

Totalitarian Schizophrenia: Psychological Oppression in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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I. Introduction

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a story about the state control of the people's mind. Indeed the lower middle-class (like Winston Smith) and the proles are all forced to live on meager and almost poisonous provisions every day, which keep their bodies in a state of chronic unhealthiness. But such a physical oppression occupies only a secondary place in the whole system of the Party's state management. As O'Brien says to Winston toward the end of the novel, "power is power over human beings. Over the body--but, above all, over the mind. Power over matter--external reality, as you would call it--is not important".⁽¹⁾ Once the state succeeds in the psychological regulation (or, one might say, brain-washing) of the people, its power becomes virtually almighty; no matter how cruel and irrational its policies are, the government can implement them quite easily, because the people have lost their moral or mental power to judge for themselves. This is an essential procedure to establish totalitarian society and what Orwell dramatized in his dystopian novel.

While Orwell placed strong stress upon the psychological state power over the people, there is a group of critics who try to read the novel psychologically. Some discuss the novel as a projection of the author's life experience, such as his horrible childhood in school or his physical and mental suffering from the advanced stage of tuberculosis; and other critics psychoanalyze Winston's personality in terms of Freudian psychology, especially the theory of the Oedipus complex.⁽²⁾ Although I learned much from these studies, basically I am not interested in Orwell's or Winston's psychic life. What matters to me is, instead, the discursive power of psychology as a scientific discipline and its relationship with the dystopian world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Undoubtedly, Orwell demonstrated how the abusive practice of psychoanalysis and psychiatry contributed to strengthening the totalitarian power, and cast a critical eye upon that process. This is the point of my present essay, and I will illustrate it in the following pages.

II. Schizophrenia and the Problem of Scientific Expertise

Before examining the problem of psychological oppression in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, let's take a brief look into Orwell's use of psychological terms in his essays, by way of which, I think, it is

possible to have some idea how he thought of psychological sciences. Although he didn't discuss psychology directly in his essays, he took a part of a psychological diagnostician in commenting on contemporary conditions of society. According to him, one must "start by recognising that political behaviour is largely non-rational, that the world is suffering from some kind of mental disease which must be diagnosed before it can be cured."⁽³⁾ He went on to identify what kind of mental disease the world suffered at that time, that is, schizophrenia *alias* totalitarianism: the totalitarian way of thinking is "[m]edically. . . called schizophrenia," which depends on "the power of holding simultaneously two beliefs which cancel out. . . . [W]e are all capable of believing things which we *know* to be untrue, and then when we are finally proved wrong, impudently twisting the facts so as to show we were right."⁽⁴⁾ This is the very concept that Orwell theorized as "doublethink" in his *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. To put it another way, the novel is a kind of Orwell's psychological diagnosis of totalitarian society.

Orwell refers to "schizophrenia" much the same way in other places,⁽⁵⁾ and judging from this, it seems that he appreciated the analytical ability of psychology in recognizing the problem of modern society. Yet as it was, he never trusted in psychological discourses off-hand. This contradictory attitude can be attributed to his deep suspicion of what he called "the exact sciences." In an essay titled "What Is Science?" he made a critique of scientific discourses as a whole and the people's uncritical acceptance of them. There pervades an illusion these days, he said,

that if one has been scientifically trained one's approach to all subjects will be more intelligent than if one had had no such training. A scientist's political opinions, it is assumed, his opinions on sociological questions, on morals, on philosophy, perhaps even on the arts, will be more valuable than those of a layman. The world, in other words, will be a better place if the scientists were in control of it. . . . And, in fact, there are already millions of people who do believe this.⁽⁶⁾

Yet, this is only an illusion. "The facts is that a mere training in one or more of the exact sciences, even combined with very high gifts, is no guarantee of a humane or sceptical outlook"; if one devotes himself solely to physics, chemistry, biology or the like without acquiring any knowledge of history and literature, it will result in "narrow[ing] the range of his thoughts and mak[ing] him more contemptuous of such knowledge as he did not possess."⁽⁷⁾ And, of course, "the exact sciences" include psychology, too.⁽⁸⁾

The point of Orwell's argument lies in the problematic nature of scientific expertise. Scientific discourses seem to be neutral by nature, showing objective truths. Even if we don't ascertain

them for ourselves, we believe them as soon as we learn them; we have never seen the earth revolving around the sun, but we *know* it does. Probably, heliocentrism is really true. But, the problem is that every scientific expertise sounds true as well. And that, as Orwell implied, even as a scientist expresses his or her own mere opinions on politics, social affairs or whatever, they are respected as “intelligent,” “more valuable than those of a layman,” and true. This is the same situation as that of “doublethink.” People yield their truth-making power to specialists, whose scientific expertise they believe without reserve.

That is the case with psychological discourses, too. Nobody knows what is going on in one’s mind, but psychological expertise has a decisive truth-claim on the knowledge of the human mind. You don’t have to probe deep into your psyche for yourself, but just wait for a psychologist’s opinion. Even if the diagnosis is incompatible with what you think yourself to be, you have to accept it because it is the scientific truth. If you are diagnosed as schizophrenic, you, of course, are schizophrenic. The decision-making power is completely out of your reach, and you can’t do with your mind by yourself.

This is an extreme case. Human beings have enjoyed a lot of gains through psychology and other sciences. Yet, Orwell’s concern is about over-estimation of scientific knowledge. He points out people’s uncritical acceptance of scientific truths could be dangerous, and that the power of scientific expertise would turn out to be in affinity with the totalitarian regime, if it didn’t receive a due check.

Already there are countless people who would think it scandalous to falsify a scientific text-book, but would see nothing wrong in falsifying an historical fact. It is at the point where literature and politics cross that totalitarianism exerts its greatest pressure on the intellectual. The exact sciences are not, at this date, menaced to anything like the same extent. This partly accounts for the fact that in all countries it is easier for the scientists than for the writers to line up behind their
respective governments.⁽⁹⁾

Here we can see a nutshell of the totalitarian social structure in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where psychological science--especially, psychiatry--gains the ascendancy to the point that it identifies with the state power. Nobody has doubt about its expertise; the people believe in it, cling to it as the only means to stay sane. But, ironically, it is the state itself that actually promotes schizophrenic “doublethink” among them. Under the circumstances, “doublethink” is a sign of sanity, and those who can’t do that properly are diagnosed as insane, just as Winston is. It is a scathing irony, but a possible

consequence of the totalitarian and scientific state regulation.

III. Psychiatry and the State Control of the Human Mind

Even in a first few pages of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we come across clear expressions of the Party's policy of psychological social regulation. The Newspeak terms "thoughtcrime" and "doublethink" are most suggestive of it among others. And also, Newspeak itself has an effect of reducing the range of mental activities to the degree that it is almost impossible to think in an ordinary sense. "The purpose of Newspeak was not only provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make other modes of thought impossible"(246). In other words, it provides a decisive frame of knowledge and cogitation for people, and once people internalize it in the course of disciplinary procedures, their minds are likely to become a kind of preprogrammed machines, so that they never deviate from the official ideology of the Party. They will be turned into non-volitional and non-identity puppets.

This process of social discipline is going under way not only in a discursive level, but it is also visualized in the everyday life: the poster of the Party leader, "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU"; the telescreen; and the soaring and mysterious towers of Ministries scattered around the city. The effect of these items is to keep people conscious of being watched in any place at any time. "Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque [of the telescreen] commanded, he could be seen as well as heard"(6). Of course, the Thought Police officers may be not vigilant at all times; quite probably, they turn away from the monitor screens at times. But, it makes no difference because people cannot know what is going on at the other end of the telescreen communication. The only one thing they can know is that they are constantly placed in a state of non-privacy, and this knowledge has a powerful psychological effect upon their minds. It arouses fear and uneasiness in them, and makes them self-regulatory of their own conduct. This is also the case with the towers of Ministries and the poster of Big Brother. People are never exactly informed who is doing what inside the towers, but the very presence of the towers compels them to be tamed. "Nobody has ever seen Big Brother" actually(171), but they know "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING" them. This psychological oppression will continue to the point that people forget the fear they should have felt at first, and that the code of the Party is naturalized in their minds.

This is a perfect example of what Michel Foucault called "Panopticism." Foucault's point is that the power structure of modern society has been based on the supervision and discipline of people's minds. Jeremy Bentham's architectural design of disciplinary institution, Panopticon, is quite

symbolic of this whole situation. At the periphery, a ring-shaped building stands; and at its center, a tower. A supervisor is placed in the central tower, while the supervised one—"a mad man, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy"--is shut up in each cell of the outer-ring building. And the cells are constantly lighted up, while the supervisor's room of the tower remains shaded. As a result, the inmates are only watched, but cannot see the inside of the tower. "Hence the effect of the Panopticon: to induce the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."⁽¹⁰⁾ It is much the same as the effect of the telescreen and Ministry towers. The city of London in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is, then, an outgrowth of the nineteenth-century Panopticon, armed with technologically more refined tools of supervision. In this sense, the novel can be regarded as an expression of a chronic anxiety about modern psychological oppression.

Still, Orwell's concerns about modern society seems even more pressing, and his vision of the dystopian London is more horrifying. Undoubtedly, this is because the novel reflects the terrible experiences of the World War II and the problems of the post-war world. "*1984* refers most directly to the oppressive Stalinist regime then in power in Russia, but it echoes Hitler's German Nazi regime in numerous ways as well. Moreover, the book stands as an eloquent plea that we remember the past and learn from it, that we in modern England and America not forget (and therefore repeat) the excesses of Hitler and Stalin in our attempts to defend our democratic life."⁽¹¹⁾ But, I think, Orwell's anxiety were also related with a then contemporary trend of new psychiatric manipulation. O'Brien's treatment of Winston's mind is quite suggestive of it.

Before actually arrested as a thought-criminal, Winston had kept a little bit of hope, and he grew more optimistic after meeting Julia. The Party's power was tremendous, but he thought it was not absolute, because "“They can't get inside you. If you can feel that staying human is worth while, even when it can't have any result whatever, you've beaten them”"(138). His thought went on:

One did not know what happened inside the Ministry of Love, but it was possible to guess: torture, drugs, instruments that registered your nervous reactions, gradual wearing-down by sleeplessness and solitude and persistent questioning. Facts, at any rate, could not be kept hidden. . . . [But] They could not alter your feelings; for that matter you could not alter them yourself, even if you wanted to. They could lay bare in the utmost detail everything that you had done or said or thought; but the inner heart, whose workings were mysterious even to yourself, remained impregnable. (138)

Probably, it is true. But, even if the Party is unable to alter Winston's feelings, they can destroy them.

And this is exactly what O'Brien does with Winston's mind.

The scene of O'Brien's punishing Winston in the Ministry of Love can be read as a religious conversion story: O'Brien is a merciless priest, and Winston is a powerless heretic who is doomed to be converted. But, more significantly, the scene is also filled with imageries of psychiatric manipulation of the human mind. O'Brien insists that he is "curing" Winston of "insanity"(207, 209, 226), and it turns out that it is nothing but the destruction of the human mind. O'Brien himself betrays the real nature of his "cure" and its result: "'By the time we had finished with them they were only the shell of men.' . . . 'You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves'"(211). The crucial moment comes soon after these triumphant assertions.

At this moment there was a devastating explosion, or what seemed like an explosion, though it was not certain whether there was any noise. There was undoubtedly a blinding flash of light. Winston was not hurt, only prostrated. Although he had already been lying on his back when the things happened, he had a curious feeling that he had been knocked into the position. A terrific, painless blow had flattened him out. Also something had happened inside his head. As his eyes regained their focus he remembered who he was, and where he was, and recognized the face that was gazing into his own; but somewhere or other there was a large patch of emptiness, as though a piece had been taken out of his brain. (212)

Obviously, Winston is electroshocked in the first place. And then, while he is in a state of unconsciousness, "something" is done "inside his head." This whole situation points to one fact: Winston is lobotomized in this scene. O'Brien "cures" Winston by destroying his mind or brain quite literally. (Julia also seems to have been lobotomized after the arrest. At the end of the novel, her head has a trace of the operation, "a long scar, partly hidden by the hair, across her forehead and temple"(240).)

O'Brien's method of "cure" depends on so-called shock therapy and psychosurgery. As is suggested in the novel, too, psychiatry in Orwell's days had a growing tendency to incorporate "drugs, shock therapy, hypnosis, and physical torture" into itself(160). Those were the days of a great breakthrough in the treatment of mental illness: insulin-coma therapy was first reported in 1933; metrazol-convulsion therapy, in 1935; prefrontal lobotomy, in 1936; electroconvulsive shock therapy, in 1938; and more. It was uncertain how these treatments really "cured" the patients. "All the theories attempting to explain how these treatments worked proved to be wrong and, as they were stated, so

vague as to be impossible to take seriously.”⁽¹²⁾ Strangely enough, however, “each of these therapies was put into practice, and hailed enthusiastically and energetically by the medical profession and the public. All were used extensively throughout the 1940s and early 1950s.”⁽¹³⁾ There seems to be just one reason to explain this popularity of otherwise unreliable treatments: they provided convenient methods to beat down unmalleable and sometimes violent patients, who either passed out or fell into a state of hollowness, “the shell of men,” after the treatments. The number of mental patients was increasing at that time, and especially so after the World War II. The shock therapies and psychosurgery were much needed as a counter-measure to that situation in those days. Indeed, the treatments turned out to be so efficient a measure in a sense, because the patients were quickly “cured” of insanity, and completely tamed by them. But, in fact, they were not medical treatments in a real sense, but a clear violation of human rights. They weren’t performed for the sake of the well-being of the patients, but for the convenience of society.

Even after the above-cited scene of lobotomy operation, the image of brain mutilation still lingers. O’Brien’s last card is the rats, anathema to Winston. At first glance, this rat-torture seems to have nothing to do with psychosurgery, but Winston’s traumatic nightmare of the rats refers to the “wrenching a piece out of his own brain”(120). When O’Brien remarks “[the rats] burrow through the cheeks and devour the tongue”(235), it is implied that they go further into Winston’s head to tear a piece out of his brain. This is the world where psychiatry exerts its unlimited power over the human mind; it can arbitrarily diagnose any individual as schizophrenic, and “cure” him or her of it by means of psychosurgery.

IV. Conclusion

Although Orwell makes the most of a descriptive plain style of writing, he asserts, “I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience.”⁽¹⁴⁾ As a writer, he must have been critical of this new trend of psychiatric manipulation, because it was nothing but the destruction of human emotion, imagination and creativity. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* exposes its dehumanizing cruelty, and, in so doing, clearly shows the author’s stance in this matter.

And, moreover, Orwell presents a possibility that the psychiatric oppression may not be limited to mental patients. The danger of over-estimation of scientific discourses is applicable to psychiatry, too: the power of psychiatry would be in affinity with the totalitarian state power. Orwell’s concern is like this: what if this psychiatric manipulation is applied to the state management? Or what if a psychiatrist is fused with a state leader? If this came true, it would result in the birth of O’Brien-

like despot/expert psychiatrist. Under such a despot/psychiatrist's rule, what would the individual's life be like? It would be like Winston's. The ever more increasing power of the state would be exerted over the people's mind, to the point that every step they take is watched and predicted, just as Winston's life was. There would be no secret hideaway for their persons, and no secret nook left in their minds, either. They would be completely tamed, and become, as it were, transparent minds.

This is too ominous to take place in the real world. But, Orwell's concern was not so ungrounded on the contemporary conditions of society. Even if their scientific principles weren't proved, shock therapy and psychosurgery were hailed enthusiastically by the public, and shock therapist and psychosurgeon were respected by them as well. Psychiatrists must have been one of the first groups who had a potential power to exert a strong influence over the management of the state. Orwell's point seems to increase the reader's awareness of the social conditions by putting forward this worst-case scenario.

Appendix: Time line

- 1918 The World War I ends.
- 1930 The First International Congress on Mental Hygiene (Washington, D.C.)
- 1933 Insulin-coma therapy is first reported. (Vienna)
- 1935 Metrazol-convulsion therapy is first reported. (Hungary)
- 1936 Prefrontal lobotomy is first reported by Antonio Egas Moniz. (Portugal)
- 1937 The Second International Congress on Mental Hygiene (Paris)
Transorbital lobotomy is first reported. (Italy)
- 1938 Electroconvulsive shock therapy is initiated. (Italy)
- 1945 The World War II ends.
Transorbital lobotomy is adapted by Walter Freeman. (U.S.)
- 1946 The National Association for Mental Health is established (U.K.)
- 1948 The First International Congress of Psychosurgery (Lisbon)
- 1949 Antonio Egas Moniz, a founder of lobotomy operation technique, receives the Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology.

George Orwell, *1984* is published.

Notes

1 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949; New York: Signet, 1984): 218. All subsequent citations from this volume are marked by page numbers in parentheses.

2 See, for example, Erika Gottlieb, "Room 101 Revisited: The Reconciliation of Political and Psychological Dimensions in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" and Mason Harris, "From History to Psychological Grotesque: The Politics of Sado-Masochism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," in Peter Buitenhuis and Ira B. Nadel, eds., *George Orwell: A Reassessment* (New York: St. Martin, 1988): 51-76, and 32-50; Paul Roazen, "Orwell, Freud, and *1984*" *Virginia Quarterly Review* 54.4 (1977), rpt. in Harold Bloom, eds., *George Orwell's 1984* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987): 19-34; Richard I. Smyer, *Primal Dream and Primal Crime: Orwell's Development as a Psychological Novelist* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1979). Gottlieb compactly summarizes other psychological readings of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in her essay.

3 Orwell, "As I Please," in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 4 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968): 249.

4 Orwell, "In Front of Your Nose," in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 4, 123-24.

5 See Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature," in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 4, 64; "Politics and the English Language," in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 4, 137.

6 Orwell, "What Is Science?" in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 4, 11.

7 *Ibid.*, 12.

8 "A biologist, an astronomer, perhaps a psychologist or a mathematician, is described as a 'man of science.'" See Orwell, "What Is Science?" in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 4, 10.

9 Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature," in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 4, 64.

10 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977): 201. Mary Jo Morris also points out the similarity between Bentham's Panopticon and the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. See Morris, "Bentham and Basic English: The 'Pious Founders' of Newspeak," in *George Orwell: A Reassessment*, 102-13.

11 M. Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994): 213.

12 Elliot S. Valenstein, *Great and Desperate Cures: The Rise and Decline of Psychosurgery and Other Radical Treatments for Mental Illness* (New York: Basic Books, 1986): 45.

13 *Ibid.*, 45-46.

14 Orwell, "Why I Write," in *The Collected Essays*, 6.

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