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Nineteen Eighty Four in 1984

How does the novel help our understanding of the year?

It was never at all likely that any actual society, in 1984, would much resemble the hellhole of Orwell's novel. He was in any case not making that kind of prediction:

I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive.¹

The qualification is important. He had written earlier:

'This is a novel about the future — that is, it is in a sense a fantasy, but in the form of a naturalistic novel. That is what makes it a difficult job — of course as a book of anticipations it would be comparatively simple to write.'²

This difficulty of the form needs emphasis as we try in his arbitrarily dated year to reassess his vision. The form is in fact more complex than the combination, in his terms, of 'fantasy' and 'naturalistic novel'. For there is a third element, most clearly represented by the extracts from the notorious Book and by the appendix on The Principles of Newspeak. In the case of the Book, especially, the method of the writing is that of argument: the historical and political essay.

There are then in effect three layers in the novel. First, an infrastructure, immediately recognisable from Orwell's other fiction, in which the hero-victim moves through a squalid world in a series of misunderstandings and disappointments, trying and failing to hold on to the possibility — as much a memory as a vision — of a sweeter kind of life. Second, a structure of argument, indeed of anticipations, in the extracts from the Book and in some of the more general descriptions of the actual society. Third, a superstructure, including many of the most memorable elements, in which, by a method ranging from fantasy to satire and parody, the cruelty and repression of the society are made to appear at once ludicrous and savagely absurd.

Three themes predominate in the central structure of argument on which, at the level of ideas, the book is founded. First, there is the division of the world into three super-states, which in shifting alliances are in a state of limited but perpetual war. Second, there is the internal tyranny of each of these States, with a specific version

of the relations between social classes and a detailed presentation of a totalitarian society which has been developed beyond both capitalism and socialism. Third, there is the exceptional emphasis on the control of a society through ideas and means of communication: backed up by direct repression and torture but mainly operating through 'thought control'.

Isolating the themes

These three themes need to be considered in detail, both in Orwell's presentation of them and in the actual history to which they offer to relate. It is especially important to consider all three, and to see how Orwell thought of them as essentially interrelated. Ironically, however, it is only possible to consider them with the seriousness that he expected, if we isolate them, temporarily, from the actual structure of the novel, and, in a more permanent way, from the resonance which, since its publication, has surrounded it.

It would be possible, for example, to run a silly kind of checklist on the projections. Is there an Anti-Sex League? Is there a two-way telescreen for spying on people in their homes? Is there a statutory Two Minutes Hate? No? Well then it just shows, as some said at the time, that the book is a wild kind of horror-comic, or at best stupidly exaggerated. But these are elements of the parodic superstructure. The structure then? Yet in the predominant political resonance which has surrounded the novel we do not even have to look at these arguments, because their proof is already given in the 'real world.' 'This is where socialism gets you.' 'This is where it has already got, in Russia and Eastern Europe.' But Orwell was quick to separate himself from this interpretation, which accounted for much of the early success of the book and which is still offered as if it were beyond question.

'My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable and which have already been partly realised in Communism and Fascism.'³

'Partly realised', in the social orders directed by Stalin and Hitler. The full

perversions are shown as going further. Moreover the easy response, to put down the book and look East, where 'it is all already happening', should be checked by Orwell's emphasis:

'The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasise that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, *if not fought against*, could triumph anywhere.'⁴

The point is more than one of local correction, against the use and abuse of the novel during the cold war. It is central to Orwell's arguments that what is being described, in its main tendencies, is not only a universal danger but a universal process. That is the true source of his horror. If the novel is absorbed into the propaganda of this or that state, as a basis for hating and fearing an enemy state, against which there must be preparation for war, there is the really savage irony that a citizen of 'Oceania', in



1984, is thinking as he has been programmed to think, but with the reassurance of the book to tell him that he is free and that only those others are propagandised and brainwashed. Orwell was offering no such reassurance. He saw the superstates, the spy states, and the majority populations controlled by induced ideas as the way *the world* was going, to the point where there would still be arbitrary enemies, and names and figures to hate, but where there would be no surviving faculty of discovering or telling the truth about *our own* situation: the situation of any of us, in any of the states and alliances. This is a much harder position than any simple anti-socialism or anti-communism. It is indeed so hard that we must begin by examining what he took to be its overpowering conditions, leading first to the superstates and to limited perpetual war.

SUPERSTATES

Nineteen Eighty-Four is so often quoted as a vision of the worst possible future world that it may seem odd to say that in at least one respect Orwell notably underestimated a general danger. It is not often remembered that in the novel a war with atomic bombs has been fought in the 1950s. There are not many details, though it is mentioned that an atomic bomb fell on Colchester. This is one of several instances in which, read from the actual 1984, the novel can be clearly seen as belonging to the 1940s. Orwell was quick to comment on the importance of the new weapon. He wrote in *Tribune* in October 1945 that it was dangerous mainly because it made the strong much stronger; its difficult manufacture meant that it would be reserved to a few powerful societies that were already heavily industrialised. 'The great age of democracy and of national self-determination' had been 'the age of the musket and the rifle'. Now, with this invention,

'we have before us the prospect of two or three monstrous super-states, each possessed of a weapon by which millions of people can be wiped out in a few seconds, dividing the world between them.'⁵

This is not only the outline of the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is also an intelligent recognition of the actual power of the new weapons. Yet still, after this, he included in his story a war with atomic weapons after which, though with its own kinds of horrors, a relatively recognisable land and society survived. This is no discredit to Orwell. Again and again it has been almost

impossible to imagine the true consequences of an atomic war, as distinct from the one-sided use of the bomb which has been the only actual event. Indeed there has been a familiar kind of *doublethink* about nuclear weapons, in which it is simultaneously if contradictorily known that they would lead to massive and in many cases absolute destruction and yet that, with sufficient political determination, of whatever kind, they could be absorbed and survived.

Pessimistic world view

The idea of an atomic war in the 1950s was common enough in the middle and late 1940s. It was seen as virtually inevitable, once more than one state possessed atomic bombs, by several writers and especially by James Burnham, about whom Orwell wrote two substantial essays in the years in which he was writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁶

It is strange now, when Burnham has been largely forgotten, and when *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is so much better known than Orwell's essays, to retrace the formation of the 'pessimistic world-view' of the novel. We can look again at the idea of the dominant superstates. In the novel it is as follows:

'The splitting up of the world into three great super-states was an event which could be and indeed was foreseen before the middle of the twentieth century. With the absorption of Europe by Russia and of the British Empire by the United States, two of the three existing powers, Eurasia and Oceania, were already effectively in being. The third, Eastasia, only emerged as a distinct unit after another decade of confused fighting.'⁷

in at least one respect Orwell underestimated a general danger

The next stage in Orwell's development of the idea, while he was in the middle of writing his novel, follows from his definition of three political possibilities: a preventive war by the United States, which would be a crime and would in any case solve nothing; a cold war until several nations have atomic bombs, then almost at once a war which would wipe out industrial civilisation and leave only a small population living by subsistence agriculture; or

'that the fear inspired by the atomic bomb and other weapons yet to come will be so great that everyone will refrain from using them. This seems to me the worst possibility of all. It would mean the division of the world among two or three vast superstates, unable to conquer one another and unable to be overthrown by any internal rebellion. In all probability their structure would be hierarchic, with a semi-divine caste at

the top and outright slavery at the bottom, and the crushing out of liberty would exceed anything that the world has yet seen. Within each state the necessary psychological atmosphere would be kept up by complete severance from the outer world, and by a continuous phoney war against rival states. Civilisations of this type might remain static for thousands of years.'⁸

This is, in effect, the option taken by the novel, though an intervening and less damaging atomic war has been retained from earlier positions. In his directly political writing, at this time, Orwell saw an alternative to all three dangers: the building of 'democratic Socialism ... throughout some large area... A Socialist United States of Europe seems to me the only worthwhile political objective today.'⁹ But in the perspective of the fiction this is entirely absent.

Obviously we must ask, in 1984, why none of Orwell's three (or four) possibilities has occurred. Yet we must do this soberly, since we shall not be released from any of the dangers he and others foresaw by the mere passage of a fictional date. It is not, in some jeering way, to prove Orwell wrong, but to go on learning the nature of the historical developments which at his most serious he was trying desperately to understand, that we have to ask what he left out, or what he wrongly included, in his assessment of the world-political future.

No unitary superstates

First we have to notice that what came through, in this period, were not unitary superstates or empires but the more complex forms of military superpowers and primarily military alliances. There are times, especially as we listen to war propaganda, when we can suppose that the Burnham/Orwell vision has been realised, in the monolithically presented entities of 'East' and 'West', and with China as the shifting partner of either. But the full political realities have turned out to be very different. There is, for example, a coexistent and different hierarchy of *economic* power, with Japan and West Germany as major forces. In significantly different degrees in 'East' and 'West', but everywhere to some extent, old national forms have persisted and continue to

¹ *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* IV 502.

² *Ibid* 329-30.

³ *Collected Essays* IV 502.

⁴ *Ibid* IV 502.

⁵ *Ibid* IV 8.

⁶ *Burnham and the Managerial Revolution* (1946); *Burnham and the Contemporary World Struggle* (1947).

⁷ *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 150-1.

⁸ *Collected Essays* IV 371.

⁹ *Ibid* IV 371.

command the loyalty of majorities, though also in every such nation, including those of 'the West', there is a significant minority who are conscious agents of the interests of the dominant power in the military alliance.

At the same time, in ways that Orwell could not have foreseen, these elements of political autonomy and diversity — within very narrow margins in the Warsaw Pact, within broader margins in NATO which contains most kinds of political state from liberal democracies to military dictatorships — are radically qualified by the nature of modern nuclear-weapons systems. The atomic war of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is damaging but not disastrous; in fact it is made to precipitate the 'perpetual limited war' which is a central condition of the novel, in which the superstates



are unconquerable because their rulers cannot risk atomic war. The war actually being fought, with its distant battles and its occasional rockets, belongs technologically to the 1940s. But then it is not only that the effects of atomic war have been underestimated; it is that the military and political consequences of a relative monopoly of nuclear weapons have turned out to be quite different from anything that Orwell and most others supposed.

'Suppose — and really this is the likeliest development — that the surviving great nations make a tacit agreement never to use the atomic bomb against one another? Suppose they only use it, or the threat of it, against people who are unable to retaliate? In that case we are back where we were before, the only difference being that power is concentrated in still fewer hands and that the outlook for subject peoples and oppressed classes is still more hopeless.'¹⁰

Between the powers that have acquired atomic weapons there has been neither formal nor tacit agreement never to use the weapons against one another. On the contrary, the predominant policy has been one of mutual threat. Within this policy there has not, as Orwell thought, been technical stagnation, but a continual enlargement and escalation of weapons systems, each typically developed under an alleged threat of the superiority of the other side. And these have now reached the point at which national autonomies, within the alliances, contradict in one central respect the technical requirements of the most modern systems, which require instant response or even, some argue, preventive

first use, if the other power is not to gain an early and overwhelming advantage.

It would be easy to argue from this, yet again, that the Burnham/Orwell kind of superstate, with the necessary unitary command, is inevitable, as a product of the new weapons. But to move to that kind of superstate, for all its strategic advantages, would be to provoke major political problems — especially, for example, in Western Europe — which would endanger and probably break the now fragile compromise between surviving political autonomies and loyalties and the military-strategic alliance which has been superimposed on them. Thus Britain, in 1984, both is and is not, in Orwell's phrase, Airstrip One. It is dense with its own and foreign air and missile bases but it is also — and crucially, by a majority, is valued as — an independent political nation. To force the question to the point where it would have to be one thing *or* the other would bring into play all the forces which Orwell recognised in his essays but excluded from the novel. For the agents of parnational military and economic planning Britain has become, in a true example of Newspeak, the UK or Yookay. But for the peoples who live on the actual island there are more real and more valued names and relationships and considerations.

A more serious exclusion

It is in the exclusion of even these traditional elements of resistance to what might seem a logical new order that Orwell, in the novel though usually not in the essays, went most obviously wrong. But there is an even larger error in the exclusion of new forces of resistance: most notably the national-liberation and revolutionary movements of what he knew as the colonial world. The monopoly of nuclear weapons, in the major industrialised states, has not prevented major advances towards autonomy among the 'subject peoples' whose condition he predicted as more hopeless. This is the peculiar unreality of the projection, that the old world powers, newly grouped into superstates, are seen as wholly dominant, and that the rest of the world is merely a passive quarry of minerals and cheap labour. Again, however, what has actually happened is complex. There have been political liberations in this vast area that Orwell reduced to passivity, but there is a limited sense in which what he foresaw has happened: not in superstate wars for its control, but in a complex of economic interventions, by parnational corporations which have some of the technical attributes of superstates; of

political interventions, manoeuvres and 'destabilisations' of exceptionally heavy arms exports to what in the worst cases become client states; and of military interventions, in some cases, where heavy and bloody fighting still excludes the use or threat of use of the nuclear weapons which in the perspective of the 1940s had seemed decisive for either conquest or blackmail.

Thus there has been, in one sense, the 'perpetual war' that Orwell thought likely, but it has been neither of a total nor of a phoney kind. The complex political and economic forces actually engaged have

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prevented the realisation of the apparently simple extrapolations from technical necessity or political ambition. It is sometimes hard to say, at this world-political level, whether the real 1984 is better or worse than the projected *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is more complex, more dynamic, more uncertain than the singular nightmare. Many more people are free or relatively free than the projection allowed, but also many more people have died or are dying in continuing 'small' wars, and vastly more live in danger of annihilation by nuclear war. The rationed and manipulated shortages of the projection have been succeeded by an extraordinary affluence in the privileged nations, and by actual and potential starvation in extending areas of the poor world. It is then not for showing danger and horror that anyone can reproach Orwell. If there is to be reproach, it is for looking so intently in one direction, with its simplified and easily dramatised dangers, that there is an excuse for not looking at other forces and developments which may, in the end, prove to be even more disastrous.

THE NEW SOCIAL ORDER

War is Peace is one notable chapter of the Book. As a comment on a perpetual and normalised *state* of war its details may be wrong but its feeling is right. 'We are the peace movement', a British government minister said recently, supporting the next phase of rearmament.

Ignorance is Strength is the other main chapter. This eventually describes the purposes and methods of thought control, but it begins with an analysis of the social structure of the superstates, based on a sort of historical-political theory:

'Throughout recorded time, and probably since the end of the Neolithic Age, there have been three kinds of people in the world, the High, the Middle and the Low. They have been subdivided in many ways, they have borne countless different names, and their relative numbers, as well as their attitude towards one another, have varied from age to age: but the essential structure of society has never altered. Even after enormous upheavals and seemingly irrevocable changes, the same pattern has always reasserted itself. . . .'¹¹

It is at points like this that the status of the Book, in relation to Orwell's own thinking, is most problematic. Many examples could be quoted to show that he understood history as change rather than this abstract recurrence. The point is relevant again when the Book asserts:

'No advance in wealth, no softening of manners, no reform or revolution has ever brought human equality a millimetre nearer.'¹²

This is, as written, such obvious nonsense that the status of the whole argument becomes questionable. If this were really true, there would be no basis for calling Ingsoc a 'perversion'; it would be yet one more example of an inevitable, even innate process.

Clearly Orwell did not believe this, and neither did the author or the authors of the Book, a page or two on. For what is there argued is that while in earlier periods, because of the stage of development of the means of production, 'inequality was the price of civilisation', in the twentieth century 'human equality had become technically possible' with the development of 'machine production'. However, just at that point 'all the main currents of political thought' stopped believing in equality and became authoritarian.

This is an imperfect composition of three incompatible kinds of argument: one from Orwell, one from Burnham and one from Marx. The Marxist proposition of the unavoidable relations between the stages of development of the means of production and the formation of class societies, with the orthodox communist gloss that fully-developed machine production would at last make equality possible, is unmistakably present. The Orwell argument or reservation that much talk of this kind, among its actual representatives, is just a cover for a new authoritarian conspiracy, ending capitalism but then even more thoroughly repressing and controlling the working class, is also evident. But the really discordant element, though it becomes dominant, is from Burnham. As Orwell summarises him in the first essay:

'Every great social movement, every war, every revolution, every political programme, however edifying and Utopian, really has behind it the ambitions of some sectional group which is out to grab power for itself. . . . So that history consists

of a series of swindles, in which the masses are first lured into revolt by the promise of Utopia, and then, when they have done their job, enslaved over again by new masters.'¹³

In the essay Orwell circles hesitantly and intelligently around these crude propositions. He even comments:

'He . . . assumes that the division of society into classes serves the same purpose in all ages. This is practically to ignore the history of hundreds of years.'¹⁴

And he goes on from this to the Marxist proposition, repeated in the Book, on the relation of class society to methods of production.

What kind of socialism

At the level of Orwell's direct arguments, then, the eventual emphasis of the Book is a known simplification. But it is the combination of this simplification with his own, often reasonable, reservations and suspicions about socialists or nominal socialists who are really authoritarians which determines the social structure of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. His own contribution is then more specific than Burnham's. Burnham had forseen a 'managerial revolution'. As Orwell summarises:

'Capitalism is disappearing, but Socialism is not replacing it. What is now arising is a new kind of planned, centralised society which will be neither capitalist nor, in any accepted sense of the word, democratic. The rulers of this new society will be the people who effectively control the means of production: that is, business executives, technicians, bureaucrats and soldiers, lumped together by Burnham under the name of 'managers'. These people will eliminate the old capitalist class, crush the working class, and so organise society that all power and economic privilege remain in their own hands. Private property rights will be abolished, but common ownership will not be established.'¹⁵

This is not in any full sense, how things have actually turned out, though there are



elements that are recognisable. But Orwell did not call the new social order Ingmana; he called it Ingsoc. Burnham's prediction, and the wider argument of which it is a relatively simple instance, pointed as clearly to fascism and the corporate state, or to what is now called a managed, interventionist post-capitalism, as to an authoritarian communism. It was Orwell who specialised it to a development within the socialist tradition, which it was also betraying. We can then, in 1984, only properly assess the prediction if we pull back to its full context.

In one way it is easy to understand Orwell's narrowing specialisation. Fascism, when he was writing, had just been militarily defeated. Capitalism, he assumed, was finished and deserved to be finished. What then mattered was which kind of socialism would come through, and since his option was for democratic socialism, what he had mainly and even exclusively to oppose was authoritarian socialism.

'The real question is not whether the people who wipe their boots on us during the next fifty years are to be called managers, bureaucrats or politicians: the question is whether capitalism, now obviously doomed, is to give way to oligarchy or to true democracy.'¹⁵

This makes strange reading in 1984, especially if *Nineteen Eighty-Four* there to tell us to concentrate our attention on Ingsoc and the Party. It is true that within the countries of what is now called 'actually existing socialism' this is broadly how it has turned out. Indeed the only correction we have to make, in that area, is that 'the Party', in that singular ideological sense, has proved to be less significant than the actual combination of technicians, bureaucrats and soldiers which the political monopoly of the Party makes possible and legitimises.

Capitalism's great recovery

But what has really undermined the basis of Orwell's prediction has been the phenomenal recovery of capitalism, which he had seen as 'doomed'. The spectacular capitalist boom from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s falsified virtually every element of the specific prediction. The real standard of living rose for many millions of working people. The main socialist movements, in the old industrial societies, moved steadily towards a consensus with the new, affluent, managed capitalism. Political liberties were not further suppressed, though their exercise became more expensive. The main motor of the boom, in an extraordinary expansion of consumer credit, was a new predominance of financial institutions, which gained in power at the expense of both political and industrial forces. When the boom ended, in depression and the return of mass unemployment, a new oligarchy was plainly in view. The national and international monetary institutions, with their counterparts in the giant parnational corporations,

¹⁰ *Ibid* IV 8.

¹¹ *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 162.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ *Collected Essays* IV 176-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid* IV 160.

¹⁵ *Ibid* IV 165.

had established a both practical and ideological dominance which so far from being shaken by the first decade of depression and unemployment was actually reinforced by it. These were the actual forces now 'wiping their boots on us', in the old industrial societies and the new ex-colonial countries alike. Internally and externally they had all the features of a true oligarchy, and a few people, at least, began to learn that 'centralisation' is not just an old socialist nostrum but is a practical process of ever-larger and more concentrated capitalist corporations and money markets. State power, meanwhile, though trying to withdraw from its earlier commitments to common provision for social welfare, has increased at military levels, in the new weapons systems, and in its definitions of law and order and of security (backed up by some intensive surveillance). Thus it is an obvious case of *doublethink* when the radical Right, now in power in so many countries, denounced the state at the level of social welfare or economic justice but reinforce and applaud the state at the level of patriotic militarism, uniform loyalty, and control over local democratic institutions. To hear some of the loudest of these double-mouthed people is to know what is meant, in Newspeak, by *adoubleplusgood duckspeaker*.

But then what about the *proles*? Here again the prediction was quite wrong, though there are a few disillusioned people thinking it might have been right. For the key feature of the new capitalist oligarchy is that it has not left 'eighty five per cent of the population' to their own devices. On the contrary, it has successfully organised most of them as a market, calling them now not 'proles' but 'consumers' (the two terms are equally degrading). It is true that there is massive provision, by the newspapers and other media of the oligarchy, of the semi-pornography and gambling and mechanical fiction which the Party was supposed to provide. But the real controls are different. A straight contract between disciplined wage-labour and credit-financed consumption was offered and widely accepted. Even as it became unavailable to the many millions who in depression became, in that cruel oligarchic term, 'redundant', its social and political hold, as the essence of any social order, was at first barely disturbed. Indeed the ideological response of the oligarchy was to act to make the contract more secure: by disciplining the trade unions which represented an independent element in its bargaining, beyond oligarchic control; and by identifying as public enemies, in its

newspapers, dissentient political figures (not the 'proper official Opposition' but the 'unofficial' Reds, Wreckers, Extremists, who in good *Nineteen Eighty-Four* style were seen as either mad or guilty of *thoughtcrime*).

POWER AND MOTIVATION

This brings us to the hardest question in a reassessment of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Worried and fascinated by Burnham's arguments that power is the only political reality, whatever phrases may accompany it, Orwell observed:

'It is curious that in all his talk about the struggle for power, Burnham never stops to ask *why* people want power. He seems to assume that power hunger, although only dominant in comparatively few people, is a natural instinct that does not have to be explained.'¹⁶

'A natural instinct that does not have to be explained'? This is the terrifying irrationalism of the climax of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and it is not easy, within the pity and the terror, to persist with the real and Orwell's own question. The point of Burnham's position is to discredit all actual political beliefs and aspirations, since these are invariably covers for naked power or the wish for it. But if this is so, there is not only a cancellation of history — as Orwell in his essay went on to observe. The real variations of what happened, as well as of what was said and believed; are flattened into a meaningless, degrading uniformity of human action. There is also a cancellation of inquiry and argument, and therefore of the possibility of truth, since whatever is said can be instantly translated into the base and cruel reality which it is known to cover. It is not necessary to deny the existence, even the frequent occurrence, of persecution and power and torture 'for their own sake' (meaning, for the private gratification of their executors, rather than for any objective cause) to go on resisting the cancellation of all links between power and policy. And this cancellation *must* be resisted, if only because it would then be pointless to try to distinguish between social systems, or to inquire, discriminately, where this or that system went good or went bad.

Passivity of inevitability

There is plenty of room for disagreement about the social and political systems which make arbitrary power, persecution and torture more or less likely. In the world of the actual 1984 there is so vast an extent of these practices, in social systems otherwise dissimilar — from Chile to Kampuchea, from Turkey and El Salvador to Eastern Europe, and with instances from as close to

home as Belfast — that it is tempting to override the discriminating questions, to recoil from man become brute. Yet it is the two-plus-two kind of reckoning — obstinately factual and truthful, however complex the sums may become — that is then most at risk. There *are* reasons, as outside the fiction Orwell well knew, why there are systems and phases of systems in which, as throughout recorded history, opponents and even inconvenients are imprisoned, tortured and killed; just as there are other systems and phases of systems — nearly all of them modern; nearly all of them achieved by prolonged political argument and struggle — when these brutal short-cuts are lessened or brought under control. Of course Orwell is warning against a modern totalitarian system, developed beyond even Stalin or Hitler. But there is a totalitarian way of warning against totalitarianism, by excluding just those discriminating historical analyses, those veridical political distinctions, those authentic as distinct from assumed beliefs and aspirations, which are a much better protection against it than the irrational projection inspiring either terror or hate. It is useful to remember what he said of Burnham:

'Burnham is trying to build up a picture of terrifying, irresistible power, and to turn a normal political manoeuvre like infiltration into Infiltration adds to the general portentousness.'¹⁷ It can be the same with Ingsoc. As he again said in discussing Burnham's thesis:

'Power worship blurs political judgment because it leads, almost unavoidably, to the belief that present trends will continue.'¹⁸

Yet Orwell himself, always an opponent of privilege and power, committed himself, in the fiction, to just that submissive belief. The warning that the world could be going that way became, in the very absoluteness of the fiction, an imaginative submission to its inevitability. And then to rattle that chain again is to show little respect to those many men and women, including from the whole record Orwell himself, who have fought and are fighting the destructive and ignorant trends that are still so powerful, and who have kept the strength to imagine, as well as to work for, human dignity, freedom and peace. •

¹⁶ *Nineteen Eighty-Four* IV 177.

¹⁷ *Collected Essays* IV 170.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 174.

This extract is taken from the new edition of *Orwell* by Raymond Williams. Previously published as a Fontana Modern Master the new edition contains a substantial new chapter, 'Nineteen Eighty-Four in 1984', and will be published by Flamingo on 16 February at £1.95.