

# The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism

*The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, by the character Emmanuel Goldstein, is the fictional book that is used as a thematic and plot element in the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), by George Orwell. According to Orwell's plot, in the totalitarian society of Oceania, ruled by the seemingly omnipotent, omniscient Party, Emmanuel Goldstein (in the Party's propaganda) is the principal enemy of the state – a former member of the Inner Party – continually conspiring against the leadership of Big Brother. Early in the story, the protagonist thinks to himself: "There were ... whispered stories of a terrible book, a compendium of all the heresies, of which Goldstein was the author and which circulated clandestinely here and there. It was a book without a title. People referred to it, if at all, simply as *The Book*".

## 1 Background

The protagonist, Winston Smith, secretly hates the Party and Big Brother. Eventually, he approaches O'Brien, a high-level member of the Inner Party, believing him part of the Brotherhood, Goldstein's conspiracy against Oceania, Big Brother, and the Party. Initially, he appears as such, especially in arranging for Winston to receive a copy of Goldstein's illegal book. O'Brien says it reveals the true, totalitarian nature of the society the Party established in Oceania: Full membership to the Brotherhood requires reading it.

When alone in the room above Mr. Charrington's shop, Winston examines the book, before reading it, noting that it was:

The term "oligarchical collectivism" refers not only to the Party's ideology of Ingsoc (English Socialism) but also to the ideologies of the other two states (Neo-Bolshevism in Eurasia; in Eastasia, "Death Worship" or "Obliteration of the Self"). Winston reads two long excerpts establishing<sup>[2]</sup> how the three totalitarian super-states – Oceania, Eastasia, and Eurasia – emerged from a global war, thus connecting the past and the present, and explains the basic political philosophy of the totalitarianism that derived from the authoritarian political tendencies manifested in the twentieth century. That the three "opposing" ideologies are functionally identical is central to the revelations of *The Book*.

The term "oligarchical collectivism" is similar to the theory of bureaucratic collectivism put forth by some Trotskyists in the late 1930s. Leon Trotsky is the likely model for Orwell's Emmanuel Goldstein: a former member of the Party inner circle who had been purged and declared an enemy by the Soviet state he had helped to found, and subsequently a critic of its social system in exile, as Goldstein critiques the system of Oceania. However, the bureaucratic collectivist theory was formulated not by Trotsky, but by some of his followers mainly in the United States who dissented from his view of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state. These theorists, such as Max Schachtman, saw the Soviet Union, along with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, as representing a new type of society, neither capitalist nor socialist, characterized by direct, integrated political and economic rule by a new ruling class of totalitarian state bureaucrats. In the era of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the lead-up to World War II, this theory claimed that the apparently opposed Fascist and Stalinist social systems were in effect identical in essence, reminiscent of Goldstein's claims that Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia are actually identical and only differ in the justifying ideology. For these reasons, some scholars such as James M. Decker have identified Goldstein's book as a parody of Trotsky's real-life book *The Revolution Betrayed*,<sup>[3]</sup> while others such as Carl Freedman have instead compared to works such as ex-Trotskyist James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution*.<sup>[4]</sup>

## 2 Contents

**Chapter I: Ignorance is Strength**, and **Chapter III: War is Peace** of "the book" are titled with Party slogans; O'Brien later refers to chapters featuring a programme for deposing the Party. (Chapter II, presumably titled **Freedom is Slavery** after the remaining Party slogan, is not detailed in the novel.)

### 2.1 Chapter I

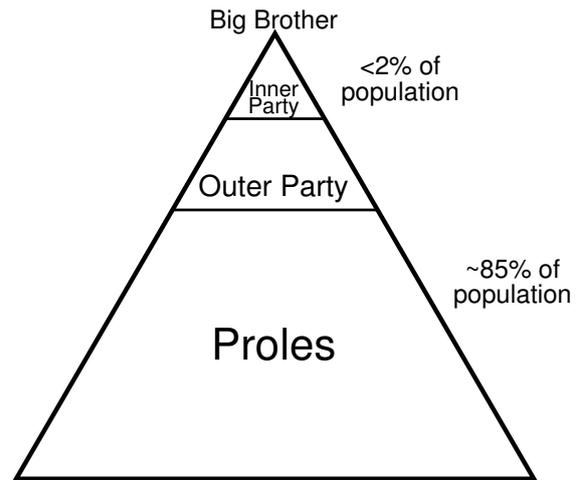
**Ignorance is Strength** details the perpetual class struggle characteristic of human societies;<sup>[5]</sup> beginning with the historical observation that societies always have hierarchically divided themselves into social classes and castes: the High (who rule); the Middle (who work for,

and yearn to supplant the High), and the Low (whose goal is quotidian survival). Cyclically, the Middle deposed the High, by enlisting the Low. Upon assuming power, however, the Middle (the new High class) recast the Low into their usual servitude. In the event, the classes perpetually repeat the cycle, when the Middle class speaks to the Low class of “justice” and of “human brotherhood” in aid of becoming the High class rulers.

Ian Slater writes that Goldstein goes beyond George Orwell’s beliefs in earlier work, such as *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, in which the Middle makes a pretence of believing in equality. In *Animal Farm*, the state sought power to improve society, but once technological advances make equality possible, the Middle abandons their former promises, as liberalism only stands in the way of their aims; they become explicitly tyrannical and openly hostile to liberalism. The new rhetoric of the Middle becomes Ingsoc and hierarchical **collectivism**. This pursuit of naked power and utter lack of liberalism distinguishes the Party from previous tyrannies, though the Party initially justifies its control through dedication to socialism. By focusing on collectivism, the Party can consolidate their power and present Ingsoc as an inevitable followup to capitalism in which the Low are no longer exploited. In reality, the social **castes** are no longer necessary, and collectivism only serves to prolong the exploitation of the Low. Slater states that while O’Brien does not own his mansion, he still lives in luxury compared to the lower castes. Once the Party consolidates its power, all justifications are abandoned. The Party itself is a meritocracy, not hereditary. This is not rooted in egalitarianism but practicality, as the Party realizes that its continuation depends on purity of orthodoxy, rather than a bloodline.<sup>[6]</sup>

Unlike Orwell’s prior writing, the Party’s exploitation in this case is fully intentional. Slater writes that Orwell desired to show through the Party’s unrealistic politics that modern authoritarianism was growing more lustful of power for power’s sake. Orwell believed that modern states could bring about the desires of the **Spanish Inquisition** to not only control men but also control their thoughts. This could be achieved through technological breakthroughs, such as the **telescreen**, a two-way television that allows continuous government espionage of the population. Efficient use of such technology to control the populace requires centralisation, and the four ministries of Oceania – The Ministry of Truth, The Ministry of Peace, the Ministry of Love, and the Ministry of Plenty – fill this need.<sup>[7]</sup>

The Proles usually are not subject to propaganda. Instead, it is the middle class – the Outer Party – that the Inner Party fears. Because the Proles have lost everything and have nothing, they have no future. The Party, through the Ministry of Truth, practices **historical revisionism**, which robs the Proles of a past, too. Robbed of the ability to learn from history and the worries of the future, the Proles exist in state of constant present and are incapable of revolution.<sup>[8]</sup> In order to prevent



*Oligarchical collectivism: The Oceanian social-class pyramid in the year 1984.*

any **unorthodoxy**, the Ministry of Truth uses **Newspeak**, an impoverished language that makes heresy impossible by omitting words that could express it. Newspeak also reduces thought to simple opposites, such as good and “ungood”, an intentional dichotomy that hides nuance and ambiguity while promoting **black and white thinking**. Party members are further subject to self-deceptive habits of mind, such as **crimestop** (“preventive stupidity”), which halts thinking at the threshold of politically dangerous thought, and **doublethink**, which allows simultaneously holding and believing contradictory thoughts without noticing the contradiction,<sup>[9]</sup> to wit:

## 2.2 Chapter III

Before reading the first chapter, Winston reads the third chapter **War is Peace**, which explains that slogan-title’s meaning, by reviewing how the global super-states were established: The United States merged with the **British Empire** and **Latin America** to form Oceania; the **USSR** absorbed continental Europe to form Eurasia; and **Eastasia** emerged “after a decade of confused fighting”, with China’s annexation of **Japan**, **Korea** and parts of **Mongolia** and **Tibet**. In various alliances, they have warred for twenty-five years. Yet the perpetual war is militarily nonsensical, because “it is a warfare of limited aims between combatants who are unable to destroy one another, have no material cause for fighting and are not divided by any genuine ideological difference”, since each is a totalitarian state.<sup>[10]</sup>

Scientific advance is held carefully in check, as the Party does not want to allow for any unaccounted abundance of goods, which could conceivably raise the quality of life beyond bare subsistence for the Proles. The only technological advances permitted are in mind control and genocide, the twin goals of each of the superstates. Once mind control is perfected, the superstates are free to destroy

their counterparts in a theoretical single, decisive strike that precludes retaliation. Technological advancement, even in war, can be counterproductive to the goals of the Party; none of the superstates are a true threat to each other, as they all must exist in a state of permanent limited war to survive. By harnessing the hysteria of war and demand for self-sacrifice, each of the nations declare war not on each other but on their own populace, who are kept ignorant, on the brink of starvation, and overworked. Permanent limited war also allows for the Party to divert attention away from domestic concerns and their failures. Instead of promises of an “easy, safe life”, Slater writes that Orwell believed that the populace requires heroic nationalism. Thus, war becomes a psychological tool to establish a kind of ironic “peace”, a stasis where progress is impossible and nothing ever changes, except for the possibility of eventual global conquest.<sup>[11]</sup> However, even though Inner Party members have devoted their lives to establishing Oceania as the universal world power, they use doublethink also in connection with the war, knowing that it is necessary for the conflict to go on indefinitely to keep the structure of Oceanic society intact.

### 2.3 Later chapters

Winston never has the opportunity to finish reading *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, and learn the “Why’s?” of Oceania and the world order in 1984 before the Thought Police arrest him; yet he believes that the hope of change lies with the Proles.

## 3 Author

O'Brien rejects Winston Smith's perspective as nonsense, because he is a faithful member of the Inner Party, not a revolutionary of the Brotherhood. At the Miniluv, he tortures Winston in order to cure him of his political insanity: that there exists an objective reality external to that of the Party. In their torture chamber conversations, he tells Winston that *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, “the book” by Emmanuel Goldstein, was written by a committee that included him. When Winston asks O'Brien if “the book” is true, he replies: “As description, yes. The program it sets forth ... is nonsense”.

## 4 References

- [1] Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), London: The Folio Society, 2001, p.191
- [2] Slater, Ian (2003). *Orwell*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. p. 243. ISBN 0-7735-2622-6.
- [3] Decker, James M. (2009). “George Orwell's 1984 and Political Ideology”. In Bloom, Harold. *George Orwell*,

*Updated Edition*. Infobase Publishing. p. 137. ISBN 9781438113005.

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- [5] Stewart, Anthony (2003). *George Orwell, Doubleness, and the Value of Decency*. New York: Routledge. p. 13. ISBN 0-415-96871-2.
- [6] Slater, Ian (2003). *Orwell: The Road to Airstrip One*. McGill-Queen's University Press. pp. 190–193. ISBN 9780773526228.
- [7] Slater, Ian (2003). *Orwell: The Road to Airstrip One*. McGill-Queen's University Press. pp. 194–196. ISBN 9780773526228.
- [8] Slater, Ian (2003). *Orwell: The Road to Airstrip One*. McGill-Queen's University Press. pp. 60–63. ISBN 9780773526228.
- [9] Slater, Ian (2003). *Orwell: The Road to Airstrip One*. McGill-Queen's University Press. p. 205. ISBN 9780773526228.
- [10] Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), London: The Folio Society, 2001, p.193.
- [11] Slater, Ian (2003). *Orwell: The Road to Airstrip One*. McGill-Queen's University Press. pp. 215–216. ISBN 9780773526228.

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### 5.1 Text

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