

George Orwell beyond 'Orwellian' understanding - A reader response critical perspective

Bancuta (Necsoiu) Elena Cristina

Valahia University of Targoviste, Faculty of Humanities, No. 35 Lt. Stancu Ion Street, 130105, Targoviste, Romania

Abstract: *This paper aims at describing the concept of an 'Orwellian' understanding of events through transposing and projecting George Orwell's work into what it holds for today's generation of young readers. Nowadays, students may find it difficult to understand Orwell's work or to go beyond the meanings yielded by a firsthand reading, because most of them do not and cannot relate in any way to a totalitarian political and societal system. Thus, in an attempt to realize a somehow comparative study on the critical reception of Orwell (by a generation that has experienced a totalitarian system vs. one that has not) which uses reader response criticism as a theoretical approach, this paper undertakes a case study that should prove useful for readers of Orwell and 'Orwellian' literature, as well as for any researcher interested in the intertwined workings of literature and human society.*

Keywords: *Orwellian, Orwell, totalitarianism, 20th century, perspective, criticism*

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

Introducing Eric Blair

George Orwell is widely known as a writer of political novels and essays. It is less known that he was born with another name and chose "George Orwell" as his pen name when his first book was published. Orwell is the name of a river in the UK countryside, and George is considered the most English of all names (St. George is the patron saint of England). He was born Eric Arthur Blair in Bengal, India, in 1903. At that time India was part of the British Empire and a military government ruled its people. Eric was five months old when his mother brought him back to England. The family settled near London.

The Age of extremes

At the beginning of the 1900's, Great Britain was the world's largest power, ruling some 500 million people around the globe. They seized the wealth of the countries they colonized, and ruled their populations. At the time of Orwell's birth, the British Empire contained around a quarter of the world's population and territory- 39 million square kilometers. George Orwell's childhood took place in the shadow of major events. **World War I** began in 1914, when he was eleven. In 1917 in Russia, widespread poverty and the harsh rule of **Tsar Nicholas II** led to protests on the streets and the start of a rebellion. This turned into a full-scale revolution when troops, sent out to crush the rebels, changed sides. The Tsar was overthrown and in his place a new government seized control. Russian communists, led by Vladimir Ilich Lenin and Leon Trotsky, renamed their nation the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

The emergence of a powerful nation committed to communist principles, which it was determined to spread worldwide, threatened the ruling powers in Europe and the United States.

George began his career as a military policeman for the British Empire in Burma. His account of his experiences in Asia was published as a novel called "Burmese Days" in 1934. Many of the Burmese-British were offended by the novel. It included a stinging attack on the British Empire. Thus, because he "could not go on any longer serving imperialism", he resigned his job and came back to England in 1927. The England he came back to was in serious crisis. England was a divided nation and arguments over the

possible ways forward-socialism, capitalism, communism, or fascism- filled the newspapers and magazines. His political thoughts were influenced by the times. So he felt that he had been part of an oppressive regime for the last five years and this left him with a bad conscience. **"I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate. I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man. I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants."** At that time he still did not have any defined ideas concerning socialism or any other economic theory. But during this time he developed his skills as a writer. In 1933, his first book, **Down and Out in Paris and London**, an account of his time living in poverty, was published. After several rejections, the left-wing publishing house Victor Gollancz picked up this book because of its "social importance". This was the beginning of a fruitful relationship for Orwell that was to last 12 years.

George Orwell, explaining in an essay in 1946 why he became a writer, stated that when he was about sixteen he **"...suddenly discovered the joy of mere words."** Orwell was passionate about the usage of the words of the English language and its ability to communicate the world as it really was. His love of prose and the concrete world of objective truth reinforced this love. **"So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects."** His belief in the use of words and language to communicate the tactile world led him to despise those who would use language to try to falsify reality and conceal the truth. He treated the language of orthodox politicians and political parties with contempt. **"Political language - and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists - is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."** He recognized that language should be an instrument for expressing and not concealing thought. The stale political speakers who loved the use of pre-fabricated terms in their speeches were in his eyes less than human, almost brain-dead. **"When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases - bestial atrocities, iron heel, blood-stained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder - one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy ... the appropriate noises are coming out of his**

larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself."

His unique political allegory, Animal Farm, was published in 1945, and in 1995 it received the W.H. Smith and Penguin Books Great Reads of the Century award. This novel, together with Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), brought Orwell world-wide fame. The story of Animal Farm moves from idealism towards disillusionment and tragedy. There will be no fairy-tale ending, but throughout the story, the majority of the animals remain innocent and generous. While Napoleon, Squealer, and their attack dogs become increasingly sinister and vicious in words and actions, the other creatures continue to throw their hearts into the dream of Animal Farm. Students all around the world embrace the "Orwellian" literature as a great way to study history and political issues from a critical perspective.

Orwellian concept

To describe something as "Orwellian" is to say that it brings to mind the fictional totalitarian society of Oceania described in Nineteen Eighty-Four. And the best way to understand what does and does not constitute Orwellian policy is to read Nineteen Eighty-Four itself and to make up your own critical response.

*Orwell's book is where we get the term Big Brother from, such as when people say **"Big Brother is watching you."** The only answer you will probably get from a student nowadays is that Big Brother is an entertaining reality- show, when in fact it's referring to the omniscient surveillance system that continuously watched and listened to people-as it is described in the novel—even in their own homes. When we call something Orwellian to describe the invasiveness of certain technology or government policies, we are also referring to Orwell's nightmarish vision described in his novel. There are several other terms that Orwell himself coined in **Nineteen Eighty-Four**, such as doublethink, thought crime, and memory hole, which have also become part of our vernacular.*

If you have read the book or seen the film, you are familiar with the issues that make up the storyline, such as the high-tech surveillance system watching and listening to everyone in order to keep them in line with the government (called the Party in the novel). You are also familiar with the concept of a small elite ruling class (what Orwell calls the Inner Party) living in luxury and wielding unimaginable power over lower level citizens. In the novel, people have lost their freedom, their critical thinking skills, and even

the ability to love due to the cultural depths society has sunk to as a result of Big Brother's control. The reason **Nineteen Eighty-Four** remained so popular, and the reason society has adopted vocabulary from the book, is because it serves as more than merely a fictional novel for the reader's entertainment. The novel served (and continues to serve) as a stark warning of what the future may hold.

Big Brother: The **Orwellian Nightmare Come True** looks at technology that now exists or is under development and will exist in the near future, that threatens to make our world just as horrific as, or even worse than the world George Orwell described. This book will provide information from mainstream news sources, industry experts, and even patent numbers of the most invasive and sinister Orwellian devices anyone could dream of. We will also look at actual government programs and policies that seem as if they came right out of Orwell's dark imagination, such as the government secretly paying mainstream media reporters to act as gate-keepers and propagandists for the establishment, and the Police illegally spying on and smearing peaceful political activists who were seen as problematic.

Are we not a part of an Orwellian world? Do students nowadays have any knowledge of how the world was like 40 years ago? Orwell's vision about the future serves as a warning for what is already here, and what is soon to come. It is scary because it holds so much truth, and yet amazing because we proved to be our own enemies. We are being turned into numbers and statistics, and mathematical formulas are used by employers to determine whether an employee is being efficient enough. Social networking sites such as Facebook have turned everyone into their own favorite celebrity and supplement actual friendships and interactions. People don't need to get together for a dinner party to catch up on each other's lives anymore; we just monitor their newsfeed on Facebook, from the comfort of our own home.

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Today Orwell's words are read differently. We live in a society that seems the opposite of that portrayed by him perfectly. But then, just 4 years after the end of World War II, Orwell wrote in a world that was prepared for the 3rd World War. A world which found out of Nazi crimes and (probably at least partially) from those of Stalinism. Then, the nearly 60 million deaths were not just a statistic. Were parents, children or friends of those who would read 1984. Then, in a dark world but full of expectations, hopes and

fears, 1984 was a probable future. Now we call it with a trace of vanity: dystopia.

What made compelling the reading of 1984, was that it is essentially a story about a man and most importantly for the existence of each of us – about **hope**. Winston Smith lives in a world in which this word is to be executed and removed from the dictionary. With all his realism, Smith can afford to get high with hope and (peak of nerve) with a little love. I understand perfectly and I admired him. Although I felt from the very beginning how this adventure will end, I liked every page and moved with fear to the next paragraph knowing his approaching inevitable. I got the impression that those moments of freedom, hope and love are worth the price paid later.

It is very hard to "advertise" a book like **1984** for the 2013th students. I do not really believe in the perfect book. I was captured by the fact that 1984 has absolutely everything you want from a book. It is truly imperative reading. But at the same time I remain convinced that in order to understand and appreciate the true 1984's value, we need a foundation consisting of tens and hundreds of other books. And still, living in a country like Romania, I really think it helps you understand the book very well.

After reading 1984, we found out that **Big Brother** can be any modern dictator of the 20th century, and its name has become synonymous with violation of the individual privacy by any totalitarian power. To control the all, dictatorship has to know the most intimate thoughts, and no corner of the human mind can remain unknown to the cold eye of **Big Brother**.

Before 1989, in Romania, in the communist totalitarian system, the party was the one defining both what was allowed and what was forbidden. To resume a formula of George Orwell, the totalitarian universe, everything that was not forbidden was compulsory; including the duty of the people to be happy, despite the bad conditions which condemned the system. At the end of the communist regime in Romania, in November 1989, that congress of shame and despair, The Communist Party had almost 4 million members. It was therefore one of the largest communist party in the world (proportionally speaking). In fact, it was a giant devoid of any internal life.

A conference of MARXISM- 2013

The School of Rebellion is a challenge to the capitalist school, where education is an instrument "to facilitate integration of the younger

generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity". The School of Rebellion is inspired by the "the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world".

The capitalist school sees the student as wage-slave, client and consumer. The School of Rebellion sees students as agents of social transformation and liberation. The capitalist school aims to produce a work-ready, disciplined and commodity thirsty citizen. The School of Rebellion aims to encourage constructive, collective and organized rebellion.

By coming to understand the world and recognizing the need to change it, children and young people can challenge a 'career' centered education and become agents of change. Such agency opens a magical door to knowledge. This is what the School of Rebellion hopes for.

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Why should we still read George Orwell on politics? Until 1989, the answer was plain. He was the writer who captured the essence of totalitarianism. All over communist-ruled Europe, people would show me their dog-eared, samizdat copies of *Animal Farm* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and ask: "How did he know?"

Yet the world of Nineteen Eighty-Four ended in 1989. Orwellian regimes persisted in a few remote countries, such as North Korea, and communism survived in an attenuated form in China. But the three dragons against which Orwell fought his good fight - European and especially British imperialism; fascism, whether Italian, German or Spanish; and communism, not to be confused with the democratic socialism in which Orwell himself believed - were all either dead or mortally weakened. Forty years after his own painful and early death, Orwell had won.

What need, then, of Orwell? One answer is that we should read him because of his historical impact. For Orwell was the most influential political writer of the 20th century. This is a bold claim, but who else would compete? Among novelists, perhaps Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Albert Camus; among

playwrights, Bertolt Brecht. Or the novelist, playwright and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, whom Orwell privately called "a bag of wind"? Take them one by one, and you will find that each made an impact more limited in duration or geographical scope than did this short-lived, old-fashioned English man of letters.

Worldwide familiarity with the word "Orwellian" is proof of that influence. "Orwellian" is used as a pejorative adjective, to evoke totalitarian terror, the falsification of history by state-organized lying and, more loosely, any unpleasant example of repression or manipulation. It is used as a noun, to describe an admirer and conscious follower of his work. Occasionally, it is deployed as a complimentary adjective, to mean something like "displaying outspoken intellectual honesty, like Orwell". Very few other writers have garnered this double tribute of becoming both adjective and noun.

Everywhere that people lived under totalitarian dictatorships, they felt he was one of them. The Russian poet Natalya Gorbanyevskaya once said that Orwell was an east European. In fact, he was a very English writer who never went anywhere near eastern Europe. His knowledge of the communist world was largely derived from reading.

In short, he was more memorably and influentially right than anyone, and sooner, about the single greatest political menace of the second half of the 20th century, as well as seeing off the two largest horrors of the first half. But those monsters are dead, or on their last legs. To say "read him because he mattered a lot in the past" will hardly attract new readers to Orwell.

Fortunately, there is a more compelling reason why we should read Orwell in the 21st century. This is that he remains an exemplar of political writing. Both meanings of "exemplar" are required. He is a model of how to do it well, but he is also an example - a deliberate, self-conscious and self-critical instance - of how difficult it is.

*Orwell the moralist is fascinated by the pursuit not merely of truth, but of the most complicated and difficult truths. It starts already with the early essay *Shooting an Elephant*, where he confidently asserts that the British empire is dying but immediately adds that it is "a great deal better than the*

younger empires that are going to supplant it". At times, he seems to take an almost masochistic delight in confronting uncomfortable truths.

Not that his own political judgment was always good. His vivacious and perceptive wife Eileen wrote that he retained "an extraordinary political simplicity". There are striking misjudgments in his work. It's startling to find him, early on, repeating the communist line that "fascism and capitalism are at bottom the same thing".

As VS Pritchett observed, in reviewing *The Lion and the Unicorn*, he "is capable of exaggerating with the simplicity and innocence of a savage". But that is what satirists do. So this weakness of his non-fiction is one of the great strengths of his fiction.

Both his life and his work are case studies in the demands of political engagement. In *Writers and Leviathan* he describes the political writer's dilemma: "seeing the need of engaging in politics while also seeing what a dirty, degrading business it is". After briefly being a member of the Independent Labour party, he concludes that "a writer can only remain honest if he keeps free of party labels".

Finally, of course, Orwell's list, and Orwell's life, is much less important than the work. It matters, to be sure, that there is no flagrant contradiction between the work and the life - as there often is with political intellectuals. The Orwellian voice, placing honesty and single standards above everything, would be diminished. But what endures is the work.

If I had to name a single quality that makes Orwell still essential reading in the 21st century, it would be his insight into the use and abuse of language. If you have time to read only one essay, read *Politics and the English Language*. This brilliantly sums up the central Orwellian argument that the corruption of language is an essential part of oppressive or exploitative politics. "The defense of the indefensible" is sustained by a battery of euphemisms, verbal false limbs, prefabricated phrases, and all the other paraphernalia of deceit that he pinpoints and parodies.

The extreme, totalitarian version that he satirized as Newspeak is less often encountered these days, except in countries such as Burma or North Korea. But the obsession of democratically elected governments, especially in Britain and America, with media management and "spin" is today one of the main obstacles to understanding what is being done in our name. There are also distortions that come from within the press, radio and television

themselves, partly because of hidden ideological bias but increasingly because of fierce commercial competition and the relentless need to "entertain".

Read Orwell, and you will know that something nasty must be hidden behind the euphemistic, Latinate phrase used by Nato spokesmen during the Kosovo war: "collateral damage". (It means innocent civilians killed.) Read Orwell, and you will smell a rat whenever you find a newspaper boy or politician once again churning out a prefabricated phrase such as "Brussels' inexorable march to a European super state".

*He does not just equip us to detect this semantic abuse. He also suggests how writers can fight back. For the abusers of power are, after all, using our weapons: words. In *Politics and the English Language* he even gives some simple stylistic rules for honest and effective political writing. He compares good English prose to a clean window pane. Through these windows, citizens can see what their rulers are really up to. So, political writers should be the window cleaners of freedom.*

Orwell both tells and shows us how to do it. That is why we need him still, because Orwell's work is never done.