

Huxley to Orwell: My Hellish Vision of the Future is Better Than Yours (1949)



In 1949, George Orwell received a curious letter from his former high school French teacher.

Orwell had just published his groundbreaking book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which received glowing reviews from just about every corner of the English-speaking world. His French teacher, as it happens, was none other than Aldous Huxley who taught at Eton for a spell before writing *Brave New World* (1931), the other great 20th century dystopian novel.

Huxley starts off the letter praising the book, describing it as “profoundly important.” He continues, “The philosophy of the ruling minority in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a sadism which has been carried to its logical conclusion by going beyond sex and denying it.”

Then Huxley switches gears and criticizes the book, writing, “Whether in actual fact the policy of the boot-on-the-face can go on indefinitely seems doubtful. My own belief is that the ruling oligarchy will find less arduous and wasteful ways of governing and of satisfying its lust for power, and these ways will resemble those which I described in *Brave New World*.” (Listen to him read a dramatized version of the book [here](#).)

Basically while praising *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Huxley argues that his version of the future was more likely to come to pass.

In Huxley’s seemingly dystopic World State, the elite amuse the masses into submission with a mind-numbing drug called Soma and an endless buffet of casual sex. Orwell’s Oceania, on the other hand, keeps the masses in check with fear thanks to an endless war and a hyper-competent surveillance state. At first blush, they might seem like they

are diametrically opposed but, in fact, an Orwellian world and a Huxleyan one are simply two different modes of oppression.

Obviously we are nowhere near either dystopic vision but the power of both books is that they tap into our fears of the state. While Huxley might make you look askance at *The Bachelor* or Facebook, Orwell makes you recoil in horror at the government throwing around phrases like “enhanced interrogation” and “surgical drone strikes.”

You can read Huxley’s full letter below.

Wrightwood. Cal.

21 October, 1949

Dear Mr. Orwell,

It was very kind of you to tell your publishers to send me a copy of your book. It arrived as I was in the midst of a piece of work that required much reading and consulting of references; and since poor sight makes it necessary for me to ration my reading, I had to wait a long time before being able to embark on Nineteen Eighty-Four.

*Agreeing with all that the critics have written of it, I need not tell you, yet once more, how fine and how profoundly important the book is. May I speak instead of the thing with which the book deals — the ultimate revolution? The first hints of a philosophy of the ultimate revolution — the revolution which lies beyond politics and economics, and which aims at total subversion of the individual’s psychology and physiology — are to be found in the Marquis de Sade, who regarded himself as the continuator, the consummator, of Robespierre and Babeuf. The philosophy of the ruling minority in Nineteen Eighty-Four is a sadism which has been carried to its logical conclusion by going beyond sex and denying it. Whether in actual fact the policy of the boot-on-the-face can go on indefinitely seems doubtful. My own belief is that the ruling oligarchy will find less arduous and wasteful ways of governing and of satisfying its lust for power, and these ways will resemble those which I described in *Brave New World*. I have had occasion recently to look into the history of animal magnetism and hypnotism, and have been greatly struck by the way in which, for a hundred and fifty years, the world has refused to take serious cognizance of the discoveries of Mesmer, Braid, Esdaile, and the rest.*

Partly because of the prevailing materialism and partly because of prevailing respectability, nineteenth-century philosophers and men of science were not willing to investigate the odder facts of psychology for practical men, such as politicians, soldiers and policemen, to apply in the field of government. Thanks to the voluntary ignorance of our fathers, the advent of the ultimate revolution was delayed for five or six generations. Another lucky accident was Freud’s inability to hypnotize successfully and his consequent disparagement of hypnotism. This delayed the general application of hypnotism to psychiatry for at least forty years. But now psycho-analysis is being combined with hypnosis; and hypnosis has been made easy and indefinitely extensible through the use of barbiturates, which induce a hypnoid and suggestible state in even the most recalcitrant subjects.

Within the next generation I believe that the world's rulers will discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs and prisons, and that the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging and kicking them into obedience. In other words, I feel that the nightmare of Nineteen Eighty-Four is destined to modulate into the nightmare of a world having more resemblance to that which I imagined in Brave New World. The change will be brought about as a result of a felt need for increased efficiency. Meanwhile, of course, there may be a large scale biological and atomic war — in which case we shall have nightmares of other and scarcely imaginable kinds.

Thank you once again for the book.

Yours sincerely,

Aldous Huxley