CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

George Orwell

Nineteen Eighty-Four

1984

Presented by: Tea Hodaj

Orwell's most acclaimed novel, written in 1949, is political both because of its content (a dystopian design of a totalitarian state) and its context (the onset of the Cold War, the author's leftist orientation and his disappointment with the socialist regimes established in Europe after the end of the Second World War). Although it is sometimes read as a prophecy, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* serves as a vehicle for exploring historical themes and contexts, providing insight into events as they actually happened. Today, it is one of those novels that are universally recognized as unmistakably political novels.

In this dystopian masterpiece, characters live in a totalitarian regime, in which all aspects of life are closely monitored and controlled by Big Brother. Central to the plot is Winston Smith, an employee of the Ministry of Truth, who falls in love with Julia and starts questioning the life prescribed to him by the authorities, a life devoid of the pleasures that define humanity. Winston and Julia start harbouring rebellious thoughts in this world, where even their thoughts are said to be monitored by The Party. The Party's slogan "Big Brother is watching you" reflects the constant surveillance and monitoring of citizens by the government. A resistance movement of rebellions called The Brotherhood welcomes both Winston and Julia, only for them to be caught by the Thought Police shortly after. Tortured and threatened, Winston is mentally broken. He ends up betraying Julia (an allegory for thirst for life), and he pledges his loyalty to Big Brother. Winston's defeat symbolises the ultimate triumph of totalitarianism over individual liberty, the unfortunate reality for many lost souls under authoritarian regimes. As Lynskey (2019) calls it, "It is both a work of art and a means of reading the world".

To further deepen this argument, Lynskey reminds us of how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* came to be. Inspired by anecdotes and details unveiled in André Gide's (1869–1951) *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, but also Boris Souvarine's (1895-1984) C*auchemar en URSS: Les procès de Moscou 1936–1938*, both works of historical analysis and documentation, Orwell constructed his world in Stalinism's light. "Many of the details and anecdotes he discovered there fed into *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: the cult of personality; the rewriting of history; the obliteration of freedom of speech; the contempt for objective truth; the echoes of Spanish inquisition; the arbitrary arrests, denunciations and forced confessions; above all, the suffocating climate of suspicion, self-censorship and fear" (Lynskey 21–22).

Until Orwell wrote this dystopian fairy tale, authors such as H. G. Wells, for example, would envisage dystopian realities based on their imagination and their predictions of what the future could

look like. Yet *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was the first fully realised dystopian novel to be written 'with the knowledge' that dystopia was real. The dystopian society depicted in the novel was significantly affected by the political climate that Orwell encountered and observed in the middle of the 20th century (Al-Hilo 18), reflecting the truth-bending and narrative fabrications characterising authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Orwell seems to have had two major drives in writing this novel. Firstly, he gives us an intimate experience of what living under draconian conditions feels like: terror, constant surveillance, lack of freedom etc. Secondly, Orwell undertakes the task of unmasking the institutionalised propaganda machines. In Oceania, there are no laws, only crimes, and no distinction between thought and deed. Hence, Winston can only confess to fabricated charges of espionage, embezzlement, sabotage, murder, sexual perversion and so on, while believing on some level that he is indeed guilty. "All the Confessions that are uttered here are true," says one of the novel's characters: "We make them true."

Ultimately, reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a political novel is unthinkable without considering the political life of its author who poured his political beliefs into his writings, attacking tyranny, dictatorship, and imperialism. Experiencing the world wars, as well as being at the very frontline of war, Orwell's books serve as vivid narrations of the European past. Guided by his idealism and overlapping beliefs, Orwell lived an adventurous and eventful life: starting from his earlier years in colonial India, during which he served in the Imperial Police in Burma (Myanmar), to his abrupt decision to live among the poor in England and France (1930) and then his idealistic participation in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the armed struggle against Fascism, where his anarchist beliefs resulted in condemnation by the Soviet-dominated propaganda, to finally witnessing the Blitz (1940–1941), a sustained bombing campaign conducted by Nazi Germany against Britain during World War II. Orwell's criticism of imperialism, social injustice, inequality and totalitarianism were empirically influenced by these experiences, which also were an odyssey of self-discovery.

Until the end of his life, Orwell acknowledged that microbes of everything he criticised existed in himself (Lynskey 8). Identifying as a socialist, when he was invited to deliver a speech at the League for European Freedom, he refused and declared that he could not respect an organisation which championed freedom in Europe but not in India. "I belong to the Left and must work inside it," he wrote, "much as I hate Russian totalitarianism and its poisonous influence on this country" (Lynskey 141). In line with this, the author later maintained that it was not before the destruction of the Stalinist or Soviet myth that the revival of the socialist movement would gain force. This is then the reason he devoted much of his work, e.g. the novels *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to the ideological pathways of the Left in the 20th century. Orwell's fervent critique of Soviet-type socialism, as opposed to the rarer critique of Fascism, is quite straightforward. He saw both forms of political rule as stages leading to a dictatorial end, helping zealous politicians hide behind what they claimed to be noble aims. As for socialism, in a time when right-wing dictatorships were commonly condemned as evil, socialism was highly appealing to the people. While among the literary intelligentsia, fascism was a mucky vice, socialism "had an almost irresistible fascination for any writer under forty" (Lybensky 23).

In the Cold War climate, it is unsurprising that *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* weren't read merely as a testament to Orwell's disappointment in Stalin's socialism, but were made out to be a wholesale dismissal of communism in its entirety. With *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in particular, American

and Western agencies took the liberty of branding the novel as an ‘anti-communist’ piece. These agencies coined the term ‘soft propaganda’, leveraging cultural products such as media, music, literature and art to shape the perceptions and beliefs of the people. In the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, they framed and skewered the public’s perception of Orwell's intended political message, by painting the author as a ‘capitalist hero’ or an ‘anti-communist crusader’. While Orwell was indeed a staunch opponent of Soviet socialism, in an act of cherry-picking, they purposely omitted Orwell’s primary purpose in his literary efforts, which was, as he himself stated: “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it.” (Orwell 1946) Understanding himself to be a socialist, Orwell attacked all forms of tyranny and colonialism without discrimination, and his efforts to capture the miserable life of the working class in England and France do not align at all with the picture that these Western agencies painted of him during the Cold War. Unfortunately, the misconceptions about Orwell’s political beliefs persist to this day, even though there is no common ground between Orwell's political ideals and the role the USA and the West assumed during and after the Cold War.

References

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