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## Orwell v Huxley: whose dystopia are we living in today?

**John Lanchester on how *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* capture the age of Facebook and Trump**

The modern world looks to many like a dystopia — a version of “the darkest timeline”, to borrow a term from the American sitcom *Community*. Whose dystopia, though? Which writer best imagined this moment of turmoil and dysfunction? The greatest contributions to the **tradition of dystopian fiction** are two defining masterpieces from the 20th century, both of them bestsellers at the time and ever since: Aldous Huxley’s 1932 *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s 1949 *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

**The two dystopias have many details in common.** Both writers saw a future shaped by weapons of mass destruction — biological and chemical weapons in Huxley’s case, nuclear war in Orwell’s. They agreed about the danger of permanent social stratification, with humanity divided into categories determined by biological engineering and psychological conditioning (Huxley) or traditional class combined with totalitarian loyalty systems (Orwell). Both men imagined future societies completely obsessed with sex, though in diametrically opposite ways: state-enforced repression and celibacy in the case of Orwell; deliberate, narcotising promiscuity in the case of Huxley.

Both men thought the future would be dominated by America. Both men thought that future governments would spend a lot of effort permanently trying to incite economic consumption — not that either man thought of anything as wildly fantastical as quantitative easing. Both began their books with a short sentence designed to signal **a world which was familiar but also disconcertingly futuristic**: “A squat grey building of only thirty-four stories,” begins *Brave New World*. We are supposed to gasp with amazement at the “only”. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* begins: “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” Thirteen! The horror!

Both men were writing warnings: “the message of the book”, said Huxley, was, “This is possible: for heaven’s sake be careful about it.” In his vision, humanity was facing a future world tranquilised by pleasure and drugs and the voluntary distractions of “civilised infantilisation”. For Orwell, humanity was facing a permanent state of war and totalitarian mind-control, summed up by the image of “a boot stamping on a human face, for ever”. For all the overlap, though, they are usually seen as contradictory, conflicting versions of the future.

The difference between the two dystopias is rooted in one of imaginative literature’s central distinctions. Many writers of speculative fiction — a term preferred over science fiction by Margaret Atwood, among others — like to stress that their work is a vision of the present,

magnified and intensified. “The future is here,” William Gibson has said, “it’s just unevenly distributed.” Atwood made it a rule in writing *The Handmaid’s Tale* that she “would not put any events into the book that had not already happened . . . nor any technology not already available. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities.” Orwell did create some technological innovations for his future world, but in essence his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a deep look into the heart of already existing totalitarian societies. Some of the details may be from the straitened world of the 1940s — the novel is pervaded by the smell of boiled cabbage — but the story goes far past that into the depths of the human heart and the totalitarian project to reshape it.

**No one could have been better placed than Orwell to see into this present and project it into the future.** His life-long involvement with leftwing ideas was both theoretical — nuances of perspectives from the Independent Labour party to the union movement through anarchism, Trotskyism and Stalinism — and directly lived. It was characteristic of him that when he went to the Spanish civil war to write about it, he found himself unable to stand back and report, but instead, once he saw the reality of what was happening, immediately joined the Trotskyist militia to fight the fascists. The utter ruthlessness with which the Soviet-backed faction suppressed the other groups on the republican side, their willingness to lie and murder their own allies, gave Orwell the impetus and insight to write his great novel about totalitarianism.

It is because of that, in this difficult historic moment, that the Orwell vs Huxley contest might seem to have been concluded in Orwell’s favour. I was recently on a plane just after the start of the school holidays, and in the course of wandering up and down the aisle, noticed the startling fact that three different young people were reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in three different languages (English, Italian, Portuguese). Not bad for a 70-year-old book. The Orwell estate has always been well run, attentive to the business of keeping his reputation in public view — that was one of the inspirations behind the creation of the annual Orwell prizes for political writing. You could even say that Sonia Orwell, who married him on his deathbed, was being attentive to his reputation in taking his pseudonym as a surname, given that his family knew him as Eric Blair. (This point was made to me by a relative of Orwell’s, someone who thrillingly-to-me knew him as Eric.)

**Nothing, however, but nothing,** could rival the sales boost provided by Donald Trump. This president embodies the insight that given a willingness to lie without compunction, norms of veracity can be abolished with extraordinary speed. **It is one of the central demands of the Party, in Orwell’s book, that you “reject the evidence of your eyes and ears”.** Trump put that maxim into effect on his very first day in office, with his insistence that people ignore the **evidence of their senses about his Inauguration day crowds.** The world is not divided up into three dominant totalitarian superstates, as in the novel, but in a time of ascendant strongmen, dictators, anti-Semites and state-sponsored liars, many of Orwell’s other prophecies have come true. Consider North Korea, an inherited communist dictatorship many of whose features — a society based on hierarchies of loyalty to the leadership — might have been directly transcribed from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Wait a minute, though. Orwell was right about many things, but Huxley was right too. Huxley's background was similar to Orwell's — not only did they both go to Eton, Huxley went back there as a young man (and even taught Orwell French). Despite that, Huxley's milieu was very different, scientific and philosophical rather than politically engaged. The Huxleys were scientific and liberal aristocracy: Aldous's great-uncle was the poet laureate Matthew Arnold; his grandfather Thomas was "Darwin's bulldog", the first high-profile public defender of Darwin's ideas; his brother Julian was a prominent biologist and public figure, the first director-general of Unesco, co-founder of the World Wildlife Fund. Julian was also a leading eugenicist, dedicated to the idea that science could be used to weed out inferior genetic stock for the public good.

The emotional texture of *Brave New World* is very different from that of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; there is a playfulness, a lightness, not at all like the grim, repressed, grey-toned landscape of Orwell's novel. The question of eugenics offers us a clue to the reason for this. Huxley was interested in eugenics, which held a fascination for many intellectuals of the left as well as of the right. He came to see it as a sinister field — correctly, since the thought that the poor have genetic traits which could and should be bred out of them is indeed one of the darkest and most dangerous ideas of the 20th century. But he had first felt the lure of the idea that modernity can improve us, that science can cure some of the pain and difficulty of being human. The fact that Huxley had been tempted by these thoughts helped him depict his ideas with a lighter, more exploratory touch than Orwell.

Huxley's dystopia was the other sort of speculative fiction from Orwell's: not a deep burrowing into the present, but a projection of existing trends into the future. He genuinely was trying to think about what the future would be, if things carried on in the direction they were headed. He was well placed to see trend lines in many of the sciences and made good guesses about where they were going. As a result, we can make a strong claim that it is he, and not Orwell, who did a better job of predicting modern life in the developed world. The revolutionary change in attitudes to sex, for instance, is not something many people foresaw in 1932, but Huxley did: the separation of sex and reproduction is complete in *Brave New World*, as it is near-complete in modern life. He guessed correctly about the development of new technologies in contraception, and guessed correctly about their consequences too.

In *Brave New World* promiscuity is not just normal, it is actively encouraged; total frankness in all aspects of sexuality, ditto. Sex is a distraction and a source of entertainment, almost a drug. Huxley would have looked at our world of dating apps and sexualised mass entertainment — and perhaps especially shows such as *Love Island* and *Naked Attraction* — and awarded his predictions a solid A+. (*Naked Attraction* is a Channel Four dating show on which people choose a partner based on whether or not they like the look of their genitals. The audience sees the genitals too. When you describe this show to people, they often think they've misunderstood, and that you can't mean that people stand with their faces concealed and their genitals exposed and are chosen by a prospective partner on that basis — but that's exactly what happens. I recommend this programme to anyone who doesn't agree that norms around

sexuality have changed.) Orwell saw a future in which the state discouraged sex. In this respect he was completely wrong and Huxley was completely right.

Huxley was also more broadly right about pleasure. Orwell wrote about a world which was sensually constrained, pinched, grey — that was one of the main respects in which he was channelling the spirit of the 1940s. Huxley looked ahead, and saw a future in which life was very pleasant — lullingly, deadeningly, numbly pleasant. Undemanding pleasures and unchallenging entertainments are central to the functioning of society. Sources of distraction play a vital role. The “feelies”, the main source of mass entertainment, are all about escape from the self. “When the individual feels, society reels,” is the motto, and every effort is made to stop people from feeling strong emotion. The preferred method for this is soma, a side-effect free drug which guarantees dissociated happiness. Here, again, Huxley could look at the modern use of antidepressants, anti-anxiety and sedative medications, and conclude that he had nailed it.

**One particular area of Huxley’s prescience** concerned the importance of data. He saw the information revolution coming — in the form of gigantic card-indexes, true, but he got the gist. It is amusing to see how many features of *Facebook*, in particular, are anticipated by *Brave New World*. *Facebook*’s mission statement “to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” sounds a lot like the new world’s motto “Community, Identity, Stability”. The world in which “we haven’t any use for old things” dovetails with Mark Zuckerberg’s view that “young people are just smarter”. The meeting room whose name is *Only Good News* — can you guess whether that belongs to Huxley’s *World Controller*, or Sheryl Sandberg? The complete ban on the sight of breast feeding is common to the novel and to the website. The public nature of relationship status, the idea that everything should be shared, and the idea that “everyone belongs to everyone else” are also common themes of the novel and the company — and above all, the idea, perfectly put by Zuckerberg and perfectly exemplifying Huxley’s main theme, that “privacy is an outdated norm”.

**This theme, of an attack on privacy, is central to Orwell’s vision too.** Thought crime is one of the most serious crimes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is at this point that we can start to see his and Huxley’s novels not as competing visions of the future but as complementary, overlapping warnings. Our world has sex on display everywhere, entertainment to take you out of your mind whenever you want, and drugs to make you stop feeling. It also has an increasing number of strongmen leaders who rewrite history and ignore the truth, and a growing emphasis on crimes-by-thought. We don’t have an official “Two Minutes Hate”, as Orwell’s state of Oceania does, but our social media equivalents come pretty close. The idea of permanent low-level war as a new norm looks a lot like our 18-year global war on terror — in fact the GWOT would fit in nicely in Orwell’s world of acronyms and Newspeak. The idea of a society permanently stratified into inherited or genetically determined social classes maps well on to a modern world where the most unequal societies are also the ones in which people are most likely to inherit their life chances.

A globally dominant society ruled by a party and a strong leader, a society which uses every possible method of surveillance and data collection to monitor and control its citizens, a society

which is also enjoying a record rise in prosperity and abundance, and using unprecedented new techniques in science and genetics — that society would look a lot like a blend of Orwell's and Huxley's visions. It would also look a lot like modern-day China. The developing Chinese "citizen score", a blend of reputational and financial and socio-political metrics, used to determine access to everything from travel and education and healthcare, is such a perfect blend of dystopias that we can only credit it to a new writer, Huxwell. Some commentators on the subject have begun saying that the citizen score is being misunderstood, that it is only a Chinese attempt to develop something as all-encompassing and socially determinative as we in the fortunate west already have with credit rating agencies. They're missing the point: that isn't what's good about the citizen score. It's what's bad about it.

Huxley and Orwell both wrote their books to try and prevent their dystopias from coming true. Their success at prophecy is also their failure — because the righter they are, the more their projects didn't do what they were supposed to. Neither man would have thought that a reason to give up hope. Their warnings are still valid. We can still change direction. There will be life after Trump and Putin. There may even be life after *Naked Attraction* and *Facebook*. Last word to Huxley, in the foreword to his dystopia, written 20 years later: "though I remain no less sadly certain than in the past that sanity is a rather rare phenomenon, I am convinced that it can be achieved and would like to see more of it".