteen Eighty Four with Critical Appreciation and Annotations* 92). But though it is a pessimistic novel it urges the people to act swiftly and prevent the formation of such a totalitarian state aided by the recent development in technology become a reality. Orwell endorses that his intention is only to warn people but not to scare them.

My recent novel is not intended as an attack on socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism...The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasize that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, *if not fought against*, could triumph anywhere. (*Orwell's Victory* 61)

In this context Rafella Baccolini's views on the role of critical dystopia will be helpful in understanding this novel. Critical dystopia's open ending, according to Baccolini, are not merely pessimistic. "It leaves its characters to deal with their choices and responsibilities. It is the acceptance of responsibility and accountability, often worked through memory and the recovery of the past, that we bring past into a living relation with the present and may thus begin to lay the foundations for utopian change. (*Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* 130). Thus it is evident that change for betterment is the motto of all the writers who want to bring about a change in the society.

CONCLUSION

This research article attempts to analyse Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four with focus on how the novelist expresses his fear that technology will be misused by people in power to perpetuate their own powers. Of course, the telescreens, swooping helicopters, rewriting history using memory hole in the novel indicate the possible role of technocrats in running the government machinery. Technocracy coupled with coercion will create a hell in this universe. At the same time, Orwell's purpose is not to frighten the people and make them go out of their senses. He expects them to act prudently and swiftly to prevent such a scenario. While Winston's death and Julia's betrayal appear to be the success of the Party in suppressing individualism, the appendix which mentions the role of Newspeak is written in past tense indicating that the nightmarish regime is over and has weakness in its own structure. The use of past perfect tense by the narrator, according to Elizabeth Russell, suggests that "Newspeak had been devised but apparent no longer in use" (quoted in *The Road from George Orwell: His Achievement and Legacy* 160). It emphasizes the role of people in nation building and any indifference on their part will ultimately affect them. Since we are living in a world driven by technology, the onus is on policy makers to ensure that it is used only for the purpose of helping people and make them stay humans.

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