



THE CITIZEN'S VOICE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICS AND LITERATURE

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Resisting Big Brother

During the Cold War it was customary to discuss Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and other dictatorships under the heading of “totalitarianism.”¹ This term was defined as the subordination of whole societies to the control of single political parties and was considered part of the malaise of modernity by Hannah Arendt,² Carl Friedrich,³ Jacob Talmon,⁴ and other analysts who were both horrified and fascinated by its vitality.

George Orwell’s *1984*, published in 1948, became a major literary expression of the totalitarian phenomenon. Its publication at the beginning of the Cold War led to its consideration in the West as an account of life in Stalinist Russia: “big brother” reflected the cult of personality, “doublethink” the use of systemic lies, and the “two minutes of hate,” the diversion of attention from the regime’s troubles to internal or external enemies.⁵ In the year 1984, many symposia were held in which *1984* served as a standard by which democratic societies measured their closeness or remoteness from the totalitarian phenomenon.⁶

Here, I would like to take a post-Cold-War perspective and suggest that Orwell's negative utopia, and the warnings conveyed by its main character, Winston Smith, could be seen as addressed at all twentieth-century political systems, not only those defined as totalitarian. I do not refer to the common argument that Orwell issued a warning to the democratic states they may turn totalitarian. I claim that the book can be read as a political pamphlet about "politics as usual." *1984* is a book about power in any state written by an intellectual who understood its meaning in the fullest sense.

Orwell's insights into the nature and effects of power could be partly attributed to his life story. He was born in 1903 as Arthur Eric Blaire, the son of an official of the British administration in Bengal. After graduating from various boarding schools, he served in the imperial police in Burma. As he writes in his memoirs, this experience taught him the meaning of authority; in observing an execution he internalized, for instance, what it means to take a human life. In his short story "Shooting an Elephant," relating to his days in Burma, inner knowledge of the colonial experience was demonstrated.

Orwell became a moderate socialist, expounding in his writings the cause of the working classes, and volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War where he was badly injured. His experience in Spain taught him of the deceit practiced by the Soviet Union, and his service in the BBC during World War II further taught him that all societies employ deceit.⁷ In his two celebrated novels *Animal Farm* and *1984* he did not leave much hope for the democratic world.

Particularly pessimistic is the scene in *1984* in which party official O'Brien, representing crude totalitarianism, holds a lengthy conversation with Winston Smith while torturing him. The latter's feeling that a whole civilization could not be based on fear, hatred, and cruelty is dismissed by O'Brien, who knows that all the norms that could restrain the evil mind had been lost. Winston brings up his belief in human nature and claims it would be outraged by totalitarianism and turn against it, but O'Brien reminds him that the regime creates human nature. Nor does Kantian humanism bear any hope because it lost its validity with the death of God:

'There is something in the universe – I don't know, some spirit,
some principle – that you will never overcome'

'Do you believe in God, Winston?'

'No'
'Then what is it, this principle that will defeat us?'
'I don't know. The spirit of Man'
'And you consider yourself a man?'
'Yes'
'If you are a man, Winston, you are the last man. Your kind is
extinct ...'⁸

It is hard to believe that just two decades ago these lines on the extinction of humanism were attributed to totalitarian regimes or, when applied to democratic regimes, were merely seen as a warning, not a reflection of life in a democracy. During the Cold War, analysts were reluctant to apply Orwell's negative utopia directly to Western democracies. There are of course major differences between totalitarian and democratic states. Human rights, the rule of law, freedom of expression, and other democratic norms and practices are invaluable and citizenship in a free country cannot be compared to life in a totalitarian dictatorship. However, twentieth-century democracies have also witnessed the demise of those ethical principles that allowed individuals to resist the fear, hatred, and cruelty found in all political regimes.

The tortured Winston who lost the ethical base of resistance speaks for many inhabitants of democratic states. The lack of civility stemming from the demise of the norms that brought it into being applies both to the case of totalitarianism and to "politics as usual." *1984* is as much a book about London of 1948 as about Russia under Stalin or Germany under Hitler. The totalitarian insinuations add to the drama, but Winston Smith may be seen as an individual facing politics, any politics.

On the first page of the book we are introduced to Winston Smith who is thirty-nine years old and walks slowly because he has a varicose ulcer above his right ankle. At the end of the book, after his dramatic encounters with the state, he still remains the same person: "I'm thirty-nine years old. I've got a wife that I can't get rid of. I've got varicose veins. I've got false teeth."⁹ Winston lives in a totalitarian state that provides "victory gin" in the workplace. As an ordinary person, he is more concerned with the burning he feels in his belly as a result of drinking that cheap gin than with its silly label. Therefore, like most ordinary persons, he is mainly confused by the political communications around him, which do not make much sense but

cannot be ignored either. He is exposed to messages and images, such as that of a lifeboat full of children with a helicopter hovering over it, which, in his mind, turn into a “stream of rubbish.”¹⁰ Winston Smith assumes someone is probably making sense of it all, but he does not.

The difficulty to make sense of the political information in the surroundings is not unique to residents of totalitarian regimes. On any given day, citizens of the world’s democracies have access to more information than they could absorb in a lifetime. Here are just the headlines of the CNN website on the day in which these lines are written (7 February 2003). They resemble no less a “stream of rubbish” if only for their sheer quantity.

The website includes a “breaking news” section announcing that “Terror Threat ‘High.’” The word “high” appears in quotation marks, which raises immediately doubts as to whether the threat is really high or whether it had only been presented as such by some government official. Three government officials in black suits are shown near the Republic’s flag in a photograph. The website produces terrifying information, which is particularly terrifying because very few readers can do anything about it. “For only the second time ever, the U.S. has raised the national terror threat level from ‘elevated’ to ‘high,’” a headline says.

The rising of the threat level was allegedly done because of threats to hotels, apartment buildings, and other “soft” targets, yet, those living in these soft targets can hardly prepare for the unspecified threats. They can only assume, after Winston Smith, that the government officials in the photograph had a good reason to make the announcement. The website also tells the reader that the warnings issued to them were based on “specific intelligence,” and that “fear of chem-bio attack grows.” The fear can be assumed to grow if only because “chem-bio” sounds much more scary than “chemical biological.”

These headlines are accompanied by “top stories” about shuttle Columbia’s wing damage, a snow emergency in D.C., a slower than expected jobless rate, readiness of the nation for any North Korean contingencies, the expression of hope by a former president that Saddam Hussein will “come to his senses,” and many other headlines concerning technological business and entertainment news of questionable relevance to most individuals faced by the information, e.g., “New ‘Potter’ to sell for record price.”

With an overflow of information, citizens turn apathetic. Apathy is embodied in 1984 in the character of Julia, who couldn't care less if the party did or did not invent airplanes. Winston Smith spends a frustrating quarter of an hour arguing with her over it, getting annoyed when she does not even notice that the name of her country's enemy had changed, but why should it matter? Julia's response is typical of citizens faced with information that makes no sense because it is not placed within relevant categories:

'Who cares?' she said impatiently, 'it's always one bloody war after another, and one knows the news is all lies anyway.... She became bored and confused and said that she never paid any attention to that kind of thing. One knew that it was all rubbish, so why let oneself be worried about it?'¹¹

Public opinion polls indicate that this approach to politics is quite common. Individuals are mainly ambivalent about the discrepancy between their bond to the regime they belong to and their realization that most of the time the regime is not concerned with their well-being. Winston Smith reflects that ambivalence when he participates in the hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness organized by the regime in the two minutes of hate against its enemy. He participates in the hate scene even though his heart goes out to the lonely, derided addressee of the two minutes of hate, and he knows that his rage is "an abstract."¹² This ceremony is taken from the world of totalitarianism, but Winston Smith speaks for all citizens who feel that the political rhetoric addressed at them is not genuine and that the policies they help execute by nature of their political participation may be wrong.

Frustrated over his participation in the self-hypnotic acts demanded in the political process, Winston Smith writes on paper in large neat capital letters "down with big brother." In this quiet rebellion he reflects the frustration democratic citizens often feel towards institutions, such as the internal revenue service, which are ever-present in their lives. Citizens in democracies are not immune from the feeling that "the Thought Police would get him just the same,"¹³ because they are no less guilty of the thought crime committed by Winston Smith. It is the crime of feeling in one's bones that despite one's participation in the ceremonies and rituals of politics, e.g., allowing candidates who couldn't care less about their well-being to shake

their hands during election campaigns, something deep down in the political association between individuals is wrong.

This feeling stems from a fundamental problem built into any political system: its need for cognitive and emotional submission that is hard to achieve even after endless efforts at civic education. Even when they believe that their submission to the rules of the state is contractual, individuals are reluctant to give up their natural liberty. Orwell considers politics a maturation process in which we are torn from “a time when there were still privacy, love, and friendship, and when the members of a family stood by one another without needing to know the reason.”¹⁴ The political association is an abstract entity composed of individuals who find it difficult to relate to its abstract nature and may thus be accused of “thought crimes.” They may be willing, in principle, to pay taxes to the state but feel differently about it the moment they have to put the check in the mail. Therefore, Orwell touches upon a hidden nerve when he describes the individual’s constant fear of a knock on the door. Like Kafka, he was aware that even the most innocent citizen may expect a knock on the door, and like Kafka he realized that the worse thing of all is its delay, often for a whole lifetime.

The knock on the door has become so much a symbol of totalitarianism that it is hard to associate it with life in a democracy, but democratic citizens are also often preoccupied as taxpayers, drivers, or pot smokers with ways to avoid punishment by the state. States differ, of course, in many ways – the banners, processions, slogans, games, and community hikes are never the same, nor is the degree of freedom allowed the individual and the severity of punishment inflicted for violations of the law. But citizens everywhere have no way to obey all the laws, hence the universal preoccupation with ways to survive in the state. One need not live in Stalinist Russia in order to recognize the following insights:

If you kept the small rules you could break the big ones.... The clever thing was to break the rules and stay alive all the same ... accepting the Party as something unalterable, like the sky, not rebelling against its authority but simply evading it, as a rabbit dodges a dog.¹⁵

There are always those who take part in the political process more enthusiastically than others, but in this novel there is no fundamental difference between the two types; government officials in *1984* do not seem much different from ordinary citizens. Party official O'Brien, a large, burly man with a thick neck and a coarse, humorous, brutal face, who evokes a momentary hush when he passes by, is fully integrated into the political system but does not look like a monster. To the contrary, like many politicians, he possesses a certain charm of manner, and Winston Smith even trusts him. It is the trust often displayed vis-à-vis teachers, school principals, drill sergeants, bosses in the workplace, judges, and political officials who are feared and respected at the same time. O'Brien "had a trick of resettling his spectacles on his nose which was curiously disarming – in some indefinable way, curiously civilized."¹⁶ Paradoxically, he continues to look civilized throughout the book because he is part of a culture that respects officials "that you could talk to."¹⁷ This culture is not confined to totalitarian regimes but to every political setting in which some people are dependent on others who make decisions that affect their lives.

Another figure, Tom Parsons, represents the ultimate government official on whom the stability of the regime depends, but when we meet him in his home, he also does not look different from any ordinary person: his wife, for example, is preoccupied with a clot of human hair blocking up a water pipe. Other officials are no less ordinary:

It was curious how that beetlelike type proliferated in the Ministries: little dumpy men, growing stout very early in life, with short legs, swift scuttling movements, and fat inscrutable faces with very small eyes.¹⁸

The fact that those who constitute the backbones of the political regime seem ordinary does not mean they do not possess great power. On the contrary, Winston Smith realizes that the Tom Parsons of the world will never be vaporized like the rest of us. They will last forever because no political system can do without the eyeless creature with the quacking voice that scuttles so nimbly through the labyrinthine corridors of power.

This is not to say that political recruitment in democratic and totalitarian regimes is the same and that political behaviors in free and dictatorial political

systems do not differ in many ways. It may be said, however, that Orwell's negative utopia is quite reflective of the contemporary world whose efforts at democratization do not diminish many of the ills underlying the world of *1984*. I would like to emphasize three such ills we live with in the present: the rise of a technocratic elite, the omnipotence of the mass media, and the loss of historical memory.

A technocratic elite is one using the products of technology without commitment to any norms beyond the endurance of technology itself. This is why many technological developments with a potential to benefit the human race are met with fear. Whatever its potential benefits, technology becomes scary when the elites controlling it are not committed to civility. We refer to techniques as "Orwellian" not so much when those in control are evil but when they remain faceless. This is when techniques such as computerized files holding information about our private affairs, cameras monitoring our activities at work or during our leisure time, orbiting satellites reading our car's license plates, or means of wiretapping our telephone calls and e-mails frighten us the most.

The danger stems mainly from the rise of a new class of technocrats whose interest in the applications of technology is smaller than its interest in its development. Observers have often considered the rise of technocracy in the post World War II world as a blessing, but Orwell highlighted the dangers stemming from its interest in maintaining its power:

The new aristocracy was made up for the most part of bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organizers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists, and professional politicians. These people, whose origins lay in the salaried middle class and the upper grades of the working class, had been shaped and brought together by the barren world of monopoly industry and centralized government. As compared with their opposite numbers in past ages, they were less avaricious, less tempted by luxury, hungrier for pure power, and, above all, more conscious of what they were doing and more intent on crushing opposition.¹⁹

Obviously, the methods used to crush opposition differ from one regime to the other, but the above paragraph refers to a familiar process in which

technical means and a sheer hunger for power determine policy rather than any consistent value system. When values are either non-existent or serve as a disguise for power, the new class of technocrats becomes a threat. Once technology is used to perpetuate itself, or the power of its holders, be they scientists or politicians, democratic politics loses its meaning.

A second feature developed in 1984 that we live with in the present is the power of the mass media. Thomas Cooper has pointed at six components of what he called "Media Fascism"²⁰ foreseen in the book. These include the abolition of pluralism by a homogenizing mass media, the rise of television figures such as Walter Cronkite to positions of mental authority, the subjection of individuals to one-sided communication, the suppression of non-conformism, the restriction of language to appropriate thought forms, and the destruction of truth, reality, integrity, human dignity, and individual purpose. Towards the end of the twentieth century, these components seemed less threatening with the greater choice individuals got over the media they consume, especially with the introduction of cable TV, the VCR, and DVD and the Internet. With greater choice over channels, with the spread of interactive media and the endless opportunities at individual development opened by the Internet, the mass media could no longer be easily described as "big brother." Where Orwell's relevance remained, however, and even increased compared to the early years of the Cold War, was in the insights he proposed on the very presence of media in a person's life. However pluralistic the media, the subjection of individuals to hours of television watching or Internet surfing takes its toll, especially in the detachment from reality caused by the media.

The society Winston Smith lives in is a mass society in which the image of "big brother" is encountered everywhere: "on coins, on stamps, on the cover of books, on banners, on posters, and on the wrapping of a cigarette packet – everywhere."²¹ But one image need not be so dominant in order for individuals to be controlled by images. As a result of the lack of means of surveillance, says Orwell in 1984, all the tyrannies of the past were half-hearted and their ruling groups were infected to some extent by liberal ideas – even the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages was tolerant by modern standards. With the invention of print, however, it became easier to manipulate public opinion. Film and radio carried the process further, and with television private life came to an end.

Orwell understood the pacifying power of written and electronic media whose main feature is their constant presence. In a house in which the TV set is on for many hours, the endless images drown out human energy and creativity. It is not just the information transmitted by the media but the very fact that it is transmitted in large quantities that assures political control. Whether it stems from totalitarian intentions, or from commercial interests in capitalistic societies, the penetration of mostly useless data into the minds of individuals turns the latter into submissive objects. Orwell exposed the horror implied by the very magnitude of information. When Winston Smith engages in the manipulation of government data in the ministry of truth (in charge of lying) it is not just the lies that stand out but the activity itself which reveals the entire flow of information in society to be nothing but the substitution of one piece of nonsense for another. The following paragraph may be seen as a comment on the modern mass media:

Most of the material that you were dealing with had no connection with anything in the real world, not even the kind of connection that is contained in a direct lie.²²

The press in *1984* is described as rubbish newspapers, containing almost nothing except sport, crime, and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs. The subjects of Orwell's negative utopia are overwhelmed by telescreens bruising everyone's ears with statistics proving that people live longer, work shorter hours, and are bigger, healthier, stronger, happier, more intelligent, and better educated than the people of fifty years ago. This description can be easily applied to present-day newspapers, radio, and TV channels using similar rhetoric to sell products and dreams. And although the Internet was expected to provide individuals with more choice over content, Internet providers were so far quite skillful in forcing users to face lots of trivial material in their surfing. Internet surfers are familiar with little boxes filled with ads, cartoons, technical warnings, and other unwanted information popping up. While the Internet has given us amazingly fast and effective access to data, it has also made us consumers of much useless and undesired information we encounter in its majestic world.

It may seem paradoxical to consider the Internet, which opens up to so many possibilities, as an Orwellian telescreen, but if we consider the

relationship established by Orwell between excessive communication and control, the Internet cannot be excluded. In the last decade of the twentieth century, millions began to engage in online communication giving them the feeling of contact with other individuals. Online opinion sharing, love making or chess playing allowed people to bridge distances and avoid loneliness. They made new acquaintances, shared ideas, downloaded music, and received news. However, the Internet is also related to two phenomena that potentially subject individuals to political control: addiction and alienation.

Internet addiction, as part of more general computer addiction, has been described as a pathological disorder consisting of craving or compulsion, loss of control, and persistence that can't be helped despite its adverse consequences, such as the neglect of family life.²³ Millions of individuals found themselves thinking about their computer, obsessively checking their e-mail, or spending long nights in chat rooms – pathological behaviors resulting, like gambling or alcohol addiction, in apathy, anger, and fatigue, which can be easily exploited by powers providing the missing stimulation. A night spent in a chat room may be exciting but also alienating because the entire experience is mostly conducted in physical seclusion and involves a great potential of deceit. The human alienation involved is quite unclear yet, but it definitely requires consideration. So does the new phenomenon of “blogs,” online diaries followed daily by thousands of surfers who have been found to turn to their favorite bloggers as main sources of political information in time of crisis and war,²⁴ which also involves a great potential of political control.

The third Orwellian feature relevant to today's world is the loss of memory, which is the main source of political control in *1984* and involves, in my opinion, the most important message conveyed by Winston Smith. By describing a political regime that destroys historical memory as a means to terrorize a population, Orwell brought to light the political implications of historical amnesia in today's world. In this regard, he may be seen as a prophet of post-modernism. Post-modernism is the contemporary intellectual trend, prevailing mainly in universities, according to which the memory of solid historical facts is mistrusted.²⁵

Pauline Marie Rosenau associates this trend with the abandonment of four beliefs:

1. That there is a real, knowable past;
2. That historians should be objective;
3. That reason enables historians to explain the past; and
4. That the role of history is to transmit human, cultural and intellectual heritage from generation to generation.²⁶

Rosenau shows how these beliefs are dismissed in a post-modern age in which history is viewed as egocentric, a source of myth, ideology, and prejudice, a creation of modern Western nations that oppresses other cultures.

In a book entitled *The Killing of History*, Keith Windschuttle accuses literary critics and social theorists of murdering the past. For thousands of years, he claims, history was associated with telling the truth, with the description of what really happened. Many historians were mistaken, but the discourse between them and their critics considered the match between historical statements and reality. The assumption prevailed that the truth was within the historian's grasp, while towards the end of the twentieth century, this assumption had been rejected:

In the 1990s, the newly dominant theorists within the humanities and social sciences assert that it is impossible to tell the truth about the past or to use history to produce knowledge in any objective sense at all. They claim we can only see the past through the perspective of our own culture and, hence, what we see in history are our own interests and concerns reflected back at us. The central point upon which history was founded no longer holds: there is no fundamental distinction any more between history and myth.²⁷

Once there is no longer a past, then control, according to Orwell, is assured: "If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind itself is controllable – what then?"²⁸ he asked. Orwell was well aware that political control did not require the intentional destruction of historical records, just the creation of confusion about the past:

When there were no external records that you could refer to, even the outline of your own life lost its sharpness. You remembered huge events which had quite probably not happened, you remembered the details of incidents without being able to

recapture their atmosphere, and there were long blank periods to which you could assign nothing... Even the names of countries, and their shapes on the map, had been different.²⁹

The idea that confusion about the past allows control over the present is repeated again and again in the novel. *1984* makes a strong statement about the political consequences of such contemporary phenomena as the neglect of historical studies in schools and universities and the disregard of historical records in political discourse. In his conversation with Winston Smith, O'Brien asks: "Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?" When Winston is forced to admit there is not and that the past exists only in the mind, it becomes clear who will have the upper hand. Orwell does not insist that political parties have a better chance to control memory because of the brute force they use but because the holders of memory themselves have given it up. As hinted at by O'Brien, Winston finds himself in a torture chamber not because others have taken control over his mind but for reasons of his own making.

The idea that the destruction of memory is self-imposed is often brought up by critics of post-modernism who claim that the post-modernist fad in universities amounts to sacrifice of the truth by those in charge of its protection. In a keynote address delivered at a meeting of the National Association of Scholars, James Q. Wilson made the following observation:

In the past, threats to academic freedom or demands for ethnic purity arose from, or were undertaken to placate, forces outside the universities – donors, trustees, parents, and legislators. Today these threats and demands are raised by elements inside the university. In the past such challenges were met by a professoriate that with near unanimity asserted the core principles of the life of the mind: free inquiry based on a commitment to truth and an obligation to conserve as well as advance the culture. Today these threats and demands are met by a professoriate that is deeply divided about the worth of freedom, the possibility of truth, the value of culture, or the meaning of standards.³⁰

Using harsher language, Gorman Beauchamp had this to say about the self-inflicted damage to the value of truth:

Although transmogrified, the smelly little orthodoxies that Orwell despised are still very much with us, and their academic O'Briens are busily at work in their respective Ministries of Love demonstrating to bemused undergraduate Winstons that what they had taken on to be truths are merely cultural constructions not to be counted on.³¹

It is hard to tell how much the notion that no truth exists beyond its reconstruction spread beyond universities' walls into Western cultures. Most of the discourse in this matter is probably just confined to academic circles, but it had two broader political implications.

The first concerns the destructive force of so-called political correctness, i.e., the purification of language in order to avoid offense to suppressed cultures, in the school system. In an important article on "Education after the Culture Wars" published in *Daedalus* in 2002, Diane Ravitch, an historian of education and former assistant secretary of education in the United States, shows how American schools were declining toward "cultural amnesia."³² She brings many examples showing how "bias and sensitivity review" panels censored information in the name of political correctness, e.g., censoring a fable in which the clever fox persuaded the vain crow to drop her cheese due to apparent gender bias, or a story in which a rotten stump in the forest serves as home to insects, birds, snakes, and other small animals due to its offense to children living in housing projects.

Ravitch surveyed history curricula in American schools that were based on the assumption that historical studies are problematic insofar as they require students to memorize and recall certain facts, abandoning the need to master specific facts and texts for the sake of dubious other skills.

When we as a nation set out to provide universal access to education, our hope was that intelligence and reason would one day prevail and make a better world, that issues would be resolved by thoughtful deliberation. Intelligence and reason, however, cannot be achieved merely by skill-building and immersion in new

technologies. Intelligence and reason cannot be developed absent the judgment that is formed by prolonged and thoughtful study of history, literature, and culture, not only that of our own nation, but that of other civilizations.³³

The second implication of the abandonment of the belief in truth concerns people's attitude towards international affairs. In a world in which lies have become an imminent part of the culture – dishonest politicians get elected and nation-states get away with massive deceit – the political order is endangered.

This was a major motive behind the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. In his opening remarks to the commission's report in 1998, Archbishop Desmond Tutu reminded the world that exploration of the past is invaluable to the construction of a decent political order. The commission, established to explore the crimes committed during the apartheid regime, was criticized for bringing up a past that ought to be forgotten, but Tutu insisted that historical amnesia is more dangerous. Such amnesia will simply not do, he said, because the past refuses to lie down quietly; it has an uncanny habit of returning to haunt one, and one must deal with it for the sake of the future. Tutu realized that lies and deception were at the heart of apartheid – they were indeed its very essence – and therefore led an investigation of the past as a way to establish a different culture of respect for human rights.³⁴

Such a concern for historical truth is quite rare in the international arena. Paradoxically, international relations scholars investigating world history were often the first to abandon historical facts for the sake of mechanical models of the international system. During the Cold War, international politics was reduced to systemic models in which a “balance of power” system was replaced by a “tight bi-polar system” which, in turn, transformed into a “loose bi-polar system” and the like. “Equilibrium points,” “rules of transformation,” and other concepts adopted from general systems theory were used to predict international moves by threatening forces. University graduates often transferred their professors' models to foreign ministries, strategic planning units, and the like. Add to this the general abandonment of historical consciousness as a guide for public life, the anti-historical approach

of the mass media, and a post-modernist resentment of historical facts, and one gets a cultural trend of significant political implications.

This trend consists of a view of international politics by scholars, leaders, journalists, and the public at large that ignores the experience gained in hundreds of years of diplomacy, negotiations, mobilizations, wars and peace making, national interests, personal ambitions, craziness, righteous and base motivations, surprise attacks, massacres, human suffering, power shifts, economic depressions, the rise and fall of empires, great leaders, petty thugs, and many other variables that compose international history. With the memory of the historical process lacking, people facing international crises have no way to evaluate them either intelligibly or ethically. Without memory, international politics becomes a game played out by "game theorists," one devoid of the tragic nature of the process, its delicacies and contingencies, and its overall complexity. With historical consciousness playing only a minor role, scholars fail to predict major events (the demise of the Soviet Union was not foreseen by the vast community of analysts) and leaders are willing to subject their populations to risks that had already been proven to be unwarranted in the past.

When history is replaced by a "systems approach" to world affairs, the capacity is lost to make ethical judgments over international affairs. One's ability to distinguish between good and evil depends on historical memory; when no such memory exists, good and evil are determined by the latest image on television. A striking example could be found during the early 1990s when the world stood still for a long time vis-à-vis the massacres taking place in the former Yugoslavia.

In a book titled *The Balkanization of the West*, Stjepan Mestrovic complained about the voyeurism he identified in the Western discourse over the Yugoslavia war. He spoke of the media reports on the war marked by a refusal to take sides. The West, he writes, had put up a good show of moral concern, but all its actions insured that the atrocities in the Balkan continue. He refers to such actions as "The First World Conference of Human Rights" of June 1993 assembled with a broad mandate to discuss human rights as long as it avoids naming any government for abuses, or a feminist convention in Zagreb in October 1992 in which, according to Mestrovic, Western feminists were willing to condemn rape as a male phenomenon but not as a weapon

used in the ethnic wars of the Balkans. He is particularly harsh on the media's position that everyone was to blame:

Despite their feigned objectivity, television anchors and reporters who covered this Balkan war definitely came across as moral agents. They referred to the "warring parties" as representatives of primitive "tribal" and "ethnic" hatreds.

Sixty years earlier, on the eve of World War II, George Orwell was similarly critical of fellow writers, like Henry Miller, who refrained from political commitment and preoccupied themselves with the "self" at a time in which the earth was burning. "To say 'I accept' in an age like our own," he wrote in a critique of Miller's 1935 *Tropic of Cancer*, "is to say that you accept concentration camps, rubber truncheons, Hitler, Stalin, bombs, aeroplanes, tinned food, machine guns, putches, purges, slogans, Bedaux belts, gas masks, submarines, spies, provocateurs, press censorship, secret prisons, aspirins, Hollywood films, and political murders."³⁵

Orwell volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War of 1936 in which the Spanish republic tried to defend itself unsuccessfully against the rising forces of fascism. It is interesting to note the role of historical memory in his decision to join the republican forces. He went to Spain in late 1936 on behalf of the Independent Labor Party and had little knowledge of the events there but was impressed enough by the cause of the Republic to join the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista) militia. In *Homage to Catalonia*, where he described his fighting and injury in the war, he admitted:

In secret I was frightened.... I was old enough to remember the Great War, though not old enough to have fought in it. War, to me, meant roaring projectiles and skipping shards of steel, above all, it meant mud, lice, hunger, and cold.³⁶

This is a key sentence not only because Orwell refers in it explicitly to the memory of World War I as an influencing factor but because he demonstrates what that memory consists of. It consists of the reality of war with its actual rather than metaphorical facets – the mud, the lice, etc. War is a horrible

experience yet one which constitutes part of the options humanity faced and, in the wake of the fascist threat, a necessary option.

The former imperial policeman knew that there are times in which individuals must get into the trenches and – filled with mud and lice – defend the values they believe in. This sober vision of war, and of the need to engage in war, differed from that of many intellectuals at the time. In his article “Looking Back on the Spanish War” of April 1938, Orwell attacked the leftist intelligentsia in Britain which, he wrote, had swung between the extreme notions of “war is hell” and “war is glorious” both of which are useless:

At a given moment they may be “pro-war” or “anti-war,” but in either case they have no realistic picture of war in their minds.³⁷

It is interesting to observe the relationship Orwell proposes between a realistic approach to war and the understanding that war may, at certain historical moments, be inevitable. Although to him war was closer to “hell” than to “glory,” this did not justify refraining from it and allowing evil forces to prevail:

We have become too civilized to grasp the obvious. For the truth is very simple. To survive you often have to fight, and to fight you have to dirty yourself. War is evil, and it is often the lesser evil.³⁸

Orwell understood all too well the motivation of those he criticized. These were intellectuals who avoided the complexity of the Spanish situation, which gave them an excuse to remain neutral and leave the stage to the fascists:

When one thinks of the cruelty, squalor, and futility of war – and in this particular case of the intrigues, the persecutions, the lies and the misunderstandings – there is always the temptation to say: ‘one side is as bad as the other. I am neutral.’ In practice, however, one cannot be neutral, and there is hardly such a thing as a war in which it makes no difference who wins.³⁹

These strong words stem from deep insight into the human condition as it reveals itself in history. Orwell approaches war not in moralistic but in

realistic terms, and reality is tragic because human history is tragic. It teaches us that war is bad but that appeasement or a resort to apathy may be worse. In contrast to the warrior's euphoria on one hand, and the pacifist's utopia on the other, Orwell recognizes this state of affairs. To him, only in a world in which two plus two is taken seriously to be four, and cannot be the subject of political or intellectual manipulations, is the distinction between good and evil and the commitment to do good maintained. However, when everything is open to manipulation, when historical facts make no difference, moral commitment is replaced by ethical neutrality. Wars can be fought endlessly without any reason for anybody to care who fights whom, where, when, and why.

To sum up, when Winston Smith puts on paper in large neat capital letters "down with big brother," he expresses resentment against a wide range of phenomena that constitute his world and ours. These include the political communication around him consisting, among other things, of decisions lacking a clear and predictable normative base, misleading rhetoric demanding cognitive and emotional commitments to abstractions he does not share, and a loss of historical memory that turns the world into a blur of signals and images. Winston's desperate attempt to maintain his sanity vis-à-vis big brother by recalling the past and clinging to memory may turn out to be the most significant message of civility stemming from twentieth-century literature.

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