

IS THE FICTIONAL DYSTOPIA OF GEORGE ORWELL'S NOVEL *NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR* FINALLY COMING TO PASS AS A NEW QUASI-REALITY FOR U.K. ACADEME?

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Abstract This essay discusses those austere aspects of Orwell's cultivated and profound literary classic that have taken root in U.K. higher education, where the boundaries separating his fictional world from ours have already started to fall away.

"The man who asks a question is a fool for a minute; the man who does not ask is a fool for life."
Chinese sage Confucius

1 Introduction

"In a free nation, it matters not whether individuals reason well or ill; it is sufficient that they do reason. Truth arises from the collision and from hence springs liberty, . . ." So said Thomas Erskine (as libel defence barrister at the December 1792 trial of English-born American activist, philosopher and revolutionary, Thomas Paine), quoting the French 'Enlightenment' thinker Charles de Montesquieu. Around a century and a half later, the English writer George Orwell produced a devastating portrayal of a planet bereft of this most basic prerogative as revealed by a lone maverick determined to quietly confront, in his own *sapere aude* way, the ultimate annihilation of autonomy and a grotesque betrayal of humanity.

This evergreen novel—which of late boasts a fresh surge in popularity (The *New York Times* reported a sales spike in January 2017, for instance, when it rose to the top of Amazon's bestseller list)—has remained a readers' favourite for seventy years, its relevance to us prolonged and sharpened by the conduct of those in positions of sovereignty across vast swathes of the earth; the depiction of a dire global order, reeking of corruption and lies, holds ominous warnings that reverberate more strongly than they ever once did. Orwell showed us the intimate workings of a frightening regime able to crush identity and supplant it with a hollow counterfeit. He painted a stark picture of monotony, drudgery, debasement, anguish and danger fuelled by unrelenting prohibition, brainwashing, uncertainty and repression as a means to exercise command over those living out a stifled reality punctuated by disorientation and hopeless strife. Surely this nightmare could never come to pass, but wait . . . not only has the work taken on some disturbing resonances in the macro context of transcontinental events, but at a micro level some definite analogies can be drawn between the author's description of ordinary life in the main fictional city of his book and an oppressive environment that thousands of industrious and talented U.K. academics—to the detriment of wellbeing, aspirations and achievements—have to cope with and navigate. Have only a few spotted that some of the essential themes of the book are looming large in academe, casting their own fateful shadows?

This short treatise is not borne of any conspiracy theories on the part of the writer, nor does it originate from a private reservoir of paranoia. It is solely an attempt to disclose those premises underscoring and permeating *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as signposts to, and harbingers of, things that would not have been foreseen or even possible in academia until the early 1990s expansion of the university system ushered in a new age of industrial scale post 18 education. I make a clear statement to the effect that the defective and slightly schizophrenic H.E. bubble has a host

of negative attributes that should in fact come as no real shock to anyone since they are driven by human factors that were written about in detail with appealing facundity—albeit embedded inside a different anatomy of prose—many decades ago by Orwell. A background to the discourse is first given here, referencing teaching, research and the wider university culture as moulded by doctrines and precepts present in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Section 3 is a reminder that mathematicians are especially prone to risk from the current direction of travel throughout academia (and always have been by their very cast and complexion), while Section 4 unpicks the substance of the novel in highlighting those narrative threads and literary devices that are germane to us and whose close proximities are more than a little disconcerting. Extending this line of thinking, Section 5 reflects on developments elsewhere that elevate the work as presaging a future whose essence is already upon us and, one could argue, betokens worse to come.

*“Not surprisingly, “1984” has found a nervous readership
in today’s “post-truth” era.”*

Book review by M. Kakutani (January 2017) for *The New York Times* (on-line).

The tentacles of Orwell’s masterpiece have a reach that could never have been envisaged or foretold upon its publication in 1949.

2 Backdrop and Context

2.1 Teaching and Research

Not only is Orwell’s topography of state totalitarianism echoed by characteristics of burgeoning suppression found in H.E. today, so too are cacotopian moral failures in his society imitated by the manner in which a good number of our prevailing bureaucratic systems are sometimes planned and commonly executed. We are routinely advised that administrative architectures are there to help us, simplifying processes and guaranteeing transparency for all. They purport to account for and nurture ambition through freedoms of expression, creative possibilities and career progression, but they frequently serve (by accident or otherwise) to impair, constrain and demoralise those charged with the dual tasks of educating the next generation while retaining an authentic research profile in order that each advance the growth and enrichment of a kaleidoscope of disciplines. Cause and effect connectives are now eroding the occupations of academics, redefining job descriptions and throwing aside well established tenets about the purpose of universities amid changes in government legislation, funding streams, and (escorted by a myriad of sensibilities and suppositions, and unhelpful variations in calibre) student intake. In addition to teaching—where we want to inculcate in our pupils an air of optimism, vitality and fortitude to stand them in good stead, as well as imparting knowledge—we are by default supposed to be committed to pure and applied research, to represent the face of radical creeds and avant-garde thinking at times, or else be those pushing the boundaries of business, commerce, science, and so on. It is, though, difficult to sustain the cognitive functionalities necessary for these scholarly pursuits as genuinely worthwhile endeavours—upholding one’s integrity and resolve—when fighting against energy sapping stresses and the bridling obedience demanded from us. What follows might be something of an overgeneralisation (for working conditions do vary across the tertiary sector) but the ongoing H.E. landscape is, like the dystopian world of Orwell, unrewarding and unforgiving for lots of people in ways that more than hint at links between the two—one only has to glance at the abundance of works in education and social sciences that detail the huge issues making universities of today habitats where academics do not find it easy to relax, to grow and to thrive. *Haud ignota loquor*, surely?

2.2 Wider Culture

Moves towards neoliberal models for universities have, over the last decade in particular, fundamentally changed those things required of academics with regard to teaching and research, but (it is widely concurred) not for the better. On the one hand, increasingly taxing students eagerly raise issues—and are sometimes encouraged to do so by untrustworthy or timorous jacks-in-office—if they perceive their engagement as ‘customers’ to be disappointing and/or overpriced, and are armed increasingly with an air of entitlement to a ‘good’ undergraduate degree (to which

we must ever more bow, in cases regardless of how bright or studious they are); this is why the freshly launched Teaching Excellence (and Student Outcomes) Framework, or T.E.F., ratings (lauded, but bogus) have taken on such significance, as 'Gold Standard' awards supposedly put universities on the front foot in their battles to combat criticism about the instruction/facilities they provide, and are enthusiastically seized by directorate as a positive recruitment utility and substitute marker of excellence.¹ Then, on the other, a minacious type of internal boss—replete with university edicts and initiatives, and bolstered by the company of cloned personalities further up the proverbial food chain—is now granted license to give full vent to centralised and pseudo-serviceable praxes foisted on university staff who in their research are losing sight of who they are and what is important, urged to chase down such things as 'impact' and 'quality' described by metrics specifically formulated to assist in the judgement of our precious 'outputs' and, by implication, ourselves. The post of lecturer holds real challenges, especially if one is conscientious and loath to make compromises on respectability, duty and issues of ethics in these two primary activities that suffer tireless scrutiny and assessment. It's all rather Orwellian, for the allegorical heartbeat to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* directs a perfect prism of interpretation through perspicacious images and emblematic constructs that instinctively resurface in any reliable and honest description of modern day academe.

As an aside, although we regularly encounter media references to the 'Orwellian' type atmosphere universities are fostering, they are almost always very sweeping in nature and in soundbite form only. The only semi-serious piece I've seen on this topic is a short (900+ word) and narrow *Times Higher Education* offering 'Last Man in the University: It's 13 O'Clock on Campus' authored under the pseudonym Eric Blair (Orwell's real name) in April 2016, the title being a play on an initial one for the novel (which was set to be *The Last Man in Europe*).

3 Mathematics: A Curse and a Blessing

C.J. Keyser was an American mathematician with a noticeable inclination for philosophical as-severations. In an article, published at the start of the 20th century, he set down a beautiful and in places almost poetic *coup d'oeil* into what mathematics is and, by implication, what it means to be a mathematician:

"It [mathematics] is, then, in the inner world of pure thought, where all *entia* dwell, where is every type of order and manner of correlation and variety of relationship, it is in this infinite ensemble of eternal verities whence, if there be one cosmos or many of them, each derives its character and mode of being—it is there that the spirit of mathesis has its home and its life.

Is it a restricted home, a narrow life, static and cold and grey with logic, without artistic interest, devoid of emotion and mood and sentiment? That world, it is true, is not a world of *solar* light, not clad in the colours that liven and glorify the things of sense, but it is an illuminated world, and over it all and everywhere throughout are hues and tints transcending *sense*, painted there by radiant pencils of *psychic* light, the light in which it lies. It is a silent world, and, nevertheless, in respect to the highest principle of art—the interpenetration of content and form, the perfect fusion of mode and meaning—it even surpasses music. In a sense, it is a static world, but so, too, are the worlds of the sculptor and the architect. The figures, however, which reason constructs and the mathematic vision beholds, transcend the temple and the statue, alike in simplicity and in intricacy, in delicacy and in grace, in symmetry and in poise. . . . The domain of mathematics is the sole domain of certainty. There and there alone prevail the standards by which every hypothesis respecting the external universe and all observation and all experiment must be finally judged. It is the realm to which all speculation and all thought must repair for chastening and san[i]tation—the court of last resort, I say it reverently, for all intellection whatsoever, whether of demon or man or deity. It is there that mind attains its highest estate, and the condition

¹The T.E.F. review (preceded a while back by Q.A.A.(Quality Assurance Agency) audits), all too predictably, confounds a concern for standards (that is, quality) with an appetite for standardisation (assured by measurement) which bulldozes the sector towards a bland state of homogenisation where knowledge is diluted to the level of nothing more than information (undemocratic, fascistic and anti-pluralistic dictators understand implicitly the usefulness of this, as did Orwell).

of knowledge there is the ultimate object, the tantalising goal of the aspiration, the *Anders-Streben*, of all other knowledge of every kind.” [5, pp. 313–314];

though flowery, and written with a trademark rhetorical flourish of the day, the metaphors are accurate and timeless in equal measure. The English mathematician G.H. Hardy had a nice way of describing steps not atypical in mathematical discovery (the below is taken from a transcript of his invited 1928 Rouse Ball Lecture at Cambridge where he spoke of both the philosophy and practicalities of proof (and, as an informed amateur, logic)), penning

“I have myself always thought of a mathematician as in the first instance an *observer*, a man who gazes at a distant range of mountains and notes down his observations. His object is simply to distinguish clearly and notify to others as many different peaks as he can. There are some peaks which he can distinguish easily, while others are less clear. He sees A sharply, while of B he can obtain only transitory glimpses. At last he makes out a ridge which leads from A, and following it to its end he discovers that it culminates in B. B is now fixed in his vision, and from this point he can proceed to further discoveries. In other cases perhaps he can distinguish a ridge which vanishes in the distance, and conjectures that it leads to a peak in the clouds or below the horizon. But when he sees a peak he believes that it is there simply because he sees it. If he wishes someone else to see it, he *points to it*, either directly or through the chain of summits which led him to recognise it himself. When his pupil also sees it, the research, the argument, the *proof* is finished.” [4, p. 18],

and adding “. . . ; it is only the very unsophisticated outsider who imagines that mathematicians make discoveries by turning the handle of some miraculous machine.” Staying with this for a moment, the well known Hungarian-born American mathematician and gifted expositor Paul R. Halmos wrote (on presenting mathematics as a creative art to an audience in 1967)

“Mathematics—this may surprise you or shock you some—is never deductive in its creation. The mathematician at work makes vague guesses, visualizes broad generalizations, and jumps to unwarranted conclusions. He arranges and rearranges his ideas, and he becomes convinced of their truth long before he can write down a logical proof. The conviction is not likely to come early—it usually comes after many attempts, many failures, many discouragements, many false starts. It often happens that months of work result in the proof that the method of attack they were based on cannot possibly work, and the process of guessing, visualizing, and conclusion-jumping begins again. A reformulation is needed—and—and this too may surprise you—more experimental [thought] is needed.” [3, pp. 380-381].

Taken together—the universal mathematical vista we see before us that is expressed so eloquently, and the purposeful steps of revelation—one obvious inference here is that conditions need to be right for laws, principles and certitudes to emerge, and while the subject has diversified and been enriched inestimably since the time of Keyser and Hardy (and even Halmos), the nucleus of their words still rings true. This is why the suffocating and repressive clouds that hang over post millennial H.E. are so very deleterious to mathematicians, more than most, for those sensitive interplays between the dazzling artistic, aesthetic and logical purity of mathematics—whose practitioners are successful only when offered contemplative cerebral space for analytical and lucid thinking that is deep and leisured—give rise to a delicate dynamic that is quickly derailed or ruined. Thus, mathematics becomes at once both a blessing and a curse, but however it feels at any given moment—a cross to bear, or an intoxicating elixir—it needs a special sort of patience, dedication and, above all, time, which has been understood by research mathematicians for centuries (Swiss statistician Peter J. Huber (1934–) said, in interview, “I found that in order to do creative work, I had to be at it without interruption for at least a week at a time. . . . When I had a successful idea, I could not let loose and worked furiously.” Italian mathematician Enrico Bombieri (1940–) spoke, when moved, of working “. . . three days and three nights never taking a rest save for eating a little and drinking coffee.”); this is the way we are—*actiones secundum fidei*, in other words.

In a September 1904 address before the Department of Mathematics of the International Congress of Arts and Science at the Universal Exposition in St. Louis, American mathematician James P. Pierpont commenced with “The extraordinary development of mathematics in the last

century is quite unparalleled in the long history of this most ancient of sciences.” He spoke of new areas that had “sprung up in almost bewildering profusion” to assume “proportions of vast extent” [6, p. 136], and went on to detail some of the then leading theories in a fine piece of writing. He closed with the words

“What strikes us at once is its colossal [size] and rapid growth in nearly all directions, the great variety of its branches, the generality and complexity of its methods, an inexhaustible creative imagination, the fearless introduction and employment of ideal elements, and an appreciation for a refined and logical development of all its parts.

We who stand on the threshold of a new century can look back on an era of [unmatched] progress. Looking into the future an equally bright prospect greets our eyes; on all sides fruitful fields of research invite our labor and promise easy and rich returns.” [6, pp. 158–159].

This “new century” has come and gone, and another is well under way, but the excited anticipation shared by Pierpont (and peers) is, I would say, today much less a part of the U.K. mathematical community than it was (and this is replicated in many other longstanding fields) due to the unashamed commercialisation of the academy and the way its intellectual density is distilled and harnessed—each one of us is a child of our time, remember. We are a far cry from the bold testimony of Keyser, whose disposition is discernible in tone and posture some one hundred and seventy years previously, for we can go back much further in time to the writings of Isaac Barrow—a 17th century English Christian theologian and mathematician, and inaugural holder of the prestigious University of Cambridge Lucasian Professorship of Mathematics (a post later held by his student, Isaac Newton)—who published a 1734 monograph of 23 lectures on a wide range of topics prefixed to which, in a lengthy ‘Prefatory Oration’, he opined (*inter alia*) on the sheer magnificence of the subject (pointing out, ahead of the following words, that it acts as a remedy to many of life’s trifles, disputes, misgivings, distractions, and a sundry of foolishness and strife):

“These Reproaches (which I confess are thrown upon you by way of Banter and without Cause) you may either easily wipe off, or entirely avoid, by only applying yourselves to the Study of the *Mathematics* with that Diligence which is requisite: The *Mathematics*, I say, which effectually exercises, not vainly deludes nor vexatiously torments studious Minds with obscure Sub[tle]ties, perplexed Difficulties, or contentious Disquisitions; which overcomes without Opposition, triumphs without Pomp, compels without Force, and rules absolutely without the Loss of Liberty; which does not privately over-reach a weak Faith, but openly assaults an armed Reason, obtains a total Victory, and puts on inevitable Chains; whose Words are so many Oracles, and Works as many Miracles; which blabs out nothing rashly, nor designs any Thing from the Purpose, but plainly demonstrates and readily performs all Things within its Verge; which obtrudes no false Shadows of Science, but the very Science itself, the Mind firmly adhering to it, as soon as possessed of it, and can never after desert it of its own Accord, or be deprived of it by any Force of others: Lastly the *Mathematics*, which depends upon Principles clear to the Mind, and agreeable to Experience; which draws certain Conclusions, instructs by profitable Rules, unfolds pleasant Questions; and produces wonderful Effects; which is the fruitful Parent of, I had almost said all, Arts, the unshaken Foundation of Sciences, and the plentiful Fountain of Advantage to Human Affairs. In which last Respect, we may be said to receive from the *Mathematics*, the principal Delights of Life, Securities of Health, Increase of Fortune, and Conveniences of Labour.” [1, pp. xxviii–xxix].

There is a certain contumacious mindset attached to research mathematicians, who feel keenly the need for headspace to express themselves or else all can appear lost; intellectual restraints and curtailments are antithetical to us. It breeds an ingrained obstinacy captured well by the eminent English historian A.J.P. Taylor on writing of the resignation of Bismark (Otto Eduard Leopold, conservative political statesman and Prince of Bismarck) from the Prussian bureaucracy after a year’s service as an officer, and noting the high grounds on which he stood in taking this action—the Prussian official, Bismark allegedly said, was but a member of an ensemble, “But I will play music the way I like, or none at all.” I know what he means: *sic semper erat, et sic semper erit*.

4 The Book and Us: Metaphors, Tropes and Motifs

4.1 Setting the Scene

In what follows, forget Oceania and Airstrip One as the equivalences of Western Europe and the United Kingdom. Let's imagine London—the city in which the novel is set—as the location of an extensive campus of the University of X with its own spectrum of characters but minimal or no opportunity for an organised subculture as people try to eke out a survival that despairingly reaches out for happiness and satisfaction (those circumspect moans and complaints from academic and support staff alike, are akin to the sombre and subdued voices of grievance in Orwell's capital where they are sporadically found). Many of us can surely connect with the singular protagonist, Winston Smith, as he struggles with officialdom, subterfuge and malevolent agencies—both overt and clandestine—ruling each hour of his day, awake or asleep. Drip fed dogma and indoctrinated into a skewed rendition of existence where dignity is wilfully neglected, he wrestles with his own feelings, unmet emotional needs, and inter-personal relationships in the workplace—symptoms familiar throughout H.E. where rises in documented mental health illness continue unabated as staff deal with problems that match many of Smith's.

Unmistakable congruences between Orwell's infrastructures and those intrinsic to universities are, I contend, suggested thus, tendered as the style of a polemic excites. "IngSoc" is the overarching "English Socialism" oligarchy holding the keys to power and ordinance, whose "infallible" government (read that batch of incumbent education policy makers) runs the Inner Party (led by a relatively small circle of Vice Chancellors in our domain, together with a camarilla of senior personnel around the country) that displays a consistent form across different branches (institutions) and seeks to engineer and regulate not only the speech and actions, but also the neurological biases, of its natives (university employees)—here we see that Orwell's "unapproved thoughts" (punishable as "crimethink") tally with intellectual deviation from mandated organisational 'core values' that all should unreservedly embrace and merrily advocate. This, then, sets the scene for his storyline to play itself out on the stage of here and now, where academic 'truths' carved for us (incorporating such things as research priorities, and what/how we should teach) mirror those convenient (and false) Party lines that we witness peddled in the book.

4.2 Orwell's Novel—Our Unfolding Reality?

In every town/city (university campus) the Inner Party "Thought Police" (factions of Department/School Heads and similar figures, answerable to College/Faculty Deans) observe movements of the sizeable Outer Party (regular staff), looking for aberrant opinions or unconcealed private doubt, each evidence of unrest or disquiet—these may damage the stability of a party that relies on behavioural uniformity which goes hand in hand with compliance (the 21st century watchword in education). Members of the Inner Party assume the mantle of illuminati, and rapaciously self-award privileges denied to those immediate and more distant underlings (only latterly have onanistic salaries of V.Cs and their handpicked A-list associates been properly queried—perks also include exclusive sanctuaries that are the envy of more and more academics confined to multi-occupancy barracks known as 'pooled/joint office spaces' shown through rigorous and credible studies to be gravely destructive work settings for people who need to focus and think originatively). When an Outer Party member communicates in a controversial fashion (contributes in a meeting, sends an e-mail, writes on affairs using a public platform, publishes a piece of freethinking prose), the words are carefully analysed. The Thought Police also target and eliminate ("vapourise", in the novel's terms) a few of the more astute individuals since there is concern they may come to realise how the Party is enslaving them and move to rally meaningful hostility; these translate to the more naturally vociferous among us, or else older and inveterate scholars (an "oldthink" brigade) who—unwilling to prostitute themselves for the sole good of their establishment and compelled to vocalise protestations—may be spotted, labelled agitators, and squeezed out of what might still be a vocation, their successes and presence soon forgotten as an "unperson" with no registered footprint (how very replaceable academics are these days in lots of quarters, and how swift the descent into evanescence can be). Smith himself is fully cognisant of the possible death penalty for those caught documenting or talking about the warped ideologies engulfing everyone, and the renegade secret diary he keeps puts him in

persistent peril. There is a substantial underclass, known as “proles”, who are interfered with negligibly and on the whole ignored as a peripheral group of society (those escalating numbers of submissive sessional/part-time workers and vulnerable contract researchers is striking, as is their poor treatment, both indictments of a creeping casualisation of labour across H.E.), although a few agents (subordinates and acolytes of middle managers, acting as informants) move among even this body of Orwell’s rank and file, identifying persons capable of independent thought or rebellion against the Party (exemplified in the novel by the motives and manoeuvres of O’Brien, typifying a class of character—ranging from the slightly underhand to the outright treacherous—with which most of us have crossed paths at some point or about which we hear whispers). All Party members must tolerate ceaseless supervision that ensures those straying from the accredited gospel are reprimanded (retribution for us can be meted out at annual appraisals, or else by way of more discreet disciplinary sanctions). Conspicuous surveillance—which negates any innate *raison d’être* and “ownlife” of its subjects in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—is obtruded upon us also, gathering intelligence under the guise of student feedback, lecturer ratings and peer-to-peer classroom observations that are chosen beside other poor and highly subjective tools deployed to assist others in formulaic performance evaluations (end/mid-term module results, final degree classifications conferred, etc.).

Widespread civic misinformation is rife in the book (read deliberately falsified, assiduously massaged, and selectively exaggerated facts about a university’s standing and prestige), where any bearing or stance deemed anti-Party—by speech or deed—is regarded as subversive and trampled on as an unwelcome disruption to the status quo (undiscerning and heartfelt allegiance to one’s university ‘brand’ is expected, an example of “bellyfeel” in the novel). The tyranny of Orwell’s vision is epitomised by the symbolic figure of “Big Brother” who enjoys a cult reputation among the upper echelons of the Party, but whose role—shrouded in mystery and invincibility—has the stamp of a conduit for those possessing superior Party grade to effect strategies that maintain their domination; we see shades of this in the contemporary university arena where self-shielding elites (V.Cs and the like, who function as localised Party leader counterparts) draft and implement protocols keeping people on their toes, so to speak (in answer to higher order directive, but sometimes for the sake of change alone or on imprudent impulse), and always with an eye on their own security. The Ministries of “Truth” [propaganda] (which hews transient and shifting Party verities announced for consumption, while at the same time rewriting (‘correcting’) the past to suit its own agenda), “Peace” [war] (which devours assets, perpetuates strife and hardship as immutable facets of society, and promotes an unending wider conflict with other ‘states’), “Love” [law and order] (which brutally enforces Party and Big Brother patriotism through intimidation, torture and suffering), and “Plenty” [rationing] (which oversees planned shortages in food, supplies and goods, preserving poverty and scarcity while claiming to furnish sufficiency through false statistics) fit neatly with Central Marketing, Central Finance, Human Resources and Central Estates/Administration—these are our imperious houses of authority and censorship, each containing a few highly placed staff who hold closely guarded confidences as latent weapons of supremacy and assertive rule (as do Orwell’s in his climate of malaise) buoyed by flocks of willing executioners, servile apologists and deferential minions conserving the long arc of micro-management that grips us with intensity and without respite.

Government monitoring and inspection are prosecuted in the novel through an entrenched and robust apparatus underpinned by IngSoc, its merciless champions subscribing to a solipsistic and nihilistic thesis that all understanding and principles dwell only in the collective consciousness of the Party. This is externalised through the government’s language, “Newspeak”—a triumph of psychological linguistic choreography in which synonyms and antonyms are abolished (and so with them ambiguity and nuance), and whose residue is a limited pool of words that subtly persuade its adherents to absorb party ideals (“goodthink”) and mindlessly recite the orthodoxies they form (“duckspeak”); we would gaze at this as an extreme kind of the political correctness and jargon-laden hokum thrown at us, cloaked by a new genre of institutional blandishments dispensed as analgesics for our professional rules and calibrations. Founded on a rigid, pragmatic and draconian lexicon, it is invented to numb—with the aim of removing—the capacity for citizens to assemble anti-Party sentiments because crucial avenues of articulation are removed, key chords of vocabulary and idiolects having been cauterised away with the ideas and passions they embody. In this way no-one can, in theory, conceive of insurgency, and proclamations are unremittently disseminated as instruments of influence to cement Newspeak Party slogans that fill

the ensuing voids, somewhat reminiscent of that regressive period known as pre-modern when credences and convictions were received passively by an impuissant majority. We, today, are fast becoming normalised to crass ‘executive’ platitudes transmitted using e-mails and occasional grandiose verbal address that are supported by university catch phrases brimming with neologistic distortions and vacuous taglines (see the Appendix for more on the latter) whose trifling banalities bemuse. They all gradually become stitched into the lining of workforce garb, as it were, to stimulate (one presumes) cumulative responses through clusters of artificially embedded attitudes (a colleague recently wrote that on-line training—planting mission statements and buzzwords in our heads so as to set a baseline for outlook and comportment—is a menacing hazard to academic freedom when made compulsory, reminding us that we used to have a legal right not to be told what to think and say; determining ‘values’ via committees and consultations also means that nobody owns them, so they remain (perniciously) fluxional and, maybe more pertinently, totally superficial in practice²). It is as if the efficacies of repeated bulletins, pronouncements, broadcasts and semi-subliminal *communiqués* have been seized upon by autocratic ‘leadership’ as a way to coerce thinking and induce its own actualities. When augmented by a barrage of procedural red tape and a plethora of imposed duties, the resulting overload desensitises us to elements of corporate improbities over time, and we become robotic and spent versions of ourselves who are less productive and whose vivacity, verve and vigour waste away—shipwrecked souls trained to placidly accept those recurrent clashes between, and divergent pulls from, teaching and research that are frequently pitted against each other (leading to self-contradicting perspectives on work, or a “doublethink” in Orwellian parlance), incapable of landing our own heavy cargos and forever dreaming of more soothing voyages to those distant shores of interior fulfilment. Winston Smith’s bid to rise above his plight proved in the end to be doomed, but at least he tried—I recall words from Confucius that we could all take as a guiding mantra, as he did (although it eventually led to him being killed): “The wise man is intelligently, not blindly, loyal.” (*de omnibus dubitandum*). That said, one of the messages of the novel is that people can be broken, and reconstituted accordingly (to a new template, as Smith and his girlfriend Julia discovered to their cost) by organisations directing such things as ‘rehabilitation’ and ‘reconditioning’—something that never seems to alter, but about which we should all be wary in H.E. and prepared to face down (armed forces are based on it, and some nations are currently involving themselves in hardline ‘cultural re-engineering’ of what they see as unwanted non-ethnic residents).

It’s all very disheartening. Wearing by changes from both sides of our horizon (at one end through the needs of students as part of an undeniable quasi-privatisation of H.E., to the way research is rated as an entirely quantifiable enterprise at the other), academics exhibit a crippling and almost unpreventable lack of demur and dissent—a sign of victory for the state over its people in Orwell’s tome—when faced with a confusing and burdensome fluidity of their surroundings fused with unattainable targets in programme ratings, income generation, publication counts, and such like. He wrote on the necessity of pointless toil and meaningless moil from sedated masses reduced to automatonesque units whose potential individuality is a threat, and academics are touched by these concepts daily (Smith finds the greatest pleasure in life from his methodical work as Records Editor clerk in a department at the Ministry of Truth, for it at least tests his concentration levels and attention to detail; he knows full well, however, that he is a puppet of the government). The closest thing we have to the “Brotherhood” (an underground resistance movement with its own classified manifesto) would be informal and like-minded fraternities concentrated in and around the University and College Union. We should be thankful that someone hasn’t re-visited the notion of a “memory hole” and had electronic updates set up in the rooms of university directors and along their communal corridors, for then our present and future—becoming ever more divorced from anything that has gone before—would be endlessly shaped and recast for us (and delivered to us) in ways we are unable to recognise, let alone determine ourselves. Or, more insidiously, we might yet be conscripted to a daily “Two Minutes Hate” where we vent our fury at someone, or something, before finding herd syndrome

²In 1988 the politician Roy H. Jenkins (Baron Jenkins of Hillhead) fought for and won an amendment to the Education Reform Act, assuring freedom of speech across further and higher education establishments. This protected the right of academics (and students) to question and test “received wisdom”, and was integrated into the statutes/articles of governance in all British universities and colleges; having since been slowly corroded, the immunities it once declared are now for the most part redundant, unenforceable, and in need of strengthening within a revised concordat that looks unlikely to raise its head any time soon.

consolation in outward homage to our university and deification of its leaders (in the text, Outer Party—and superintending Inner Party—members are made to watch a film depicting enemies of the state; Chapter 1: “The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but, on the contrary, that it was impossible to avoid joining in.”). What is going on here is summed up in American writer William S. Burroughs’ harrowing 1959 landmark novel *Naked Lunch* (structured as a series of loosely bridged vignettes) in which he writes of the drugs pusher-buyer relationship:

“The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product. He does not improve and simplify his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies the client.” [2, p. 201].

Replace “junk merchant” with “Inner Party government”, “product/merchandise” with “lifestyle”, and “consumer/client” with “citizen” (and switch the pronoun sense accordingly), and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is condensed exquisitely. Make instead (respective) substitutions “High management tier”, “working conditions” and “academic”, and we have a pithy and insightful statement of current H.E.

The 1984 film of the same title was a decent enough adaptation of Orwell’s work. The subsequent *V for Vendetta* (released across cinemas in 2005³) was, however, a weak and clumsy effort to repackage and modernise his weighty prescience and satirical compositions, succeeding only in attenuating them. Just read the book, I’d say—the alarm bells will assuredly ring, and rightly so.

5 Final Thoughts: A New Strain of Manipulation

The familiar model of conventional entrepreneurial capitalism takes real goods that reside outside market places and turns them into tradable commodities. The new millennium has given birth to a darker sibling called surveillance capitalism which garners human experience as its raw material in manufacturing actions that treat concomitant data as proprietary surplus for specialised industries (Google and Facebook are two cardinal offenders, furtively appropriating such information—collateral ‘digital exhaust’, as it was first designated—and combining it with an impressive capability in computational machine intelligence to generate lucrative spin-off predictive inferences/patterns that have been exploited and sold on as innovative artefacts of monetary worth coined ‘behavioural futures’). We are no longer clientele of capitalism, but instead are being reconfigured as a form of product, our awareness of such operations (developed to keep the populace ignorant) having been neutralised so that decision rights to participate or not in them have been bypassed and we are made to march down channels that have become surveillance capitalism supply chains in which information is fed to us from closed circuits of algorithmic curation that produce a virtual content prison—a walled garden for the formation and sustaining of mental models—where prejudices and world views are nourished and hardened, our discriminations and preferences made for us. History has shown that traditional capitalism can be arrested and sometimes reversed by societies, but this infant variant is a different beast that has taken advantage of sleeping democracies whose attentions lie elsewhere, or tightly controlled territories with limited freedoms, and whose excesses—showing no signs of being binded or diminished—afford effortless scope for more and more sophisticatedly veiled invasions into all pockets of our on-line lives. The phenomenon is another reason why Orwell’s book is an esteemed one in hindsight, as it is hailed with trepidatious apprehension as a roadmap to physical, spiritual and psychological oblivion on which we have somehow placed ourselves; *alea iacta est*, if you will.

Those who push the economic logic that insists surveillance capitalism is the inexorable outcome of an expanding scientific frontier have been allowed to hijack digital technology in our time. It is evident that as a society we are now being subjected to incipient mechanisms fabricated to amass the whole existential envelope of individuals not only to record, but to trigger and sculpt, proclivities and choices that mesh with and affect our personalities (note that they have also begun to be taken up by countries with the capability to pivot them by a few degrees, so that

³A more robust ten-part comic series, published by American *D.C. Comics* in the late 1980s (and, prior to this earlier in the decade, circulated in part by the short-lived U.K. anthology *Warrior*), was a forerunner to it.

commercial objectives can be diversified to accommodate political ones brought about by elaborate mosaics of orchestrated social penchants and predilections laced with fake news). While the technical know-how was not available in Orwell's era, of course, the desire for manipulation and modulation of beliefs, reactions, exertions, and so forth, shouts loudly and emphatically in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, bringing disastrous consequences for those who are subjugated and shackled. Maybe, in time, kindred forces (softened, yes, but with the same broad controlling goals and linguistic equivocations behind them) will be at play in the realm of universities where—felt through things such as conformity, standardisation and hypersynchronicity—we become purely variables that are somehow optimised from algorithms and methodologies rolled out by a hierarchy and hidden from us; it might have already begun, through phantoms of deceit and duplicity released in our midst. Or, as opposed to a more sinister pro-active intent, perhaps we are only detecting those re-active pressure waves—whose sources are merely the volatility of the higher education sector coupled with those inadequacies and glaring deficiencies in some of the transitory high-earners attending to its governance—that engender debilitating instabilities, anxieties and tensions endemic within the academy. *Praemonitus praemunitus?* We shall see.

A final thought, then, is this: how unsettling is it that a piece of science fiction (written with astonishing percipience as ostensibly a satirical exaggeration and dramatic extension of what its author had learned about Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, and Francoist Spain) has gifted us portentous cautionary tales of such troubling clarity, and how worrying is it that the urgency of their prophetic undertones alas goes unheeded as 21st century higher education forges its own solemn track towards a mini-dystopia whose dysfunctionalities carry distinctive Orwellian hallmarks and will be neither mitigated nor countervailed?

Disclaimer, Thanks, and Personal Remarks

The opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author who makes no intended reference—explicit or implied—to any current colleagues at the University of Derby, nor to the institution itself (save in the Appendix in making a general point). To those people who have endorsed the deliberations presented, and commented constructively on the discourse as it evolved, many thanks are extended—this applies especially to Dr. John Redgate and The Reverend Dr. Alan Flintham for careful and objective considerations given to the manuscript. The piece is based on personal experience from three decades of work in tertiary education, and the testimonies of many former/present fellow workers.

To end, it is appropriate to mention that, as it happens, I feel a distinct empathy with Orwell whose “starting point [for writing, was] always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice”, and who acknowledged “When I sit down to write . . . I [do so] because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.” Admitting as well that “. . . I could not do the work . . . if it were not also an aesthetic experience”, he noted, of producing balanced commentary and analysis, “It is not easy. It raises problems of construction and of language, and it raises in a new way the problem of truthfulness.” (quotations are taken from ‘Why I Write’ (1946) of his *Collected Essays*); in regards to this last point it is not for me to gauge the success or otherwise of this submission, or how my delineations stand up to Orwell's postulate that “. . . one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality.”

Appendix

I am pressed to report on the contagion of shallow and facile taglines which, having breached our shores from America, have spread across the university sector here in the U.K. like a rampant disease full of synthetic lure. Beamed out around campuses on Open Days, popping up on staff personal computers, and integrated into marketing literature, they are an interminable *aide-memoire* of what universities think they stand for, and what they think Joe Public needs to hear, using language as a lowest common denominator affectation. Here at my institution we have seen it self-declared as the University of “Let's Do This”, “Making a Difference”, “Future Focus”, “Bright Ideas”, “Aiming High”, “Raising the Bar”, “Bright Futures”, “Anything is Possible”, “Breaking New Ground”, “Future Leaders”, “Possibilities”, “Giving Back”, “Ready

for Anything”, “Pushing the Boundaries”, “Ambition”, “Hands-On Learning”, “First Class Facilities”, “Choice”, “Gold Standard Teaching”, “Perfect Combinations”, “Warm Welcomes”, “Global Welcomes”, “Creative Thinking”, “What Are You Waiting For?”, “New Discoveries”, “What Will You Make of It?”, “Open Doors and Minds”, “Changing Lives”, “Next Steps”, and (my personal favourite) “Get Stuck In”. We are not the exception, of course—everyone is at it, and yet no-one takes it seriously bar those who push such *jejune* and artless descriptors either as bellwether necessities or else to simply chip away at our minds incrementally (the very fact that they are now so visibly ubiquitous is food for thought, is it not?). I think it was English writer H.G. Wells—visionary futurist and himself a father of science fiction—who once said that advertising is “legalised lying”.

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