

George Orwell

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Introduction

George Orwell understood completely that totalitarian governments were easily corruptible by those in power. He saw the corruption in the world around him, and he knew its power. It was because of this disgust with dictatorships, totalitarian governments, and communism that he gave us his dire warnings, warnings of the possible future we may face as people if we were to begin allowing ourselves to be ruled by a totalitarian dictatorship.

It is no doubt in the minds of today's reasonably-educated person that totalitarian dictatorships are naturally flawed. However, back in Orwell's day, there was a hope and optimism that a totalitarian state could actually improve the way of life for those being governed by it. Readers must ask themselves to what degree does our awareness of the failures of totalitarianism come from Orwell's writings.

Background on Orwell

To fully understand the impetus for George Orwell's disgust with totalitarianism, one needs first to analyze the background from which he came. If not for the life that Orwell led, some of the classic literature we have today may never have been inspired.

In 1903, Eric Arthur Blair (who later wrote under the pen-name George Orwell)

was born in an Indian Village called Motihari. At the time, India was part of the British Empire. Eric Blair's father, Richard Blair, held a post as an agent in the Opium Department of the Indian Civil Service. The Blair family, as a result of having helped to administer the Empire, had a relatively privileged and pleasant existence. Orwell later described his family as being "lower-upper-middle class." Like many middle-class English families of the time, the family had no extensive investments and owned no property; its members remained fully dependent on the British Empire for their livelihoods. Though his father continued to work in India, Eric Blair moved to England in 1907 with his mother and his sister, where he attended Eton. Orwell published his first writings in college periodicals. During these years, Orwell had developed his antipathy towards the English class system. One must keep in mind that, back in Orwell's day, the stratification between the classes in England was ten times as great as it is now ("Biography"; "pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair"; Johnson).

Eric Blair, neglecting to acquire a university scholarship, joined the Indian Imperial Police in 1922 in Burma as an assistant superintendent. In 1927, Orwell resigned from the police force. He had become increasingly disgusted with the imperialistic system in Burma, and he had felt that, as a policeman in the area, he was supporting a political system in which he no longer believed. His emotions concerning the behavior of colonial officers was manifested in such essays as "Shooting an Elephant" and "A Hanging" ("Biography"; "pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair").

Orwell's war experiences

In the nineteen thirties, Orwell had adopted socialistic views and went to Spain with ideas of writing newspaper articles there about the Spanish Civil War. The conflict in Spain was between the communist, socialist Republic, and General Franco's fascist military rebellion. Arriving in Barcelona, Orwell was astonished to see, as a fact of daily life for those living there, what had seemed impossible in England. Distinction in class

seemed to have vanished completely. Enlisting in the militia of POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación de Marxista), which was associated with the British Labour Party, Orwell joined in the war. Socialism, for the first time in Orwell's life, actually seemed as though it could be a reality. Orwell viewed this as something for which it was worth fighting. After receiving a basic military training, he was sent to the front in Aragon, near Zaragoza, where he had spent several months. There, he fought alongside the United Workers Marxist Party militia and had been shot through the throat by a Francoist sniper's bullet. Luckily, he survived the shot. Orwell escaped through the chaos with his wife, Eileen Blair, when Stalinists on their own side began to track down anarchists. When he returned to Barcelona, he found that it was returning to a state of normalcy without the equality that had been there earlier. The POUM were now being accused of being a fascist militia, secretly helping Franco. Orwell eventually escaped into France with his wife. The war made Orwell an even stronger opponent of communism, as well as an advocate of the English brand of socialism. After this experience in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell published *Homage to Catalonia*. Those who considered the communists to be heroes reacted to the book very coldly. He saw that true socialism could only exist ephemerally, and that class systems would always return. This is when Orwell first gains the knowledge that, despite his best wishes, communism was not the way to go. Orwell considered himself a socialist, but at no point in his life was he ever willing to give his freedom up to a dictatorship, which could do nothing but taint that which he was desiring in the first place ("Biography"; "pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair"; Widmann, Johnson).

Orwell, opposed to war with Germany, made the declaration that the British Empire was worse than Hitler. However, during World War II, Orwell served as a sergeant in the Home Guard. He had also worked as a journalist for the B.B.C., *Observer*, and *Tribune*, where he acted as literary editor. Working at the B.B.C., he noticed plenty of "bureaucratic hypocrisy." This is believed to be what provided Orwell with the inspiration for the concept of "newspeak," that is, the "truth-denying language of Big Brother's rule"

in 1984. Designed to counter German and Japanese propaganda in India, Orwell also wrote a weekly radio political commentary. Even though he was opposed to both the imperialism and the class system of England, he knew that Nazi Germany, in the end, would be able to offer people nothing of any true value, because all totalitarian dictatorships inherently corrupt anything good and distort people and institutions to the sole benefit of themselves. Toward the end of the war, Orwell wrote *Animal Farm*, which described a revolution is quickly corrupted by power (Orwell, 1993; “pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair”; Widmann).

Animal Farm

The story *Animal Farm* takes place on a farm in England. The novel starts when the oldest pig on the farm, Old Major, calls all of the animals to a secret meeting. He informs them about his dream of a revolution against the cruel Mr. Jones, the owner of the farm, who represents Czar Nicholas II and the old rule of government in Russia. Three days later Major, who represented Orwell’s desire for pure socialism, dies; but his final speech gives a new outlook on life to some of the more intelligent animals. The pigs prepare the animals for the rebellion, which is based on “animalism.” After the rebellion takes place, the farmer is no longer in control of what had been his farm. The animals, whom together now control the farm as equals, create the following rules:

1. Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy.
2. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings is a friend.
3. No animal shall wear clothes.
4. No animal shall sleep in a bed.
5. No animal shall drink alcohol.
6. No animal shall kill another animal.
7. All animals are equal.

At this point in the story, everything is going well for all the animals. They are living as

equals, as comrades. What Orwell considered socialism is working out splendidly here. But it does not last for long, for Orwell knows that true socialism never lasts for very long. Again, power easily corrupts those who have it.

The two main pig characters in the beginning of the story are Snowball and Napoleon. They often argue with one another due to their mutual hostility. Eventually Napoleon drives Snowball out of the farm via force, and accuses him of not remaining loyal. Without Snowball, the other pigs decide to do as they please; after a while, they slightly alter each of the commandments for their own benefit. For example, they changed “all animals are equal” to “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” This, to Orwell, is a direct example of how communist leaders eventually try to separate themselves from their people and elevate themselves hierarchically, which just recreates the class system that they had fought so hard to eliminate. Slowly, the pigs end up breaking every rule that had been established. They eventually take on so many corrupt characteristics that the other animals can no longer distinguish them from the humans against whom the animals had originally rebelled. The pigs become the same corrupt government that had ruled initially. For Orwell, this correlated perfectly to the Spanish Civil War, where socialism had only lasted for a short while before the system returned to the same corruption that had been present previously (Orwell, 1993; “Animal Farm”).

1984

The story *1984* takes place in 1984 in England, or as it is now called, Airstrip One. Airstrip One is the mainland of a huge country, called Oceania, which consists of North America, South Africa, and Australia. The country is ruled by “the Party,” which is led by Big Brother. The population of Oceania is divided into three parts:

1. The Inner Party (app. 1% of the population)
2. The Outer Party (app. 18% of the population)
3. The Proles

Our protagonist, Winston Smith, is a member of the Outer Party, working in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth. His job is to rewrite and alter records, such as past newspaper articles. Smith develops thoughts critical of the Party, which is the ruling dictatorship. He buys for himself a book and uses it as a diary, so that he can keep track of the real truths (as opposed to the constructed “truths” of the Party), which he is slowly forgetting. Individual expression is forbidden by the Party, and having a diary is a crime punishable by death. There are cameras everywhere, with microphones, that the Party uses to spy on people to ensure they are not committing any crimes. The last thing Smith clearly remembers is the World War, after which the party had taken control of the country; from then on it was difficult to remember anything, because the Party continually changed history to their own benefit via doublethink. The Party says that sex may only be used to produce “new material” for the Party, and that any sex for personal pleasure is a crime. When Smith thinks about the small yet oppressive Party, he concludes that the only hope lies in the proletariat who constitute over 80% of Oceania’s population. Already, Smith is reflecting Orwell’s opinions.

The following day, Smith goes to the shop where he had bought the book. Because of its warmth and its apparent lack of telescreens, he quite liked the room. While leaving the shop, he meets a dark-haired girl, whom he had seen in the Ministry of Truth, in the street. He now believes that this girl is an amateur spy or possibly a member of the Thought Police, spying on him. This same girl, later, slips him a note with “I love you” written upon it. The fact that this all takes place so clandestinely shows to the reader that, beyond walking around, few people have many rights in a totalitarian dictatorship. For a week Smith waits for an opportunity to speak with his secret admirer.

Finally he is able to meet her again, and discovers that her name is Julia. She leads him to another place where they cannot be observed. Before she takes off her blue party-overall, Julia tells Winston that she is attracted to him by something in his face that shows that he is against the Party. Smith is surprised and asks Julia if she has done such a

thing before. To his delight she tells him that she has done it bunch of times, which fills him with a great hope. Perhaps there are many others that are just as anti-Big Brother as he is. As he looks at her sleeping body, he thinks that, now, even sex is a political act. Later still, Smith sees inner-party member O'Brien, who invites Smith to his flat, ostensibly to see the latest edition of the Newspeak dictionary. Smith and Julia meet each other to go to O'Brien's flat, which naturally lies in the district of the Inner Party. They are admitted to a richly furnished room by a servant. To their amazement, O'Brien switches *off* the telescreen in the room. Normally, telescreens are impossible to turn it off. Winston blurts out why they had come: they want to work against the Party, and they believe in the existence of the Brotherhood and that O'Brien is involved therewith. O'Brien's servant brings real red wine, and they drink a toast to Emanuel Goldstein, the leader of the Brotherhood. O'Brien asks them a series of questions about their willingness to commit various atrocities on behalf of the Brotherhood and acquires their assent on each. They leave, and some days later Smith gets a copy of "the book," a book written by Emanuel Goldstein about his political ideas. It is now Hate Week, and suddenly the war with Eurasia has stopped, and a war with Eastasia has begun. This means Smith has to "correct" dozens of articles about the war with Eurasia. Nevertheless Smith finds time to read the book. The book has three chapters, titled "War is Peace," "Ignorance is Strength," and "Freedom is Slavery"—these were also the catchphrases of the party. He learns some thing from the book about the power of the Party. He learned that in becoming continuous, war has ceased to exist. The continuity of the war guarantees the permanence of the current political order. Hence the words "War is Peace." He also learns that you can never truly get away from the class system. The leaders are always on top because they control the money. And he learned that the only reason the proletariat has freedom of thought is because they do not think. This is due to doublethink.

He awakes the next day, saying, "We are the DEAD." An iron voice behind them repeats the phrase, the picture on the wall is revealed to actually be a telescreen.

Uniformed men thunder into the room, and they carry Smith and Julia out. Smith finds himself in a cell that he presumes is in the Ministry of Love. He is sick with hunger and fear, and when he makes a movement or a sound, a harsh voice will bawl at him from the four telescreens. O'Brien enters. Smith thinks that they must have got him too, but O'Brien says that they got him a long time ago. O'Brien now explains why the Party works. Through manipulation and torture, they get Smith to accept all the lies of the Party. George Orwell allowed this depressing ending to take place to show the devastation that affects everyone controlled by a totalitarian state (Orwell, 1992; "Nineteen Eighty-Four").

Conclusion

In conclusion, George Orwell proves, not only that he despises totalitarianism, which steals freedom and oppresses all except those who are in power, but he is able to base these feelings on actual experiences he has had, and support his feelings on the subject through realistic storytelling. From *Animal Farm* to *1984*, and everything in between, Orwell demonstrates how dictatorships actually work, and how they manipulate everything in their paths just to maintain complete control. There is no freedom in totalitarianism, just deceitful oppression.

Orwell never saw a "perfect government," but he never gave up hope for the future. He stands as a role model for all those who believe in political activism. By doing what he was good at, writing, he showed that one man could make an impact on the future of the world. For what would the world be like today if it had not been for Orwell's commentary on it?

George Orwell, the socialist who noticed that communism was a failed system, never lost track of the fact that, so too were all other forms of totalitarianism failed systems. Dictatorships are never the utopia they seem to be.

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