

The Alienated World: A Critical Analysis of George Orwell's *1984*

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Abstract: *1984*, the final installment of George Orwell's "Dystopian Trilogy", is renowned for its incisive critique of totalitarianism and its literary achievements. This paper examines the oppression of individual freedom and holistic development under totalitarian regimes in *1984*, exploring Orwell's revelations about the alienation of power and their contemporary relevance. The analysis focuses on four dimensions of alienation: reification through language, education, and technology; self-alienation manifested as the loss of individual freedom; alienation between humanity and its essential nature; and alienation in interpersonal relationships. Through depictions of language manipulation (e.g., "Newspeak"), thought surveillance, oppressive use of technology, and historical falsification, Orwell illustrates the comprehensive distortion of humanity and reason in a totalitarian society. Ultimately, this paper argues that *1984* is not merely a warning against the totalitarianism of the past but also a profound caution against potential totalitarian tendencies in the future. Its insights into human freedom and development remain timeless.

Keywords: *1984*; George Orwell; Power alienation; Anti-utopianism; Totalitarianism

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1. Introduction: The Quest for True Freedom

The pursuit of true freedom and comprehensive development is intrinsic to human nature. However, when rulers, cloaked in the guise of "socialism", treat power as an end rather than a means, they create a totalitarian society where individual freedom is suppressed, and the notion of development becomes a mere illusion. In a world where the values of freedom continue to gain global significance, revisiting George Orwell's *1984* is crucial for constructing a democratic society that enables genuine human freedom and development.

As the final installment of his "Dystopian Trilogy", *1984* presents a chilling portrayal of totalitarianism, lauded for its literary brilliance and scathing critique of contemporary politics. Set in a dehumanized society, Orwell's protagonist Winston endures daily oppression and is isolated from the outside world. Through diary entries, he attempts to document his experiences, reconstruct his true self, and cling to the hope of a return to the past.

He sought to awaken readers to life's meaning and inspire resistance against all forms of totalitarian control. Orwell stated that his goal was not to critique socialism or the British Labor Party but to reveal the potential distortions within a highly centralized economic system.

Orwell's incisive critique unsettled the powers of his time, making him an unwelcome figure among authorities. Though the society he described may not come to fruition, its parallels with past and potential future regimes remain striking. Regardless of the era, Orwell's insights remain essential.

2. Power Alienation in *1984*

Since its publication, *1984* has been widely regarded as a political allegory of "anti-utopianism". However, post-Cold War shifts and the relaxation of political climates have diversified its interpretations. Studies now span
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linguistics, communication, sociology, gender studies, and pathology, yet consistently center on “alienation”.

The concept of alienation has evolved across historical contexts. Initially rooted in political philosophy, Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* posited that individuals alienate certain rights to a sovereign to avoid conflict, reflecting a social contract theory. Hegel linked alienation to labor, examining its historical roots, while Feuerbach critiqued Hegel's idealism, proposing a materialist and humanist view of alienation. Karl Marx further developed this theory in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, identifying four forms of alienation: from the product of labor, self, species-being, and others. Marx saw alienation as a social phenomenon where human creations dominate their creators, often intertwined with class divisions—a dynamic vividly portrayed in Orwell's novel.

Winston's remark, “I understand how, but I do not understand why,” encapsulates the alienation permeating *1984*. This sentiment reflects the Party members' suppressed discontent and Winston's quest for truth, epitomized by the Party's slogans: “War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength.” These paradoxes represent the Party's systematic control over material reality, personal autonomy, and intellectual freedom, culminating in absolute dominance. In the novel's final chapter, Winston's pursuit of the “why” ends with a chilling revelation: for the Party, power is an end in itself.

Max Weber once stated that “anyone engaged in politics is pursuing power,” and among them, some “pursue power for its own sake, that is, to enjoy the prestige it brings.” This pure desire for power leads political actors to focus on “maintaining power, increasing power, or demonstrating power,” often disregarding what they consider unrelated matters. Undoubtedly, the desire for political power is one of the driving forces behind the development of political life, but the pursuit of this desire involves a significant potential for alienation. In literature, this alienation is primarily manifested as the consequences arising from differing understandings of how power should be exercised. In totalitarian societies, the alienation of political power, or the privatization of power, serves as the primary source of all forms of alienation.

(1) Reification through language, education, and technology

In *1984*, alienation is first manifested in the realm of material production, where the products of labor are weaponized to enforce intellectual confinement. Marx's concept of “alienation of the object” underscores the disconnection between material progress and human fulfillment, whereby individuals' capacity to derive meaning from the external world diminishes as they produce more. In Orwell's dystopia, the Party achieves this form of alienation by manipulating language, education, and technology to restrict individual thought.

Language plays a crucial role in shaping thought. If a language lacks words to express certain ideas, it becomes impossible to convey those concepts. One of the central themes in *1984* is how the government uses language as a tool for enhanced control over its citizens, thereby enforcing political correctness. Orwell dedicates significant portions of the novel to describing the state's language policy, Newspeak—a language that deliberately reduces its vocabulary year by year, violating basic principles of linguistic development. The creation of Newspeak was intended to prevent individuals from expressing thoughts that contradicted socialist values. Over time, words and meanings that did not align with political agendas, such as “freedom”, “democracy”, and “equality”, were gradually purged. Terms like “Big Brother”, “doublethink”, and “thought police” are products of the Party's distortion and reconstruction of language, designed to manipulate semantics and reinforce its control.

The advent of Newspeak represents the alienation of the means of communication, which is closely linked to the alienation of education itself. The Party's belief in the essence of education is to keep the populace in ignorance, as demonstrated by textbooks that assert with certainty, “the Party invented the airplane.” Additionally, the state exerts strict control over the creation and dissemination of mass culture, which parallels the “culture industry” theory articulated by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. According to their theory, mass culture consists of cultural commodities produced uniformly by factories—films, radio programs, and magazines—all designed to manipulate the thoughts of the masses. In Oceania, all literary works are produced by novel-writing machines, transforming cultural production into a tool of totalitarian control and serving as a long-term psychological opiate

for the populace.

To solidify its control over the people's thoughts, the alienation of technology is powerfully reflected in the Party's restrictions on individual freedoms and its deliberate creation of social instability. Marcuse argues that in modern society, science and technology have evolved into forces of domination and new forms of social control. Advanced human inventions, which should be harnessed for the benefit of humanity, are instead used to control, threaten, or harm individuals. In Oceania, the Party utilizes technology to enhance surveillance, confinement, and punishment, while continuous warfare is employed to create a state of social insecurity, further degrading the standard of living and suppressing dissent.

(2) Self-Alienation manifested as the loss of individual freedom

Subsequently, self-alienation is portrayed through the loss of freedom and the distortion of reason. The ruling Party controls material goods to undermine public thought, promote ignorance, and maintain its dominance. In this context, alienation separates individuals from their true essence. According to Marxist theory, self-alienation occurs when labor becomes a mere means of survival rather than a form of self-expression, leaving individuals unfulfilled and powerless.

The pursuit of freedom is a fundamental human instinct, as only in a state of freedom can individuals fully realize themselves and unleash society's primordial creative potential. As Marx once stated, "Freedom not only includes what I live by, but also how I live; not only includes my realization of freedom, but also my realization of freedom in freedom." In Oceania, the alienation of technology directly contributes to the erosion of individual freedom. The "telescreen", an advanced communication device, should ideally serve humanity and promote development. However, in the hands of the Party, it becomes a tool for repression and control. As long as a person is within the surveillance range of the telescreen, every action and even subtle facial expression is captured, and any deviation from Party norms results in severe punishment. Winston, for example, learns to feign calmness and optimism while facing the telescreen, mechanically performing meaningless tasks like a puppet. Behind countless telescreens, the thought police monitor every move, stripping Party members of their instincts, including facial expressions. When obedience to the Party's orders becomes instinctual, their freedom to think independently is further eradicated.

"Power, in its essence, is the power over individuals, especially over the body and mind." When the body is enslaved, the mind is also controlled, preventing it from freely developing, leading to the distortion of reason. Reason refers to an individual's intellectual capacity to make judgments about reality based on the laws of development, ensuring that their actions align with specific goals. It emphasizes individual subjectivity and the value of personal existence. Philosophically, alienation signifies a reversal of the subject-object relationship, meaning that the alienation of reason transforms reason into a force that dominates individuals, hindering their healthy development. Marcuse critiques this self-alienation with the concepts of "positive reason" and "negative reason". Positive reason involves the unquestioning acceptance of existing conditions, rejecting any negative evaluation of what has been accepted, while negative reason emphasizes critical engagement with the world. When control over reason weakens, individuals may passively accept positive reason, losing their ability for self-reflection and critique of reality.

In Oceania, the ruling Party maintains its authority by formulating policies and utilizing tools to indoctrinate citizens into adopting "doublethink", the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs simultaneously, thereby rendering them uncritically accepting of everything the Party says. This mirrors Marcuse's concept of "positive reason". In Winston's world, reason no longer serves humanity but instead controls it, becoming a powerful force that undermines normal human functioning.

For the masses, the Party does not impose overt restrictions on personal freedom. Having consumed surplus resources through constant warfare, the proletariat loses the material foundation necessary for self-improvement. Simultaneously, the Party indulges them with base entertainment and cultural products, allowing them to become engrossed in trivial daily life, harboring simplistic affection for the state and the Party. This results in a vicious cycle: "No

rebellion, no awakening; no awakening, no rebellion.”

Under the influence of doublethink, both Party members and ordinary citizens in Oceania are incapable of making reasonable judgments about reality, having lost their capacity for independent thought. During a demonstration, a speaker condemns the war crimes of the enemy, Eurasia, and the audience fervently agrees with his words. However, his assistant informs him that the enemy has now shifted from Eastasia to Eurasia. The speaker's tone and content remain unchanged, but the target of the condemnation has shifted, yet the audience fails to notice anything amiss, continuing to express their outrage. This episode underscores the extent to which the people of Oceania can change their views without any rational thought. The habitual acceptance of contradictions—such as “black is white” or “white is black”—makes it even easier for the ruling Party to control their minds.

The terrifying construction of a dual cage, both physical and mental, fundamentally eliminates any possibility for the masses to think, communicate, or resist. This results in the tragic loss of self and the inability to rebel under extreme conditions.

(3) Alienation between humanity and its essential nature

Thirdly, the alienation of humanity from its species-being is depicted as a rupture in the subject-object relationship, building upon the earlier forms of alienation. Marx's concept of “alienation from species-being” refers to humanity's unique capacity to consciously engage with and shape the natural world. This capacity distinguishes humans from animals, as it involves creating value that transcends mere survival. When human labor becomes indistinguishable from animalistic subsistence, it epitomizes alienation from species-being: the reduction of human potential to mere physical survival.

In Oceania's rigidly hierarchical society, this alienation is starkly evident. The spiritual leader, “Big Brother”, occupies the pinnacle of the power structure, revered as “absolutely correct and omnipotent”. All accomplishments are attributed to his guidance and inspiration. Below him, most of the population is trapped in monotonous, mechanical labor. While a select few Inner Party members live free from material concerns, Outer Party members endure relentless service to the Party, and the proles struggle to survive. Despite a lifetime of labor, the proles achieve nothing beyond subsistence, unable to accumulate wealth or social value.

This dynamic reflects a profound disconnection in the species-being interaction between subject and object. The subject—the individual—fails to meet their objective needs, losing their ability to consciously direct and organize their lives. In Oceania, humans are stripped of their role as conscious creators in production, reduced to passive instruments serving the Party's perpetuation of power.

(4) Alienation in interpersonal relationships

The final form of alienation is the alienation between individuals, which in the novel is manifested in the coldness and estrangement of interpersonal relationships. In Marx's theory of alienation, the alienation of individuals from their own labor products and labor activities extends to their relationships with others, referred to as the alienation between individuals. In such a society, everyone views others through the distorted values shaped by their alienation.

The observers remain in the shadows, while the observed are exposed. The number of observers is unclear, and the observed are isolated from one another. The methods of the observers are cruel and silent, while the observed live in constant fear and repression. As a result, everyone wears a mask, remaining cautious of those around them, even their children and loved ones.

In Oceania, after undergoing rigorous training, children are conditioned to monitor their parents. If they discover any heretical thoughts or expressions, they report their parents' “crimes” to the thought police. The novel includes instances in *The Times* where children denounce their parents, even earning the title of “child heroes”. Childhood, which should be the most innocent and beautiful phase of life, becomes instead a period of indoctrination in hate, transforming children into predatory little beasts. This misunderstanding of family relationships among children

further deepens the alienation within families. Additionally, absurd marital regulations exist, where the purpose of marriage is purely reproduction for the Party, with no expectation of emotional connection or communication.

The foundation for a harmonious and healthy social atmosphere rests on the establishment of genuine familial relationships. When marriage is reduced to a tool for reproduction and mutual denunciation among close family members becomes the norm, normal social interactions become inconceivable. Under the totalitarian rule of "Big Brother", legitimate human desires are stifled to an extreme. The indoctrination of enslaved thought leads to alienation between individuals, severely damaging the most precious emotions in interpersonal relationships.

3. Conclusion: The Paradox of Rebellion

Confronted with the unbearable imprisonment of thought, Winston initially attempts to denounce the oppressive society of Oceania through acts of indulgent rebellion. However, his political resistance veers toward another extreme—his "fight fire with fire" approach ultimately undermines his original humanism and aligns him, ironically, with the doctrine of "Big Brother". By the story's end, Winston is arrested, subjected to relentless interrogation and torture, and ultimately transformed by the totalitarian regime. His multiple efforts at resistance crumble as he transitions from a free-willed individual to a "qualified" Party member who genuinely loves "Big Brother". From reluctantly correcting the regime's false narratives to fully submitting to its authority, Winston's ability to question or reconstruct his sense of self is systematically eradicated.

Winston's downfall is not solely the result of external oppression but also the internal alignment of his desires with the very forces he seeks to resist. Philosopher James Carse, in *Finite and Infinite Games*, observes, "Even the oppressors acknowledge that the weakest oppressed person must agree to their oppression. If the oppressed were unresisting puppets or robots, there would be no need for threats, and oppression would come at no cost." This insight underscores the paradox within Winston's rebellion: every individual possesses the freedom to reject oppression, yet continued endurance often reflects tacit complicity, revealing the subtle allure of the existing system.

However, Winston's rebellion is not a futile endeavor. His resistance represents humanity's enduring pursuit of light in the face of darkness and remains a crucial exploration in the quest for a free life. The alienation portrayed in *1984* serves as a timeless warning for contemporary society. Today, both domestic and international politics witness similar dynamics: the concealed concentration of power through modern surveillance technologies and the conflation of nationalism with divine will. These practices threaten individual freedoms and stand in stark contrast to humanity's broader aspirations for peace and development. Addressing and mitigating these forms of alienation remains an urgent task for modern societies.

Critiquing, transcending, and ultimately overcoming human alienation was Marx's lifelong theoretical pursuit. His relentless examination of this phenomenon inspires continued vigilance in the modern era, reminding us that the fight against alienation must remain an ongoing effort.

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