# AFTERWORD to George Orwell's *1984*
by Erich Fromm

George Orwell's *1984* is the expression of a mood, and it is a warning. The mood it expresses is that of near despair about the future of man, and the warning is that unless the course of history changes, men all over the world will lose their most human qualities, will become soulless automatons, and will not even be aware of it.

The mood of hopelessness about the future of man is in marked contrast to one of the most fundamental features of Western thought: the faith in human progress and in man's capacity to create a world of justice and peace. This hope has its roots both in Greek and in Roman thinking, as well as in the Messianic concept of the Old Testament prophets. The Old Testament philosophy of history assumes that man grows and unfolds in history and eventually becomes what he potentially is. It assumes that he develops his powers of reason and love fully, and thus is enabled to grasp the world, being one with his fellow man and nature, at the same time preserving his individuality and his integrity. Universal peace and justice are the goals of man, and the prophets have faith that in spite of all errors and sins, eventually this "end of days" will arrive, symbolized by the figure of the Messiah.

The prophetic concept was a historical one, a state of perfection to be realized by man within historical time. Christianity transformed this concept into a transhistorical, purely spiritual one, yet it did not give up the idea of the connection between moral norms and politics. The Christian thinkers of the late Middle Ages emphasized that although the "Kingdom of God" was not within historical time, the social order must correspond to and realize the spiritual principles of Christianity. The Christian sects before and after the Reformation emphasized these demands in more urgent, more active and revolutionary ways. With the breakup of the medieval world, man's sense of strength, and his hope, not only for individual but for social perfection, assumed new strength and took new ways.

One of the most important ones is a new form of writing which developed since the Renaissance, the first expression of which was Thomas More's *Utopia* (literally: "Nowhere"), a name which was then generically applied to all other similar works. Thomas More's *Utopia* combined a most penetrating criticism of his own society, its irrationality and its injustice, with the picture of a society which, though perhaps not perfect, had solved most of the human problems which sounded insoluble to his own contemporaries. What characterizes Thomas More's *Utopia*, and all the others, is that they do not speak in general terms of principles, but give an imaginative picture of the concrete details of a society which corresponds to the deepest longings of man. In contrast to prophetic thought, these perfect societies are not at "the end of the days" but exist already -- though in a geographic distance rather than in the distance of time.

Thomas More's *Utopia* was followed by two others, the Italian friar Campanella's *City of the Sun*, and the German humanist Andreae's *Christianopolis,* the latter being the most modern of the three. There are differences in viewpoint and in originality in this trilogy of Utopias, yet the differences are minor in comparison with what they have in common. Utopias were written from then on for several hundred years, until the beginning of the twentieth century. The latest and most influential Utopia was Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, published in 1888. Aside from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Ben Hur*, it was undoubtedly the most popular book at the turn of the century, printed in many millions of copies in the United States, translated into over twenty languages [1]. Bellamy's Utopia is part of the great American tradition as expressed in the thinking of Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson. It is the American version of the ideas which at that time found their most forceful expression in the socialist movement in Europe.

This hope for man's individual and social perfectibility, which in philosophical and anthropological terms was clearly expressed in the writings of the Enlightenment philosophers of the eighteenth century and of the socialist thinkers of the nineteenth, remained unchanged until after the First World War. This war, in which millions died for the territorial ambitions of the European powers, although under the illusion of fighting for peace and democracy, was the beginning of that development which tended in a relatively short time to destroy a two-thousand-year-old Western tradition of hope and to transform it into a mood of despair. The moral callousness of the First World War was only the beginning. Other events followed: the

betrayal of the socialist hopes by Stalin's reactionary state capitalism; the severe economic crisis at the end of the twenties; the victory of barbarism in one of the oldest centers of culture in the world — Germany; the insanity of Stalinist terror during the thirties; the Second World War, in which all the fighting nations lost some of the moral considerations which had still existed in the First World War; the unlimited destruction of civilian populations, started by Hitler and continued by the even more complete destruction of cities such as Hamburg and Dresden and Tokyo, and eventually by the use of atomic bombs against Japan. Since then the human race has been confronted with an even greater danger -- that of the destruction of our civilization, if not of all mankind, by thermonuclear weapons as they exist today and as they are being developed in increasingly frightful proportions.

Most people, however, are not consciously aware of this threat and of their own hopelessness. Some believe that just because modern warfare is so destructive, war is impossible; others declare that even if sixty or seventy million Americans were killed in the first one or two days of a nuclear war, there is no reason to believe that life would not go on as before after the first shock has been overcome. It is precisely the significance of Orwell's book that it expresses the new mood of hopelessness which pervades our age before this mood has become manifest and taken hold of the consciousness of people.

Orwell is not alone in this endeavor. Two other writers, the Russian Zamyatin in his book *We*, and Aldous Huxley in his *Brave New World*, have expressed the mood of the present, and a warning for the future, in ways very similar to Orwell's. This new trilogy of what may be called the "negative Utopias" of the middle of the twentieth century is the counterpoint to the trilogy of the positive Utopias mentioned before, written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [2]. The negative Utopias express the mood of powerlessness and hopelessness of modern man just as the early Utopias expressed the mood of self-confidence and hope of post-medieval man, There could be nothing more paradoxical in historical terms than this change: man, at the beginning of the industrial age, when in reality he did not possess the means for a world in which the table was set for all who wanted to eat, when he lived in a world in which there were economic reasons for slavery, war, and exploitation, in which man only sensed the possibilities of his new science and of its application to technique and to production — nevertheless man at the beginning of modern development was full of hope. Four hundred years later, when all these hopes are realizable, when man can produce enough for everybody, when war has become unnecessary because technical progress can give any country more *we*alth than can territorial conquest, when this globe is in the process of becoming as unified as a continent was four hundred years ago, at the very moment when man is on the verge of realizing his hope, he begins to lose it. It is the essential point of all the three negative Utopias not only to describe the future toward which *we* are moving, but also to explain the historical paradox.

The three negative Utopias differ from each other in detail and emphasis. Zamyatin's *We*, written in the twenties, has more features in common with *1984* than with Huxley's *Brave New World*. *We* and *1984* both depict the completely bureaucratized society, in which man is a number and loses all sense of individuality. This is brought about by a mixture of unlimited terror (in Zamyatin's book a brain operation is added eventually which changes man even physically) combined with ideological and psychological manipulation. In Huxley's work the main tool for turning man into an automaton is the application of hypnoid mass suggestion, which allows dispensing with terror. One can say that Zamyatin's and Orwell's examples resemble more the Stalinist and Nazi dictatorships, while Huxley's *Brave New World* is a picture of the development of the Western industrial world, provided it continues to follow the present trend without fundamental change.

In spite of this difference there is one basic question common to the three negative Utopias, The question is a philosophical, anthropological and psychological one, and perhaps also a religious one. It is: can human nature be changed in such a way that man will forget his longing for freedom, for dignity, for integrity, for love — that is to say, can man forget that he is human? Or does human nature have a dynamism which will react to the violation of these basic human needs by attempting to change an inhuman society into a human one? It must be noted that the three authors do not take the simple position of psychological relativism which is common to so many social scientists today; they do not start out with the assumption that there is no such thing as human nature; that there is no such thing as qualities essential to man; and that man is born as nothing but a blank sheet of paper on which any given society writes its text. They do assume that man has an intense striving for love, for justice, for truth, for solidarity, and in this respect they are quite

different from the relativists. In fact, they affirm the strength and intensity of these human strivings by the description of the very means they present as being necessary to destroy them. In Zamyatin's *We* a brain operation similar to lobotomy is necessary to get rid of the human demands of human nature. In Huxley's *Brave New World* artificial biological selection and drugs are necessary, and in Orwell's *1984* it is the completely unlimited use of torture and brainwashing. None of the three authors can be accused of the thought that the destruction of the humanity within man is easy. Yet all three arrive at the same conclusion: that it is possible, with means and techniques which are common knowledge today.

In spite of many similarities to Zamyatin's book, Orwell's *1984* makes its own original contribution to the question, How can human nature be changed? I want to speak now about some of the more specifically "Orwellian" concepts.

The contribution of Orwell which is most immediately relevant for the year 1961 and for the next five to fifteen years is the connection he makes between the dictatorial society of *1984* and atomic war. Atomic wars had first appeared as early as the forties; a large-scale atomic war broke out about ten years later, and some hundreds of bombs were dropped on industrial centers in European Russia, Western Europe, and North America. After this war, the governments of all countries became convinced that the, continuation of the war would mean the end of organized society, and hence of their own power. For these reasons no more bombs were dropped, and the three existing big power blocs "merely continued to produce atomic bombs and stored them up against the decisive opportunity which they all believe will come sooner or later." It remains the aim of the ruling party to discover how "to kill several hundred million people in a few seconds without giving warning beforehand." Orwell wrote *1984* before the discovery of thermonuclear *We*apons, and it is only a historical footnote to say that in the fifties the very aim which was just mentioned had already been reached. The atomic bomb which was dropped on the Japanese cities seems small and ineffective when compared with the mass slaughter which can be achieved by thermonuclear weapons with the capacity to wipe out 90 per cent or 100 per cent of a country's population within minutes.

The importance of Orwell's concept of war lies in a number of very keen observations.
First of all, he shows the economic significance of continuous arms production, without which the economic system cannot function. Furthermore, he gives an impressive picture of how a society must develop which is constantly preparing for war, constantly afraid of being attacked, and preparing to find the means of complete annihilation of its opponents. Orwell's picture is so pertinent because it offers a telling argument against the popular idea that *we* can save freedom and democracy by continuing the arms race and finding a "stable" deterrent. This soothing picture ignores the fact that with increasing technical "progress" (which creates entirely new weapons about every 5 years, and will soon permit the development of 100 or 1000 instead of 10 megaton bombs), the whole society will be forced to live, underground, but that the, destructive strength of thermonuclear bombs will always remain greater than the depth of the caves, that the military will become dominant (in fact, if not in law), that fright and hatred of a possible aggressor will destroy the basic attitudes of a democratic, humanistic society. In other words, the continued arms race, even if it would not lead to the outbreak of a thermonuclear war, would lead to the destruction of any of those qualities of our society which can be called "democratic," "free," or "in the American tradition." Orwell demonstrates the illusion of the assumption that democracy can continue to exist in a world preparing for nuclear war, and he does so imaginatively and brilliantly.

Another important aspect is Orwell's description of the nature of truth, which on the surface is a picture of Stalin's treatment of truth, especially in the thirties. But anyone who sees in Orwell's description only another denunciation of Stalinism is missing an essential element of Orwell's analysis. He is actually talking about a development which is taking place in the western industrial countries also, only at a slower pace than it is taking place in Russia and China. The basic question which Orwell raises is whether there is any such thing as "truth." "Reality," so the ruling party holds, "is not external. Reality exists in the human mind and nowhere else ... whatever the Party holds to be truth is truth." If this is so, then by controlling men's minds, the Party controls truth. In a dramatic conversation between the protagonist of the Party and the beaten rebel, a conversation which is a worthy analogy to Dostoyevsky's conversation between the Inquisitor and Jesus, the basic principles of the Party are explained. In contrast to the Inquisitor, however, the leaders of the Party do not even pretend that their system is intended to make man happier, because men, being frail and cowardly creatures, want to escape freedom and are unable to face the truth. The

leaders are aware of, the fact that they themselves have only one aim, and that is power. To them "power is not a means; it is an end. And power means the capacity to inflict unlimited pain and suffering to another human being"[3]. Power, then, for them creates reality, it creates truth. The position which Orwell attributes here to the power elite can be said to be an extreme form of philosophical idealism, but it is more to the point to recognize that the concept of truth and reality which exists in *1984* is an extreme form of pragmatism in which truth becomes subordinated to the Party. An American writer, Alan Harrington, who in *Life in the Crystal Palace* [4] gives a subtle and penetrating picture of life in a big American corporation, has coined an excellent expression for the contemporary concept of truth: "mobile truth." If I work for a big corporation which claims that its product is better than that of all competitors, the question whether this claim is justified or not in terms of ascertainable reality becomes irrelevant. What matters is that as long as I serve this particular corporation, this claim becomes "my" truth, and I decline to examine whether it is an objectively valid truth. In fact, if I change my job and move over to the corporation which was until now "my" competitor, I shall accept the new truth, that its product is the best, and subjectively speaking, this new truth will be as true as the old one. It is one of the most characteristic and destructive developments of our own society that man, becoming more and more of an instrument, transforms reality more and more into something relative to his own interests and functions. Truth is proven by the consensus of millions; to the slogan "how can millions be wrong" is added "and how can a minority of one be right." Orwell shows quite clearly that in a system in which the concept of truth as an objective judgment concerning reality is abolished, anyone who is a minority of one must be convinced that he is insane.

In describing the kind of thinking which is dominant in *1984*, Orwell has coined a word which has already become part of the modern vocabulary: "doublethink." "Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. ... This process has to be conscious, or it would not be carried out with sufficient precision. But it also has to be unconscious, or it would bring with it a feeling of falsity and hence of guilt." It is precisely the unconscious aspect of doublethink which will seduce many a reader of *1984* into believing that the method of doublethink is employed by the Russians and the Chinese, while it is something quite foreign to himself. This, however, is an illusion, as a few examples can demonstrate. We in the West speak of the "free world," in which we include not only systems like those of the United States and England, which are based on free elections and freedom of expression, but we include also South American dictatorships (at least we did as long as they existed); we also include various forms of dictatorship like those of Franco and Salazar, and those in South Africa, Pakistan and Abyssinia. While we speak about the free world, we actually mean all those states which are against Russia and China and not at all, as the words would indicate, states which have political freedom. Another contemporary example of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accepting them can, be found in our discussion about armament. We spend a considerable part of our income and energy in building thermonuclear weapons, and close our minds to the fact that they might go off and destroy one third or one half or most of our population (and that of the enemy). Some go even further; thus Herman Kahn, one of the most influential writers on atomic strategy today, states, "... in other words, war is horrible, there is no question about it, but so is peace, and it is proper with the kind of calculations we are making today to compare the horror of war and the horror of peace, and see how much worse it is" [5].

Kahn assumes that thermonuclear war might mean the destruction of sixty million Americans, and yet he finds that even in such a case "the country would recover rather rapidly and effectively," [6] and that "normal and happy lives for the, majority of the survivors and their descendants" [7] would not be precluded by the tragedy of thermonuclear war. This view holds: a) that we prepare for war in order to preserve peace, b) that even if war breaks out and the Russians kill one third of our population and we do the same to them (and if we can, of course, more) still, people will live happy lives afterwards, c) that not only war but also peace is horrible, and it is necessary to examine how much more horrible war is than peace. People who accept this kind of reasoning are called "sober"; those who doubt that if two million or sixty million died it would leave America essentially untouched are not "sober"; those who point to the political and psychological and moral consequences of such destruction are called "unrealistic."

While this is not the place for a lengthy discussion on the problem of disarmament, these examples most be given in order to make the point which is essential for the understanding of Orwell's book, namely that

"doublethink" is already with us, and not merely something which will happen in the future, and in dictatorships.

Another important point in Orwell's discussion is closely related to "doublethink," namely that in a successful manipulation of the mind the person is no longer saying the opposite of what he thinks, but he thinks the opposite of what is true. Thus, for instance, if he has surrendered his independence and his integrity completely, if he experiences himself as a thing which belongs either to the state, the party or the corporation, then two plus two are five, or "Slavery is Freedom," and he feels free because there is no longer any awareness of the discrepancy between truth and falsehood. Specifically this applies to ideologies. Just as the Inquisitors who tortured their prisoners believed that they acted in the name of Christian love, the Party "rejects and vilifies every principle for which the socialist movement originally stood, and it chooses to do this in the name of socialism." Its content is reversed into its opposite, and yet people believe that the ideology means what it says. In this respect Orwell quite obviously refers to the falsification of socialism by Russian communism, but it must be added that the West is also guilty of a similar falsification. We present our society as being one of free initiative, individualism and idealism, when in reality these are mostly words. We are a centralized managerial industrial society, of an essentially bureaucratic nature, and motivated by a materialism which is only slightly mitigated by truly spiritual or religious concerns. Related to this is another example of "doublethink," namely that few writers, discussing atomic strategy, stumble over the fact that killing, from a Christian standpoint, is as evil or more evil than being killed. The reader will find many other features of our present Western society in Orwell's description in *1984*, provided he can overcome enough of his own "doublethink."

Certainly Orwell's picture is exceedingly depressing, especially if one recognizes that as Orwell himself points out, it is not only a picture of an enemy but of the whole human race at the end of the twentieth century. One can react to this picture in two ways: either by becoming more hopeless and resigned, or by feeling there is still time, and by responding with greater clarity and greater courage. All three negative Utopias make it appear that it is possible to dehumanize man completely, and yet for life to go on. One might doubt the correctness of this assumption, and think that while it might be possible to destroy the human core, of man, one would also in doing this destroy the future of mankind. Such men would be so truly inhuman and lacking in vitality that they would destroy each other, or die out of sheer boredom and anxiety. If the world of *1984* is going to be the dominant form of life on this globe, it will mean a world of madmen, and hence not a viable world (Orwell indicates this very subtly by pointing to the mad gleam in the Party leader's eyes). I am sure that neither Orwell nor Huxley or Zamyatin wanted to insist that this world of insanity is bound to come. On the contrary, it was quite obviously their intention to sound a warning by showing where *we* are headed for unless we succeed in a renaissance of the spirit of humanism and dignity which is at the very roots of Occidental culture. Orwell, as well as the two other authors, is simply implying that the new form of managerial industrialism, in which man builds machines which act like men and develops men who act like machines, is conducive to an era of dehumanization and complete alienation, in which men are transformed into things and become appendices to the process of production and consumption [8]. All three authors imply that this danger exists not only in Communism of the Russian or Chinese versions, but that it is a danger inherent in the modem mode of production and organization, and relatively independent of the various ideologies. Orwell, like the authors of the other negative *Utopia*s, is not a prophet of disaster. He wants to warn and to awaken us. He still hopes -- but in contrast to the writers of the Utopias in the earlier phases of Western society, his hope is a desperate one. The hope can be realized only by recognizing, so *1984* teaches us, the danger with which all men are confronted today, the danger of a society of automatons who will have lost every trace of individuality, of love, of critical thought, and yet who will not be aware of it because of "doublethink." Books like Orwell's are powerful warnings, and it would be most unfortunate if the reader smugly interpreted *1984* as another description of Stalinist barbarism, and if he does not see that it means us, too.

Footnotes:
[1] The latest edition was published by the New American Library of World Literature, Inc., New York, 1960 (CD26).
[2] It should be added that Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, the prediction of fascism in America, is the earliest of the modern negative *Utopia*s.
[3] Cf. this definition of po*We*r in Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1941. Also Simone *Wei*l's definition that power is the capacity to transform a living person into a corpse, that is to say, into a thing.
[4] Alan Harrington, *Life in the Crystal Palace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1959; London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd.,

1960.

[5] Cf. H. Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960, p. 47, n. 1

[6] Ibid., p. 74.

[7] Ibid., p. 21.

[8] This problem is analyzed in detail in Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*. New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1955.