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A CRITIQUE OF ORWELL'S OLIGARCHIC  
COLLECTIVISM AS AN ECONOMIC SYSTEM

by

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### Summary

This paper assesses the consistency, efficiency and viability of the economic system implicit and explicit in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. The first section illustrates the main features of Orwell's model: (its geopolitics, the convergence to a single system, ownership, planning, markets and prices, information, statistics, resources, technology, trade, public policy, permanent warfare) and its internal dynamics. The second section provides a critique, based on the implausibility of the whole if not of the parts of the model, the uni-dimensionality and indivisibility of Orwell's notion of power, the informational inefficiency of the system, the unwarranted extension of the results of the model to a three-players game between the superstates, technological regress, the lack of micro-foundations, the economic position of Outer Party members, the dehumanisation of the working class. The third section concludes, on the strength of these points, that Orwell's "oligarchic collectivism" does not stand the strain of close scrutiny as a feasible economic system, and remains simply a catalogue of all the things that could go wrong in a modern society, though not at the same time in the same society, let alone in all societies.





A CRITIQUE OF ORWELL'S OLIGARCHIC COLLECTIVISM  
AS AN ECONOMIC SYSTEM \*

George Orwell's account of social life at an indeterminate date circa 1984 has anticipated correctly a number of detailed developments which have occurred since 1949 when he published his book : from eaves-dropping techniques to mass media manipulation, from two-way visual communications to computer-written literature, from obfuscating official language to decimalisation. Gradually Orwell's book has turned from a literary artefact with a political charge into the forecast of a political and economic scenario which is now regarded as plausible, likely and even partly realized. This process of public acclimatisation to the danger of Orwell's horror parable coming true has accelerated simply with the approach of the fated calendar year, as if the very fact of entering 1984 somehow represented the partial fulfilment of a dreaded prophecy. Reprinted by the million copies in dozens of editions and languages, the book is labelled as a "warning for us all" : "Now in the eighties - our present and Orwell's brilliantly imagined future - his vision of brutalised and manipulated humanity is still gripping and still supremely relevant" (from the cover of the Penguin edition, 1983, to which page references are made here).

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The plausibility of Orwell's "oligarchical collectivism" (Part 2, Chapter 8, p. 163; 2.8.163 in the shorter notation used hereafter) as a political system has been strengthened by the observed growth and stability of totalitarian regimes, the widespread diffusion of state capitalism and one-party systems, the mysterious succession of dying octogenarians to Big Brother's immortal high office. But the economic system implicit and explicit in Nineteen eighty-four has no such prima facie grounds for credibility; its consistency, efficiency and viability deserve closer scrutiny. This paper assesses the economics of Orwell's vision as either fantasy or anticipation.

## I. ORWELL'S SYSTEM

Geopolitics. In Orwell's story in the mid-nineteen-fifties, after a global atomic conflict during which some hundreds of bombs were dropped, the world was split - or rather regrouped - into three great super-states. Eurasia was formed by the absorption of Europe by Russia; it "comprises the whole of the northern part of the European and Asiatic land mass, from Portugal to the Bering Strait" (2.9.164). Oceania was formed by the absorption of the British Empire by the United States; it "comprises the Americas, the Atlantic islands including the British Isles now rechristened Airstrip One, Australasia, and the Southern portion of Africa"; "Eastasia, smaller than the others and with a less definite western frontier, comprises China and the countries to the south of it, the Japanese islands and a large but fluctuating portion of Manchuria, Mongolia and Tibet"; it emerged as a distinct unit after another decade of confused fighting (Ibidem).

Convergence. By 1984 political and economic systems in the three superstates have completely converged to a virtually identical system: "In Oceania the prevailing philosophy is called IngSoc [a term coined around 1960, standing for English Socialism, 1.3.37], in Eurasia it is called Neo-Bolshevism, and in Eastasia it is called by a Chinese name



usually translated as Death-Worship, but perhaps better rendered as Obliteration of the Self... Actually the three philosophies are barely distinguishable, and the social systems which they support are not distinguishable at all". "The conditions of life in all three super-states are very much the same" (2.9.171).

Ownership and social strata. Means of production and durable consumption goods are formally the object of collective ownership. Private capitalists have been expropriated and private property has been formally abolished, except for petty personal belongings. Formal ownership is vested in the Party, which collectively owns everything. There are three strata of economic agents, with diversified access to economic power and real consumption, according to their connection with the Party; the Inner Party, or the "brain" of the state, making up in Oceania 2% of the population; the Outer Party, or the "hands" of the state, making up 13% of the Oceanian population, and the proletarians, or "proles", making up the remaining 85%. Economic power is vested in a hierarchical oligarchy that goes through the motions of renewing itself through meritocratic processes but is effectively selfperpetuating (2.9.179).

Planning. The economy is centrally planned. The Ministry of Plenty (Miniplenty for short) is responsible for economic affairs (1.1.9; the other Ministries are those of Truth, Peace, and Love, respectively in charge of media manipulation, war and police). Miniplenty operates a system of Three-Year Plans, which started in mid-1958 (in fact the fourth quarter of 1983 is also the sixth quarter of the Ninth Three-Year Plan, 1.4.38). Planning is in physical terms; great importance is attached to fulfilment and overfulfilment of plans; priority is attached to armaments and heavy industry (pig iron, 1.1.8), while consumption levels even of necessities are deliberately held down (2.9.168). Central control is tight even on minor aspects of economic life ("Repairs, except what you could do for yourself, had to be sanctioned by remote committees which were liable to hold up even the



mending of a window pane for two years", 1.2.22, which reveals both high centralisation and lack of concern for consumption). Planning mobilises resources ("the battle for production", 1.5.54). "The recurrent economic crises of past times ... are not now permitted to happen" (2.9.178-179) and there appears to be full employment of labour. However, actual outputs, at least of consumption goods, always fall grossly short of official forecasts (1.4.38).

Information. Everybody has a number (Winston Smith's is 6079). Central authorities, symbolically personified by Big Brother, monitor individual behaviour and communicate directly with individuals by means of telescreens. However, Inner Party members can turn their telescreens off ("'Yes', said O'Brien, 'we can turn it off. We have that privilege'", 2.8.150) and the great majority of proles do not have telescreens (1.7.65; "I never had one of those things", 1.8.87). There is no "real intercommunication between one part of Oceania and another" (1.8.77); there are no directories of any kind (2.6.140). The systematic shortfall of actual output with respect to plans is concealed and eliminated by the retrospective adjustment of official figures so as to agree with official forecasts (1.4.38). If promises and even "categorical pledges" are reneged, records are subsequently modified as to indicate a premonition or warning of actual events. This process of continuous alteration is applied "to every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance" (1.4.39).

Statistics "were just as much a fantasy in their original version as in their rectified version. A great deal of the time you were expected to make them up out of your head" (1.4.40); for instance Miniplenty's quarterly plan for boots had been of 145 million pairs; actual output was given as 62 million, so in Minitrue Winston Smith retrospectively rectified the planned figure to 57 million as to allow for overfulfilment, but in any case all these figures had "not even the kind of connection with reality that is contained in a direct lie",



nobody knew or cared how many boots were being produced, while perhaps half the population went barefoot and an astronomical number of boots were produced on paper in a shadow world in which even the date of the year had become uncertain ("...(if it was 1984)...", 1.3.34). "Day and night the telescreens bruised your ears with statistics proving that people today had more food, more clothes, better houses, better recreations - that they lived longer, worked shorter hours, were better, healthier, stronger, happier, more intelligent, better educated, than the people of fifty years ago. Not a word of it could ever be proved or disproved" (1.7.68).

Standard of living. If consumption trends could be concealed and falsified, actual levels were directly and instantaneously perceived and could not be. The standard of living varies for the three strata: members of the Inner Party have direct access to generous allocations of necessities and luxuries by virtue of membership, as well as receiving cash for market transactions; they live in a special district, in "richness and spaciousness", surrounded by unfamiliar smells of good food and tobacco, silent and incredibly rapid lifts, white-jacketed servants, in a state of virtual saturation of needs (2.8.152). Outer Party members are considerably worse off, consume cheap and inadequate surrogates and have no access to luxuries. An Outer Party member receives 3,000 clothing coupons annually, and a suit of pyjamas is 600 (1.3.32); his regulation lunch consists of a metal pannikin of pinkish-grey stew, a hunk of bread, a cube of cheese, a mug of milkless Victory coffee and one saccharin tablet (1.5.47). Tobacco is rationed to 100 grammes a week (1.5.54); chocolate to 20 grammes (reduced from 30 grammes, 1.2.27). Electric power in the home is cut off during daylight (1.1.7); lights are turned off at 23.30 hours. The quality of available goods is low and deteriorating (coarse soap, bread, bad gin, cigarettes); surrogates are inadequate (blackberry leaves for tea; saccharin for sugar); simple essential goods are in short supply, such as razor blades, buttons, darning wool. Advertising is not commercial, only political; plain white labels are stuck to the only brand available, named after Victory.



Simple luxuries such as wine, oranges and lemons, are now forgotten ("I wonder what a lemon was', he added inconsequently. 'I have seen oranges. They are a kind of round yellow fruit with a thick skin.'", 2.5.130; "'It is called wine', said O'Brien with a faint smile. 'You will have read about it in books, no doubt. Not much of it gets to the Outer Party, I am afraid'." (2.8.152). Outside the Inner Party district the housing stock is in a poor state of repair: flaking plaster, burst pipes, leaking roofs, malfunctioning heating systems and lifts (1.2.22 and 1.1.7). Proles are worse off than Outer Party members, but are subject to fewer economic and political restrictions (unlike Outer Party members, they can divorce, indulge in promiscuity, consume pornographic products, transact in black markets, and escape direct monitoring of their lives; they are supposed to drink beer instead of gin, but have no difficulty in obtaining it). Recorded increase in the average standard of living in 1983 was officially said to be 20% (1.5.54), but "always in your stomach and your skin there was a sort of protest, a feeling that you had been cheated of something that you had a right to" (1.5.54).

Markets and prices. In spite of privileged access to consumption by groups, and widespread rationing, cash transactions also took place for wages and consumption goods. Oceania's currency is the dollar; at 1984 prices a large nip of Victory gin is \$0.10 (1.5.46), a high quality writing book \$2.50 (1.1.11), an antique glass paperweight which in the midfifties would have fetched £8 now is priced substantially less at \$4 (1.8.85); a rented room in the private market is a few dollars a week (1.8.86), and a telescreen is "expensive" (1.8.87). The permanent state of excess demand is not reflected in official price trends, but there is a parallel black market in which scarce goods are redistributed at higher prices. "Party members were supposed not to go into ordinary shops ('dealing on the free market', it was called), but the rule was not strictly kept, because there were various things, such as shoelaces and razor blades, which it was impossible to get hold of in any other way" (1.1.11; this presumably applied only to Outer Party members, since Inner Party members had all they needed). There is also some production



of goods and services outside the state sector, i.e. a very small scale black or second economy, as we would call it today. We are given evidence for butter in the countryside (2.2.105; we are not told whether official agriculture is made up of anything other than state farms), retail services in the cities ("in one of the poorer quarters there was an open market which was generally crowded", 2.3.113) and rented accommodation (1.8.86).

Resources. Human and capital resources have been seriously depleted by war. "The ravages of the atomic war of the nineteen-fifties have never been fully repaired" (2.9.166). Subsequent wars are less destructive, in spite of the universal availability of nuclear weapons; however conventional bombing continuously damages the housing stock. Much of social capital is wearing out faster than replacement; investment is concentrated in non-productive sectors (armaments); metals are being recycled ("... of course the metal stuff's mostly been melted down", 1.8.85). Population has drastically fallen since the mid-fifties, down to just over one billion (we know that Oceania's Inner Party members are 6 million and represent 2% of Oceanian total, which is, therefore, 300 million, 2.9.179; the three super-states have roughly equivalent economic size; even including the floating populations of the equatorial land, which is about a fifth of the total, world population cannot be much out of 1.1 billion). Demographic growth is restricted by the Party's policy of sexual restraint and overall attitude to marriage and family (1.4.45; 1.6.60-61, on the Party's attempt at killing the sex instinct).

Technology. All major past inventions are credited to the Party, from helicopters to aeroplanes and the steam engine (1.8.85 - per se a harmless practice). As a whole the world is more primitive than fifty years earlier; some sectors have advanced, especially in connection with warfare and internal repression, and some new inventions are available (such as the novel writing machine used by Julia, whose tasks consisted chiefly in running and servicing a powerful but tricky electric motor, 2.3.115). But experiment and invention have largely stopped (2.9.166),



much technical knowledge has been forgotten and regress has taken place; fields are now cultivated with horse ploughs (2.9.166-168); since warfare is permanent but - in spite of nuclear technology - inconsequential, even in military matters efficiency is of lesser importance. In the past, technical progress by raising productivity undermined the very foundations of a hierarchical society, by spreading too widely its benefits among the masses; now those benefits are used to raise the war effort while maintaining inequality, thus progress does not have this adverse side-effect on the oligarchy's long term survival.

Trade. The three super-states are totally self-sufficient and do not engage in trade between themselves. Each of them is large enough to have almost everything it requires from within its boundaries, so that the competition for raw materials is no longer a matter of life and death. Production being geared to internal requirements, the scramble for markets is no longer necessary. Thus regions within each state are completely integrated and each state is totally autarkic (2.9.164-165). There are no migrations of labour, only temporary conquest and enslavement of equatorial populations. There are no international loans, or financial flows of any kind (presumably old outstanding financial links have been liquidated with the nineteenfifties war). Apart from (friendly or hostile) military contact there are no direct links between the super-states: "War prisoners apart, the average citizen of Oceania never sets eyes on a citizen of either Eurasia or Eastasia, and he is forbidden the knowledge of foreign languages"... "the main frontiers must never be crossed by anything except bombs" (2.9.171).

Public policy. There is no mention of taxation; though "About a quarter of one's salary had to be earmarked for voluntary subscriptions"; nor is there any mention of banking and credit; every week a Gordo-type giant Lottery with large prizes (fictitious, of course) has an important place in individual expectations of material improvement (for millions it is the principal if not the only reason for remaining alive, 1.8.77).



If there were no armaments, the system would be subject to the same underconsumptionist tendencies of pre-mid-fifties capitalism; a state of permanent warfare provides the necessary outlet (over and above public investment and the very substantial requirements of secret police and mass media manipulation) not only to absorb any excess capacity that might remain after the satisfaction of desired consumption expenditure, but also to squeeze private consumption in order to deliberately maintain the masses in a condition of permanent relative poverty.

Permanent warfare is therefore regarded as essential to the very survival of oligarchic collectivism both as a state-wide and a worldwide system. The object of war is only marginally and incidentally the conquest of territorial and resource advantage, which even if it occurs is known beforehand not to be permanent, because no two allied super-states can permanently subjugate the third. The primary purpose of war is that of destroying surplus labour before its fruits bring about too much equality, i.e. of reproducing inequality and therefore keeping the structure of society intact. Thus in 1980 Oceania was still at war with Eastasia and at peace with Eurasia (2.5.136); then it turned to war with Eurasia in alliance with Eastasia (1.3.34), and suddenly, right in the middle of 1984 Hate Week, Oceania allies itself again with Eurasia against Eastasia. This cyclical pattern replaces the business cycles and political cycles of the pre-fifties world, while the system continuously reproduces itself.

System dynamics. Collectivism and warfare are the solid pillars of the oligarchic system envisaged by Orwell. Collectivism provides the only secure basis for oligarchy, in that the formal abolition of private property protects the few who somehow have hoisted themselves onto a position of power from the threat which otherwise would remain to their own exclusive enjoyment - and that of their heirs - of the fruits of their property. Warfare prevents the dispossessed majority from improving their lot relatively to the oligarchy through the better use of resources due to higher capacity utilisation or technical progress, by



destroying what would otherwise be distributed to their benefit, and more. By assumption, or by construction, the resulting low-consumption, high-inequality, permanent-warfare equilibrium is protected from any disturbance. In particular, both the Inner Party members and the proles are said to be contented with their lot, i.e. there is no alienation: "Winston's greatest pleasure in life was in his work", (1.7.65); while the proles are caught in a vicious circle: "Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious" (1.7.65, emphasis in text); left to themselves they have reverted to a natural, ancestral pattern of behaviour which makes them happier than Outer Party members but keeps them so concerned and busy with their private, physical and low grade world as to make them easy - animal-like - prey to the long arm of the Party. And in any case the concern with subsistence, the response to petty concessions, the superior technology of central surveillance, the absence of horizontal communication networks, the lack of exogenous shocks from sudden technical progress or international relations, load the dice so heavily in favour of the oligarchy as to make O'Brien's final statement a foregone conclusion: "'The proletarians will never revolt, not in a thousand years or a million ....The rule of the Party is forever'" (3.3.225-226).

## II. A CRITIQUE

The parts and the whole. A major, apparently not yet acknowledged, achievement of George Orwell's description of oligarchic collectivism is not the anticipation of a future system, but the pioneering understanding of some (and some only) of the already existing economic features of the Soviet system, which though partly sketched by Hayek and Mises were still not fully acknowledged in contemporary Western Sovietological literature to which Orwell had access. Many of the economic traits of oligarchic collectivism were already present in the USSR while Orwell was writing: clearly drawn social strata, from the Nomenklatura down, physical planning, heavy and defence industry priorities; an absence



of street maps, telephone directories, and similar sources of social information; a barrage of propaganda about material progress; dodgy economic statistics, shortages; housing in a poor state of repair, privileged access to goods and services for the upper strata; black markets; and a tendency towards technological stagnation.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the economic features of oligarchic collectivism were also borrowed from war-time economics, and from the Nazi system; while some of the more unpleasant political and human features of Orwell's vision were also observable in these and other totalitarian systems of his own time.

It does not follow from the plausibility or even the actual realisation of some of Orwell's premises, however, that his vision deserves credibility, as a picture of the world either as it is or as it will be. First, there are essential parts of his picture which have not come true and cannot come true because they are evidently implausible, such as the triangular international set-up and its equilibrium, the elimination of independent thought and protest, technical regress, the autarky of the super-states. Nazi Germany is gone, and the Soviet Union of 1984 employs a large labour force of quite highly educated and well-informed people; has made substantial material progress; deals extensively with other states, including states with different socio-economic systems, and does not require mass poverty and coercion for its functioning. Second, many of the essential features of the Orwellian system are actually mutually

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1. I am indebted to Phil Hanson for making this point and providing such a comprehensive catalogue of similarities between Orwell's picture and the Soviet Union of his own times, as well as of the differences given below.



incompatible and the system, regardless of its components, is not plausible as a whole.

Intensity versus certainty of power. At several stages during the narration Winston Smith questions the "ultimate motive" of the whole system: "I understand HOW; I do not understand WHY" (1.7.72; 2.9.185). Only towards the end is the question of why posed and answered by the Inner Party inquisitor, O'Brien: "The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power" (3.3.227). It is indeed true that "... no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it" (Ibidem), and that, as we have seen above, the system gives the certainty of reproducing the power structure over time. But power here is taken as an absolute, single and indivisible object; in fact, if power could be graded in intensity, or identified into the components of a multidimensional measurement, the oligarchy would have to attach some weight on to a suitable measure of power intensity, depending in turn on its own "preferences", or "objective function".<sup>1</sup> The system outlined by Orwell, if it functions as envisaged, can ensure the certain undisturbed enjoyment of a given relative inequality position of a given oligarchy, but this is not the same thing as "pure power". If the oligarchy is interested in its relative size, or its precise relative position of unequal privilege (even neglecting the multidimensional difficulties associated with a measurement of inequality), or some other measure of power intensity, Orwell's system is too crude to deal with this more

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1. Phil Hanson has pointed out that there actually is, in the Soviet system, a trade-off between the retention of status and privilege by the oligarchy, on the one hand, and efficiency and technical progress on the other; when the choice has arisen, status and privilege have been preferred (see J.H. Moore, Agency costs, technical change and Soviet central planning, Journal of Economics and Law, Vol. XXIV(2), October 1981). However, there is no evidence to suggest that relative status and privilege and other aspects of power would always be maximised regardless of cost in terms of the absolute level of power and material consumption, which is what is needed to substantiate Orwell's approach.



complex choice and to deliver the desired combination of intensity and certainty of power. It must be a very frightened oligarchy that worries exclusively about its own reproduction without paying any attention to the power level that is being reproduced. And a frightened oligarchy cannot be paranoid for ever: either it has reason to be frightened and tumbles, or it has not, and it will eventually learn to seek objectives other than the certainty of its longterm survival. Efficiency in a conventional Paretian sense then becomes important, and the envisaged system ceases to make sense; the WHY question remains unanswered.

A three-players game. From the discussion of super-state Oceania Orwell passes quickly to extend his propositions to a world of three super-states almost indistinguishable in their institutions, economic structure, self-sufficiency, and each powerful enough to be individually invincible. Yet these are very strong and crucial assumptions, and the model is not robust enough to survive without them. If, contrary to Orwell's strict assumptions, two super-states can together subjugate or destroy the other, conventional efficiency becomes crucial to super-state survival, and the three players game will lend itself to a broader range of solutions other than the simple succession of alternate alliances and enmities envisaged by Orwell. If the super-states have different institutions (hastily ruled out by means of a now discredited "convergence" hypothesis) or different preferences between intensity and certainty of power, or are potentially complementary, the blind logic of repeated warfare for surplus destruction and for the reproduction of inequality does not follow necessarily at all. The new solution might involve better material conditions, or a better chance of a change, for agents other than the oligarchy itself; while the choice of alternative strategies also opens the possibility of mistakes and miscalculations; in this way the "system" can lose some of its grip on its subjects.

Informational inefficiency. The systematic destruction of wealth for the preservation of social order is inefficient both with respect



to the achievement of alternative objectives and with respect to possible cheaper ways (such as unemployment, for instance) of preserving social order at the expense of wealth. Thus there is no need of dwelling over the system's inefficiency. But there is, in particular, a striking informational inefficiency in Orwell's system, that makes it vulnerable and possibly unviable. One can understand the rulers' wish to remould the past, conceal and distort information, as long as someone, somewhere, can store and retrieve correct information for the use of decision-makers. This, however, would both be less dramatic in literary terms (because trivially close to existing real practice) and reduce the safety of the system, because rebels might gain access to correct information and use it against the system. Thus Orwell pictures a world in which not even Big Brother knows or cares about what really happens. But without this knowledge, control unavoidably slips.

Technical regress. Whenever there is a permanent shift in relative input price, best practice techniques usually change and old techniques may be forgotten without loss or regret; for this kind of forgetfulness to lead actually to technical regress it is necessary that the original shift be unexpectedly and permanently reversed. This is not what is envisaged in Orwell's approach to technology, thus the regress which is said to take place (except in the privileged sector of police and warfare techniques) has no conceivable explanation.

Technological gap. The three superstates are depicted as totally insulated from one another, without communications, migrations, financial or commercial links. Yet, especially in warfare techniques, research goes on. There is no mechanism, in Orwell, preventing the appearance of a technological gap in war technology, upsetting the relatively harmless continued warfare which is a fundamental pillar (the other being collectivism) of Inner Party oligarchs. Nor is there a way of preventing technical spillover from military to civilian uses, reversing technical regress even if it could occur.



Firms and farms. Economists know, and knew long before Orwell wrote, that the complex tasks of running a large centrally-planned economy can only be managed with some degree of decentralisation, of information flows if not of decision power as well, to the level of sectors, or groups of firms, or firms and plants. Here Orwell is completely silent. Yet a multilevel decisional structure opens problems of decisional incentives and responsibility, of access to reliable information, of workers' participation in the process, as well as solutions which would be very much at odds with Orwell's implicit monolithic centralised structure which collects and processes information and dispatches orders; the politics of alternative allocational models might also differ. Two side problems also arise here: without real intercommunications between one part of Oceania and the other, connections between firms delivering their output to each other must be centralised along vertical lines, instead of being direct, possibly pushing the centralisation level and local autarky, beyond reason. Also, the specific problems of agricultural production, and of feeding the towns, have been left aside but would have to be a constant worry even for the most careless Big Brother.

Outer Party members' preferences and incentives. While Inner Party members have all they need and proles do not know they need it (and have compensations), Outer Party members are both knowing and unprovided for, as well as having awkward limitations of their political and economic freedom (compulsory telescreen, no access to black market goods, etc.). Yet they are the backbone of Party executives; in view of their miserable lot they cannot be regarded as full members of the ruling oligarchy; their career prospects are low; they have no incentives. Does anything prevent their voluntary demotion to proles, other than cultural indoctrination into the Party's unbound contempt for the proles ("The proles are not human beings", says Syme of the Research Department of Minitrue, 1.5.50)? (A small incongruity also springs to mind: are the Inner Party members' white-jacketed servants, who know and see so much, also assimilated to Inner Party members, or are they Outer Party members?).



"The future lies in the Proles". In Nineteen eighty-four Orwell's love/hate relationship with the working class takes a clearcut turn. He occasionally may convey a hint of solidarity and hope for their liberation - at any rate from Big Brother - at the beginning of the book ("If there is hope,....., it lies in the proles", 1.7.64) or while debating the question with torturer O'Brien: "'Life will defeat you'... 'Then what is it, this principle that will defeat us?' 'I don't know. The spirit of Man'" (3.3.232). But the spirit of Man is immediately and irredeemably broken, soiled by degradation and betrayal. There can be no doubt that Orwell's final stance in the book is one of contempt not compassion for the proles (and man at large, for that matter), who are doomed beyond redemption: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face - for ever" (3.3.230), says O'Brien, and Winston Smith's feeble objections (no vitality ... the spirit of Man) only add force to O'Brien's proposition. Are there less feeble objections? The first concerns the oligarchy's reliance on collectivism as the route to the legitimization of inequality; it is true that historically we find many instances of this, but when privilege is visible and resented and is not counterbalanced by attenuating circumstances (such as greater efficiency, or luck, being associated with greater inequality), the formal pretence of collectivisation is no safe protection for the ruling oligarchy. The second is Orwell's neglect of the economic and political consequences of full employment, in spite of working class progress in Britain following virtual full employment during and immediately after the war (though Orwell did not live to see the 1951 election, which also rejected some of the more Big-Brotherish features of English Socialism for some time to come). Finally, and most importantly, the Proles' unwillingness and inability to revolt is due to their being brutalised not by Big Brother but by Orwell himself. "Today there were fear, hatred and pain, but no dignity of emotion, no deep or complex sorrows" (1.3.31, emphasis added). But why on earth should there be no dignity of emotion, anywhere to be found? Under the worst repression there is dignity of emotion not only in heroes, like Anna Frank, but also in common uneducated men like Solzhenitsyn's Ivan Denisovich (who in a stalinist camp takes pride in



the products of his forced labour and draws strength out of small blessings). There is no dignity of emotion in Nineteen eight-four simply because deus ex machina Orwell has fancied taking it away, at a stroke, because he felt like it. Which is perfectly good literary licence, but a poor and misleading foundation for serious speculation about the future of Man. There is still hope, for the Proles.

### III. CONCLUSION

An oligarchy that for some reason finds itself in power (for instance, as a result of the course of events described in Animal Farm) seeks to perpetuate itself as a quasi-hereditary closed group via collectivism (which covers up and perpetuates inequality) and permanent moderate warfare (to prevent both underconsumption and diffusion of wealth) between large uniform super-states that have all converged to the same system. Manipulation and falsification of information and secret police rule are subsidiary instruments of government by privileged Inner and Outer Party members over proletarians and forced labour. There is no trade, the system languishes and stagnates but successfully reproduces its own social order.

This alleged vision is no feat of the imagination. It is a collage of recognisable components belonging to Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia (always mentioned together, 3.2.218; 3.3.227) as well as English Labour and wartime England, possibly more perceptively understood by Orwell than other contemporaries of his, but not invented by him. Moreover, the whole does not hang together. The ultimate purpose of the system - power - is crude and not the same thing as what the system obtains (i.e. stable relative inequality). The super-states will behave as envisaged, as fairly cooperative enemies, only in quite special cases, otherwise their equilibrium is unstable. The system is technically and informationally inefficient. Orwell's summary and perfunctory dealing with techno-



logy and its trends neglects the possibility of an international technology gap, and relies on an implausible course of technical regress. The microeconomic foundations of the system are grossly neglected, both for firms and individual agents (especially Outer Party members and Proles). The conviction, formulated by Orwell and conveyed to the reader, that proletarians will not resist oligarchic collectivism is based on the unjustified identification of collectivism and socialisation, on the neglect of the political and economic consequences of full employment of labour, and on Orwell's dehumanisation of the working class for the purpose of literary effect.

Orwell's Nineteen eighty-four may or may not be a successful literary achievement. Certainly here Orwell does not reach the subtlety of Burgess's horror show Proles in Clockwork Orange, or the anguish of Kafka's despotism in Castle, or Trial, or Solzhenitsyn's Day in the Life, or Gulag, or Zinoviev's Yawning Heights, or even Ian Fleming's purposeful and entertaining violence. Orwell's oligarchic collectivism may or may not be a viable and credible political system; though since his book was published anticipations (already mentioned) are matched by strong counter-examples (internationalisation of production; Prague spring and Paris May of 1968; the Polish August of 1980; computer based decentralisation, to name a few). But as an economic system oligarchic collectivism does not stand the strain of close scrutiny.

Orwell's Nineteen eight-four gives voice to Orwell's own and vicarious deepest fears and complexes, of a kind better treated by analysts than by social scientists: from impotence ("... her youth and prettiness had frightened him...'Never mind, dear. There is no hurry'", 2.2.107) to frigidity (Winston's wife Katherine "would lie there with shut eyes, neither resisting nor cooperating, but submitting", 1.6.62); from loss of virginity ("... scores of times she had done it; he wished it had been hundred - thousands", 2.2.111) to vagina dentata ("She had no teeth at all", 1.6.63); from betrayal ("She betrayed you, Winston. Immediately - unreservedly" 3.2.223) to paralysis ("You have a vivid



mental picture of the vertebrae snapping apart and the spinal fluid dripping out of them", 3.2.271); from incest ("'Why', she added sentimentally, 'I might be your mother'. She might, thought Winston, be his mother", 3.1.197), to homosexual masochism ("... he clung to O'Brien like a baby, curiously comforted by the heavy arm round his shoulder. He had the feeling that O'Brien was his protector...", 3.2.216); from venereal disease ("If he could have infected the whole lot of them with leprosy or syphilis how gladly he would have done so", 2.2.111) to fear of rats ("They are enormous rats...they will leap onto your face and bore straight into it", 3.5.246).

By the same token, and in the same breath, Orwell articulates in the same unconnected fashion the fears and complexes that a society as a whole might have (or a man qua citizen rather than qua individual) : poverty, social injustice, ignorance, hunger, disappointment, waste, stagnation, relative deprivation, uncertainty, torture and war. This does not mean that a society, let alone all societies, will necessarily or even probably conform to a model where all these social evils are present - any more than Orwell's powerful description of individual fears and complexes implies that a typical individual must have all of them at the same time all the time. As long as we keep in mind the distinction between fiction and science, no problem arises. The trouble is that Orwell himself did not like this distinction and did not make it in general or with reference with this book, nor usually do his readers. Indeed Orwell's ambition was to turn political writing into an art form. Even granting some artistic licence, Nineteen eighty-four and oligarchic collectivism are an angry gut reaction to a collection of things which Orwell did not like in the world at large that he knew rather than in a single actual place or idealised system, let alone in the future of Man:

Orwell's gutthink unsystem doubleplusunsense.

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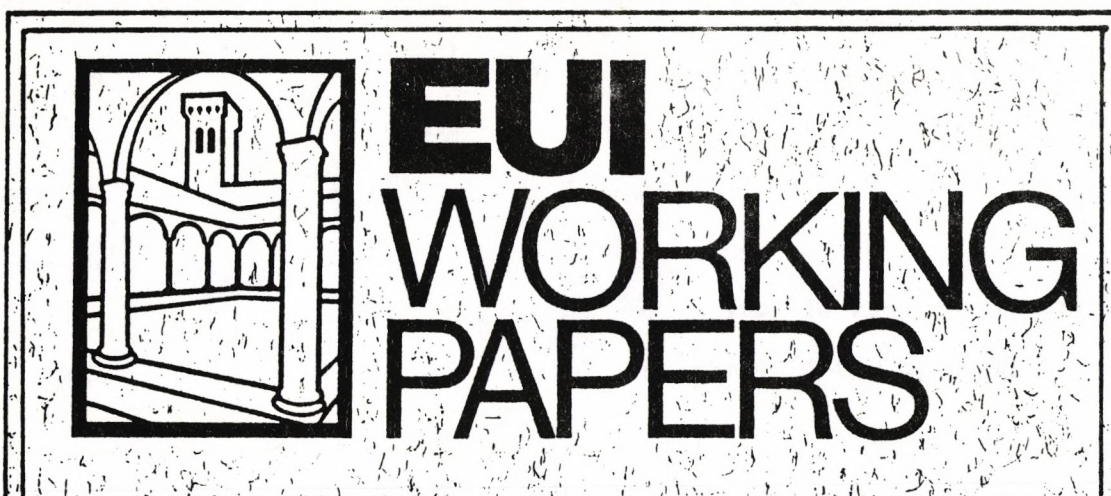
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