



**Between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*:
A Far Cry from Orwell's Socialism**

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However much *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World* were satirical takes on their own times they were equally warnings about the future of England and the dangers that lay in wait for a heavily centralised capitalist state that was not egalitarian in spirit or practice. After reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Aldous Huxley wrote to Orwell saying,

Infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs and prisons, and the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging and kicking them into obedience ... the nightmare of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is destined to modulate into the nightmare of a world having more resemblances to that which I imagined in *Brave New World*. The change will be brought about as a result of a felt need for increased efficiency. (CW, XX, p. 177)



There is no doubt that Britain, particularly England, is in a bad way. Catherine Mayer in March 2008 made the front cover of *Time* with her depiction of a hoodie in the centre of a torn Union Jack. The headline: 'Unhappy, Unloved and Out of Control: an epidemic of violence, crime and drunkenness has made Britain scared of its young. What's causing the crisis?' Her answer: our aggressive class system, destructive binge-drinking culture, failing education system... It goes on. She has a point.

As Tony Blair stepped down as Prime Minister there were no tears shed by a grieving public, instead there was an unprecedented outpouring of disgust at the mess he was leaving us in. Peter Davison summed up the mood:

Now, whilst Blair acts the pop-star, Brown and his close allies 'prowl and prowl' like 'the troops of Midian' two short books have been published which 'up and smite them'. One, Geoffrey Wheatcroft's *Yo Blair!*, 'demolishes the outgoing Prime Minister's character' (I quote Jeff Randall) and the other, *Fantasy Island* by Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson, exposes, as its subtitle puts it, 'the incredible economic, political and social illusions of the Blair legacy, and puts under the spotlight Brown's shared culpability'. [1](#)

There are plenty of books now 'out there' decrying the poor shape of This Sceptred Isle that Orwell and Huxley loved so much. James Bartholomew in his *The Welfare State We're In* picks up on psychologist Oliver James's research into the mental health of our nation. Bartholomew echoes James's depressing conclusions, arguing that excessive drinking and drug taking, rates of depression in children and adults, partly to do with the rocketing divorce rates, are all symptomatic of what James terms, 'psychological distress'. Psychological distress is what *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are all about.

So many aspects of English life are changing in ways that are polarizing and alienating groups of people formally connected to each other. I could mention the EU, the abolition of grammar schools, the selling off of our key industries, but I'd like to take the example of The Premier League. It was created in 1992 to take advantage of lucrative television rights which currently bring in revenues in their billions. Despite being called a league, it is a corporation with shareholders, and unlike The Football League it replaced, it is not obliged to put one penny toward the communities it "serves", and in real terms, it doesn't. Instead, it creates multi-millionaire footballers who are evolving to have a call-girl, cocaine culture (positive role models to be sure). These pampered mega-idols in their all-but armoured vehicles drive from high-security mega-stadiums, often through pretty run-down areas, to their high-security gated mini-mansions, and they are, as Bartholomew delineates, unrecognizable compared with their humble Stanley Matthews forebears who were, though infinitely skilled, as ordinary and well-behaved as the people who watched them. Today, the working classes are increasingly discouraged from attending the actual football event by soaring costs and the unavailability of seats, which go to corporate bottoms. Queues start as early as 4 am for the relatively few public tickets left. The real fans are not really wanted; better that they view the game vicariously in some pub that has paid-to-view and get sloshed on the promotional alcohol. The experience

can be nothing in comparison to the real thing, although, one often hears fans complaining that the players are not even trying, in which case everyone's "happy".

Above I quoted Huxley's letter to Orwell on why he thought England would "favour" his organization of society. It would seem that Huxley had not read Orwell's review of *Brave New World*. Orwell puts this book in context with Jack London's *The Iron Heel* and H. G. Wells's *The Sleeper Wakes*. It is worth reproducing here:

Everyone who has ever read *The Sleeper Wakes* remembers it. It is a vision of a glittering, sinister world in which society had hardened into a caste-system and the workers are permanently enslaved. It is also a world without purpose, in which the upper castes for whom the workers toil are completely soft, cynical and faithless. There is no consciousness of any object in life, nothing corresponding to the fervour of the revolutionary or the religious martyr.

In Huxley's *Brave New World* — a sort of post-war parody of the Wellsian Utopia these tendencies are immensely exaggerated. Here the hedonistic principle is pushed to its utmost, the whole world has turned into a Riviera hotel. But though *Brave New World* was a brilliant caricature of the present (of 1930), it probably casts no light on the future. No society of that kind would last more than a couple of generations, because a ruling class which thought principally in terms of a "good time" would soon lose its vitality. A ruling class has got to have a strict morality, a quasi religious belief, a *mystique*. London was aware of this, and though he describes the caste of plutocrats who rule the world for seven centuries as inhuman monsters, he does not describe them as idlers or sensualists. They can only maintain their position while they honestly believe that civilisation depends on themselves alone, and therefore in a different way they are just as brave, able and devoted as the revolutionaries who oppose them. (CW, XII, p. 211)

One has only to think of our most successful of modern politicians, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, Jack Straw, George Bush, to understand Orwell's point about leaders having unshakable self-believe. The entire population can march in its millions and shout as much as it likes that the Iraq war was and is wrong, that state schools are failing our children, that drug laws need to be amended if we are to reclaim our streets from an ever-expanding gangster culture, that our government should stop selling arms to the poorest people in the world who proceed to massacre each other (see Andrew Niccol's superb *Lord of War*), but it won't make a jot of difference. Our rulers are so isolated from us that making a fuss is futile.

In many ways our society does resemble *Brave New World* based as it is on Fordian principles of mass-production and high consumerism. The 'ending not mending' and 'the more stitches the less riches' mottos that brain-wash the *Brave New World* clones is also our mindless, reckless ethos. Our built-in-obsolescence buy one, buy one more culture exactly mirrors the endless consumption in *Brave New World*. The encouraged promiscuity, too, and of not loving any one person too much is horribly reminiscent of today, often leading to abortion as a means of contraception. In terms of *Brave New World*'s 'Cleanliness is next to Fordliness', and it's constant, 'civilization is sterilization', we have only to look at our magazines and TV screens deluging us with advertising for must-have products to make us clean, attractive and healthy: perfumes, vitamin supplements, drugs, accessories, clothes, endless stuff we have to buy to be happy, all exactly mirroring the frenzied pampering activity of the citizens in *Brave New World*. The issue of age too, that is of the idea that getting old, or looking old, is something disgraceful. In *Brave New World* it is, 'Youth almost unimpaired till sixty, and then, crack! the end' (p. 99). We can think of the still pneumatic Madonna, gyrating "her thing" post fifty with little sign of any real ageing. I can readily imagine it will be 'crack! the end' for her one day looking anything but an old woman in her coffin. Another similarity between our culture and that in *Brave New World* is our advertising slogans; they directly mirror the hypnopaedia that is pumped into the unconscious brains of the 'brave new people': 'Live life to the max – *Optimax*.' 'Lead a Muller life'. 'It's not just M&S, it's *your* M&S.' 'Find love or your money back.' And what of our cityscapes, are they not increasingly the same 'nightmare of swarming indistinguishable sameness' that horrify Bernard Marx?

The following is an exchange between 'the Savage' and the Controller, Mustapha Mond in *Brave New World*. The first part of the dialogue is the Savage.

.... 'What about self-denial, then?' If you had a God, you'd have a reason for self-denial.' 'But industrial civilisation is only possible when there's no self-denial. Self-indulgence up to the very limits imposed by hygiene and economics. Otherwise the wheels stop turning'. (p. 215-6)

We are living with this very dilemma. We know now that we're consuming ourselves into oblivion, but because of the way the economy works we can't stop it because we'll be plunged into social chaos, or so we believe. This is where possibly Orwell's nightmare vision, however much it was not meant as a true picture, may well, in the end, come about. There is nothing to consume in Winston's world, everything is in short supply. Whatever else disappears from the future (vast shopping malls, vast airports) there is no reason to believe that there will not be CCTV cameras on every wall, a strong police force, an all-encompassing television culture,

robust war mongering in order to control dwindling resources. Needless to say, there will be many freedom fighters or terrorists (depending of course whose side you're on) to justify a paranoid, spying, authoritarian ruling elite.

In *Brave New World* the World State has as its three core values 'COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY.' In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it is 'WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH'. Today, no doubt those mottos will resonate differently depending on people's circumstances, i.e. where you live. However, largely thanks to the US and the UK, one is becoming truer by the year, and that is WAR IS PEACE. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* our intimate introduction to Winston Smith is where we see him sat down at a table pouring out the first of his confused thoughts; they are his reactions to having witnessed war propaganda films:

April 4th, 1984. Last night to the flicks. All war films. One very good one of a ship full of refugees being bombed somewhere in the Mediterranean. Audience much amused by shots of a great huge fat man trying to swim away with a helicopter after him. first you saw him wallowing along in the water like a porpoise, then you saw him through the helicopters gun-sights, then he was full of holes and the sea round him turned pink and he sank as suddenly as though the holes had let in the water. audience shouting with laughter when he sank. then you saw a lifeboat full of children with a helicopter hovering over it. there was a middleaged woman might have been a jewess sitting up in the bow with a little boy screaming with fright and hiding his head between her breasts as if he was trying to burrow right into her and the woman putting her arms round him and comforting him although she was blue with fright herself, all the time covering him up as much as possible as if she thought her arms could keep the bullets off him, then the helicopter planted a 20 kilo bomb in among them terrific flash and the boat went all to matchwood. then there was a wonderful shot of a child's arm going up up up right up into the air... (p. 10)

This is Winston's initial brave determination to 'set his scattered thoughts in order'. We can read from his adjectives, 'wonderful shot', 'good' film that he is not far removed from the rest of the Party audience who find this inhuman spectacle 'amusing'. He then records a 'prole' woman reacting to the scenes, she's shouting, '*they didn't oughter of showed it not in front of kids they didn't*'. At this nascent stage in his emotional development, Winston does not understand that the prole woman's reaction is morally right and sane; he merely has contempt for her: 'typical prole reaction'.

In *Brave New World* the misfit protagonist Bernard Marx has no such sights to see—there are no wars. Today in 2008, there will be scenes as murderous as those described by Winston

happening every day, but they are not displayed for our entertainment in such a graphic and faithful way (there is a government ban, as journalist and war-correspondent Martin Bell, something of a lone voice, continually reminds us); indeed, politicians know too well that if war as it actually happened was projected onto our screens most of us would have the 'typical prole reaction' and scream for its end. But we see mostly the aftermath; the weeping relatives, beating their chests and 'wailing'. We can have no real emotional empathy with their trauma because we haven't seen their loved ones blown to pieces; if anything we look on bemused.

In *Brave New World* as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the 'proles' are left to themselves with no attempt to indoctrinate them with the ideals of the respective state ideologies. In the former they exist in sectioned off 'savage reservations'; in the latter they are housed in the 'prole quarters'. The equivalent today must surely be the benefit class who inhabit the 'Shameless' sink-estates, full of unemployment and a minimum of education, where gun and knife crime are becoming increasingly normal, where alcoholism and drug-taking is rife, where gangs of hoodies roam around with dangerous dogs looking to relieve their boredom, perhaps get their sorry mess of a life on the Jeremy Kyle show for the unreformed Winstons to have a good laugh at. We despise them, but we through our apathy created them. But for the grace of good schooling and 'a calling' go I. My state school, Norton Priory, has gone, it's been pulled down, as has my brother's—his is now a Tesco's; it was, incidentally, the same high school that John Lennon attended, Quarry Bank. My mother's grammar school, Holly Lodge, is now a comprehensive; it has sold off most of its luxurious grounds to housing developers; after attending Holly Lodge my mother landed a top job in the Civil Service. The Mersey Tool & Jig academy that gave my father an engineering apprenticeship, that kept him in solid employment his entire life, is no longer.

Thinking again of the TV comedy *Shameless*, I watched some episodes of Paul Abbot's 'hit' and at first thought it all rather good, and 'hilarious', until I saw through it and realised what it was to be celebrating what in reality is the abuse of an entire class. At the end of the first series they had the shameless families all together at one of their frequent parties, as usual involving a heavy cocktail of alcohol and cannabis; they may have been celebrating blowing up a car again—I'm not sure. The detail that stuck me, however, was their spontaneous breaking into song. It was Jerusalem. They knew all the words and patriotically chorused in tune, *Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand, till we have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land....* Sadly, the best joke of the series. I believe Paul Abbot was actually brought up on a sink-estate, and had the shiftless alcoholic father that goes with it. Shame he's content to describe that world rather than attempt to change it. Recently, a girl was shot in the head on the Gorton

estate in Manchester where *Shameless* is filmed; it was after just such a party as frequently takes place in the series. Not many laughs in that.

What is remarkable about our societies today, particularly the UK and many US cities, is that they are going backwards. It's the boring reality of a society that has no vision. I have already alluded to the drinking epidemic. Constantly, we have the spectacle of British youth behaving like the 'wrangling subhuman brutes' that George Gissing depicted in his novels set in Victorian London, at the height of the industrial revolution when London was full of displaced peasants, living in slums, desperately looking for any work they could get. Another notable backward step is the return of the servant class. Edward Luttwak in his excellent book *Turbo Capitalism* draws attention to this aspect of modern life:

Under-parlour maids are still mostly absent, but the new wave of high achievers married to other high achievers employs a great profusion of maids, baby-sitters, cooks, drivers and gardeners. Instead of being the servants of the leisured class, as in Victorian times and all previous eras, they serve an almost-no-leisure class. Only thus can demanding jobs, parenthood, tennis, cocktail parties, the theatre and more be combined; behind every woman-who-can-do-it-all success story, there are other women and men who do only one thing. [2](#)

To conclude, I feel we are somewhere between *Brave New World* and Nineteen Eighty-Four. Without question we need a way out, a way forward, a way to address this issue of society in our post-industrial, post-imperialist age. Thankfully we do not have to turn to revolutionary measures with rigid and murderously confused ideologies attached to them. Instead it must be sensible reform. A political attitude such as Orwell expert John Rodden sets out would offer a solution:

What I do know is that I subscribe to an egalitarian, anti-elitist politics at odds with traditional conservatism—and also to an anti-progressive, tradition-minded politics quite resonant with cultural conservatism. I distrust elites—whether in the form of aristocratic castes or Leninist vanguards. Like both you [Orwell] and Chesterton, both of whose thought also eluded political labels, I share a belief in the emotional sustenance of small property, a distaste for industrialism, an antagonism to monopolistic practices, and a faith in the common sense of common people (like my immigrant, working-class Irish parents).[3](#)

I believe we all need to be more antagonistic to monopolistic practices, to give common people their voice back, to be egalitarian and understand that it isn't right to allow vast ugly jobless estates to exist; and most of all, to accept that all human life should have a right to be brought

up in an intelligent, all-inclusive community. Again, we don't need to be Marxist revolutionaries with a zealous ideal of perfection in mind. As Orwell put it:

A Socialist is not obliged to believe that human society can actually be made perfect, but almost any Socialist does believe that it could be a great deal better than it is at present, and that most of the evil that men do results from the warping effects of injustice and inequality. The basis of Socialism is humanism. It can co-exist with religious belief, but not with the belief that man is a limited creature who will always misbehave himself if he gets half a chance. [4](#)

Notes

1. Peter Davison, 'Where You Know Nothing, Place Terrors', in *Britain Overseas*, vol. 37, No. 2, ed. Jim Bourlet (London: Economic Research Council, 2007), pp. 35-9, (p. 36). In this essay, Peter refers to Michael Sandle's 15 x 15 triptych showing, 'the Blairs, in puris naturalibus, shut out of their garden of Eden – 10 Downing Street – a hooded Iraqi at their feet. On the left, a soldier beats another hooded Iraqi prisoner, and on the right a pile of corpses almost obscures the windows on number 10 Downing Street. To rub in the Blairs' indignity, the Royal Academy awarded the charcoal sketch the Hugh Casson Prize' (p. 35).
2. Edward Luttwak, *Turbo Capitalism: Winners & Losers in The Global Economy* (Orion: London, 1999), p. 85. *The Lady* magazine has pages and pages devoted to advertising for every kind of domestic help, both in the UK and abroad, although mostly for jobs in London and the southern counties. Many of the advertisements are now appealing for butlers too.
3. John Rodden, *Every Intellectual's Big Brother: George Orwell's Literary Siblings* (Austin: University of Texas, 2006), p. 172.
4. Orwell, 'What is Socialism?' *The Complete Works*, vol. XVIII, pp. 60-3 (p. 63).

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