

WAS ORWELL RIGHT?

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I heard many times in the last decade from people practicing various esoteric religions, that 1984 was supposed to be a year of world-wide disaster, with at least our modern version of Sodom and Gomorrah, California, slipping into the ocean; George Orwell was not the only one to assign 1984 great significance as a year of trouble for mankind. The year seems to have taken on some of the significance that the millenium had for medieval Europe, when it was so widely expected that Christ's second coming would take place that there was a general decline of economic and culture activity leading up to the year 1000. When the year passed without the expected end of the world, Europe saw a renewed surge of energy and industry on many fronts. Perhaps now that 1984 has passed, we can hope for a similar renaissance.

I was surprised and dismayed last year when I heard a colleague of ours give an address on "1984" in which he claimed that Orwell was wrong, and that little of what Orwell predicted has come to pass. I want to begin by disputing that claim. In the first place, Orwell, in describing the world as shabby in material accomodations (depressing buildings, low quality food, etc.), totalitarian, run by a bureaucracy (a privileged minority class) which constantly rewrites history and keeps the masses of society ignorant, which uses war as a scapegoat, a device for distracting people from their own woes and directing their hatred from their oppressors to a supposed external enemy, etc., was specifically critical of the communism of his day. We can see that his description is very close to what is the case today in Russia and Eastern Europe. Then one might reply that Orwell may have been right about one-third of the world, but he was not right about those same conditions prevailing in America and Western Europe. I would like to investigate whether or not that is true. Let us remember that Orwell described the world as divided into three warring spheres, Eurasia (Russia and continental Europe--he was close there), Eastasia (the weakest of the three superpowers--China, Japan and fluctuating borders in Mongolia and surrounding areas--I think with the exception of Japan he was basically right), and Oceania (the Americas, England, Southern Africa, Australasia--here, if we subtract Cuba and add Japan and Western Europe, he was basically right--after all, borders do fluctuate with the misfortunes of war). And doesn't Eastasia largely fit his description? Then the key question is to what extent Oceania fits his description. My position is that it is much closer than my colleague believed.

Let us begin with the extent to which Oceania is ruled by a privileged bureaucracy (a managerial-technocratic-military minority) as are Eurasia and Eastasia. If we will begin by considering that most of "our" working class living in shabby conditions are the poor workers working in factories, mines and plantations controlled by our multi-national corporations in Latin America, East and South Asia and the other "third-world countries", often ruled by military dictatorships supported with U.S. aid, then the situation in part of Oceania seems to me worse than described by Orwell. There people are kept in poverty, ignorance, fear, economic slavery, etc. with the conscious complicity of our government, because it is in "our" (somebody's) selfish economic and political interest. I do not want to focus there, but rather here at home.

I

"Freedom is Slavery; Ignorance is Strength" (and Wealth is Poverty)

The slogans from Orwell's "Ministry of Truth" were "War is peace; Freedom is slavery; Ignorance is strength". In the United States today the media are controlled in large part by the multinational corporations who own something like 80% of the newspapers, television and radio stations, magazines, etc. They tell us what it is in their selfish interests to tell us, and how it is in their interests to tell us. The dominance of the market economy pervades all domains of our society. Our leisure time is more and more based on what profits big business (expensive jogging equipment, expensive campers and boats, etc.). But a concurrent phenomenon is that increasingly wealth is poverty. Not only do I mean that in the obvious sense that the vast wealth of a capitalist (some years ago John D. Rockefeller had an income of one million dollars a day) depends on workers getting low wages (some workers on American owned sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic today earn \$150 a year), or that the vast wealth of America depends on the poverty of the Third World, or even of future Americans from whom we are robbing the wealth of non-renewable resources and whose air and water and soil we are destroying with long-lasting pollution. No, I mean this in the more insidious sense that our vast wealth is accompanied by unaesthetic and unlivable cities, a cultural desert, a damaged environment, a depressed, suicidal, mentally disturbed, crime-ridden population; a destruction of cultural values, bombardment by advertising which is aesthetically wretched (though it is often the most sophisticated entertainment our media has to offer), which fragments information

and creates an unending wealth of unsatisfiable desires. Our material wealth is accompanied by the poverty and alienation of our lives. We are enslaved to a media-created world of desires.

Herbert Marcuse, in "Repressive Tolerance" agreed with John Stuart Mill that "tolerance is an end-in-itself" and the precondition for a humane society, however, in our society tolerance is extended to policies and modes of behavior which impede the development of an existence without fear and misery for most of mankind.¹ Radical evil ought not to be tolerated; the "moronization of children" by television and movies, advertising and propaganda, war toys, "outright deception in merchandising, waste and planned obsolescence", are the essence of a repressive system.² We might add another radical evil which ought not to be tolerated: as Erick Fromm³ pointed out, there are many forms of doublethink practiced in our society, such as including in the "Free World" the dictatorships in Latin America, South Africa and elsewhere.

Marcuse claimed that free and equal discussion works only if it is rational, but the "free marketplace of ideas", like the economic one, tends toward monopoly,⁴ and information is structured by the way it is presented.⁵ In One-Dimensional Man, Marcuse says that reason is turned to unreason by isolation from its context, for abstraction from the context of the whole falsifies information.⁶ Our news media, and even academia, fragments a wealth of information and all too often presents it to us out of the context of any whole so that we are left with a poverty of understanding of what is really going on around us. Society is irrational as a whole, though it appears to be the very embodiment of reason,⁷ reason being the faculty for distinguishing true from false, what is from what appears to be.⁸ Art, politics, religion and philosophy are reduced to commodities, and it is exchange value, not truth, which counts.⁹ Some of our colleagues are now advertising their courses in the competition for students.

Our productive apparatus becomes totalitarian: it determines not only our work skills and attitudes, but also our needs and aspirations.¹⁰ It is a non-terroristic totalitarianism which operates by "manipulation of needs by vested interests."¹¹ Marcuse distinguishes true needs from false needs. True needs are "the vital ones--nourishment, clothing, lodging at the attainable level of culture."¹² True needs can be determined by individuals themselves when they are free, rational, and autonomous. False needs are those "superimposed on the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice;"¹³ and may seem immediately gratifying to the individual, but they serve to arrest his ability to see the damage to the whole, his real long-run interest. They include wasteful production and consumption, the "need for

stupifying work", modes of relaxation which prolong stupification, so-called "free competition at administered prices" (another form of double-speak), a "free press which censors itself", a "free choice between brands and gadgets".¹⁴ We have, as Orwell portrayed, the potential for progress toward an amelioration of the human condition, for material production could be automated so that "all vital needs can be satisfied, while necessary labor time is reduced to marginal time".¹⁵ Instead, life is reduced to a means: slavery is not heavy labor but the reduction of the laborer to a thing, a tool. Reification is totalitarian because though Orwell claims it is a matter of power for the privileged, I agree with Marcuse who claims everyone is trapped by the system.¹⁶

II "War is Peace"

The 1984 U.S.A. administration has only taken one step farther the logic which prevailed under previous Republican and Democratic administrations: one must build bigger and better and more destructive military forces in order to keep peace. One must be on the verge of the total destruction of mankind in order to save it. Tacitus said: "They created a desert and called it peace"; we may turn the whole earth into a lifeless desert, and rest in the ultimate peace. This is the place I must disagree with Orwell, for Orwell claimed that the superpowers would never use nuclear weapons, for they learned how destructive they were before 1984.

The Russians have claimed that they are going into a "launch on warning" posture in response to the "first strike" potential of our Pershing and Cruise missiles. This is particularly dangerous when we consider that in the past we have had numerous instances when our radar or computer systems have given us faulty information about incoming missiles. In one instance, I know of a situation when we had only 30 minutes in which to decide whether to launch our missiles before their purported missiles would hit us; it took 23 minutes to figure out that we had received faulty computer information. But neither we nor the Russians will have 23 minutes this year, because it takes our new missiles less than 10 minutes to reach their targets. And it is speculated that they have the capacity to disable not only Russian missiles with their greater accuracy and penetrating power, but they may have the capacity to disrupt Russian command and control systems, thus presenting a very dangerous "first strike" capability. And, their submarine launched missiles could disrupt our communications systems with an electromagnetic pulse from an exoatmospheric explosion in seven minutes after launch.¹⁷ The Russians have less capable computers

and a ponderous chain of command for decision-making; I speculate that it is for these reasons that they have gone on "launch on warning", which makes the world more highly susceptible than before to a nuclear holocaust by computer or radar error.

It seems to me that the so-called "logic" of the traditional argument for nuclear deterrence, since World War II, has gone something like this:

- (1) We want to avoid harm to our nation.
- (2) We are threatened with harm by another nation so we must defend ourselves from that nation's threat.
- (3) The way to deter that nation's threat is with an adequate counter-threat (nuclear destruction).
- (4) Such counter-threat will only be effective if we intend to actually use it under certain conditions (since non-intention could easily be detected by the other side).
- (5) Such use will entail the destruction of the nation.

Since (4) and (5) (we must be ready to use weapons which will destroy us) contradicts (1) (we want to avoid harm to our nation), the argument is obviously absurd, but it is a paradox which has worked so far because of the specific nature of the "certain conditions" under which we would use these weapons. Those conditions were, until now, the supposition that neither side wanted to be destroyed by the other side, and would show restraint. The problem is that the conditions have changed. New weapons systems make possible a preemptive strike against command and communication centers before the other side could defend itself, and the situation makes such a preemptive strike more tempting to each side. Also the shortened strike time of new missiles makes warning, decision and launch times much shorter and subject to computer and radar errors, forcing each side to go on "launch on warning". The chances of nuclear war by error or intention are thus increased, and some in the 1984 U.S.A. administration have spoken of fighting and "winning" a limited nuclear war in which the loss of 100 million American lives would be acceptable! Acceptable to whom I might ask? Surely not to the dead; nor to the living who would lose everything of value nuclear power was supposed to defend.

New scientific evidence supports what many of us long feared; the consequences of a nuclear war are likely to be far more disastrous than previously generally suspected. If only 100 of the 12,000 or more available megatons of nuclear explosive were detonated on the cities the consequences are likely to include (1) a nuclear winter of below freezing temperature and pitch-black night over much or all of the globe, killing people directly, freezing their

water supplies, stopping most or all agricultural production, destroying whole species and much of the ecosystem and causing tremendous weather disturbances, (2) the reduction of the ozone layer so that when the sun did come back, animals and even pollinating insects would be blinded, resistance to disease would be drastically reduced, the very sensitive phyto-plankton, base of the ocean life-chain would be reduced drastically, and many plants would be destroyed, (3) vast amounts of radiation and pyro-toxin (such as dioxin) would be released into the environment so that since each of these conditions would weaken human beings and make them more susceptible to the other conditions--all this along with psychological stress, the destruction of the economic system, the destruction of medical facilities, cultural and social institutions, etc.--the result would be the reduction of homo sapiens to prehistoric levels, the possible extinction of the human race altogether.¹⁸ Given that, what could possibly be gained by a nuclear exchange that would be worth the sacrifice? Certainly not "freedom", "the preservation of Capitalism and the American way of life" or any of the other values nuclear weapons are said to be built in the name of.

It seems to me that war is so immoral under any conditions that it represents one of the infantilisms of the human race, and that we must aim at a time when we have become mature enough to give up all forms of war; but in the meantime, nuclear war presents such a clear and present danger to all nations that we have a clear mutual selfish interest in finding some way to make sure it can never occur. When the superpowers come to realize this, ideological differences notwithstanding, they must begin to negotiate a reduction of the total world nuclear weapon stockpile, if not to zero, at least to below the point at which use of those weapons could destroy all life on earth, or the human race, or even advanced industrial civilization as we know it, even at the risk of conventional warfare. I would even advocate a unilateral reduction of our weapons to below the level at which use of all our weapons could bring on nuclear winter, as a basis for negotiation, on the premise that the other side could not use more than that without committing suicide. All other moral considerations must have lower priority, for survival is the precondition of any morality at all in the universe so far as we know it.

Orwell was probably right about totalitarianism, possibly wrong about us avoiding nuclear war. But to overcome the threat of nuclear war might be the first step in breaking the bonds of a totalitarian system, and moving toward a rational one.

NOTES

1. Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance", Wolff, Moore and Marcuse, A Critique of Pure Tolerance, (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1969), p. 82.
2. Ibid, p. 83.
3. Erich Fromm, "Afterward", in George Orwell, 1984, (New York: Signet, 1981), p. 264.
4. Marcuse, Op. Cit., p. 93.
5. Ibid., p. 97.
6. Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, Beacon, Boston, 1967, p. 190.
7. Ibid, p. IX.
8. Ibid, p. 124.
9. Ibid, p. 57.
10. Ibid, p. XV.
11. Ibid, p. 3.
12. Ibid, p. 5.
13. Ibid
14. Ibid, p. 7.
15. Ibid, p. 16.
16. Ibid, p. 33.
17. John Steinbrunner, "Launch under attack", Scientific American, January, 1984.
18. Ehrlich, Et. Al., "Long-term Biological Consequences of Nuclear War", and Turco, Et. Al., "Nuclear Winter: Global Consequences of Multiple Nuclear Explosions", Science, Vol. 222,23 December 1983.