**The Dystopian Imagination**

**By Theodore Dalrymple**

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**W**hy did the twentieth century produce so many—and such vivid—**dystopias**, works of fiction depicting not an ideal future but a future as terrible as could be imagined? After all, never had material progress been greater; never should man have felt himself freer of the anxieties that, with good reason, had beset him in the past. Famine had all but disappeared, except in civil wars or where regimes deliberately engineered it; and for the first time in history, the biblical span—or longer—was a reasonable hope for many. Medicine had conquered the dread infectious diseases that once cut swathes through entire populations. Not to enjoy luxuries that Louis XIV couldn't have imagined now was evidence of intolerable poverty.

Yet even as technology liberated us from want (though not, of course, from desire), political schemes of secular salvation—communism and Nazism—unleashed a barbarism that, if not unique in its ferocity, was certainly so in the determination, efficiency, and thoroughness with which it was practiced. The attempts to put utopian ideals into practice invariably resulted in the effort to eliminate whole classes or races of people. Many, especially intellectuals, came to regard the utopian condition, in which earth is fair and all men glad and wise, as man's natural state; only the existence of ill-intentioned classes or races could explain the fall from grace. Where hopes are unrealistic, fears often become exaggerated; where dreams alone are blueprints, nightmares result.

It is hardly surprising that a century of utopian dreams and coercive social engineering to achieve them should have been a century rich in imaginative dystopias. Indeed, from ***The Time Machine*** to ***Blade Runner***, the dystopia became a distinct literary and cinematic genre, and Aldous Huxley's ***Brave New World*** and George Orwell's ***1984*** became so much a part of Western man's mental furniture that even unliterary people invoke them to criticize the present.

The dystopians look to the future not with the optimism of those who believe that man's increasing mastery of nature will bring greater happiness but with the pessimism of those who believe that the more man controls nature, the less he controls himself. The benefits of technological advance will be as nothing, they say, by comparison with the evil ends to which man will put it.

**T**he great dystopias do not still command our interest because of their technological prescience. The contrivances they describe are often from today's standpoint laughably nave. H. G. Wells's time machine is hardly more than an elaborate bicycle made of ivory, nickel, and quartz. The radio reporter's aluminum hat, filled with transmitting equipment, in *Brave New World*, strikes us today as ridiculous, despite Huxley's reputation for scientific foresight. In *1984*, Orwell imagines a computer as being full of nuts and bolts, with oil lubricating its operations—more steam engine than motherboard.

Yet, this technological naïveté finally does not matter, for the dystopians' purpose is moral and political. They are not crystal gazing but anxiously—despairingly—commenting on the present. The dystopias—depicting journeys to imaginary worlds, removed more in time than in space, whose most salient characteristics are exaggerations of what their authors take to be significant social trends—are the *reductio ad absurdum* (or *ad nauseam*) of received ideas of progress and sensitive indicators of the anxieties of their age, which is still so close to our own.

**S**ome of these anxieties now seem unnecessary to us or based upon false premises. Reading about them today is salutary, however, for it encourages us to step back from our current worries and wonder whether they, too, might not be chimeras. Wells's *Time Machine*, for example, is virtually a tract on the social-medical fears of his time, most of which, in light of subsequent experience, proved unfounded.

Wells's hero travels 800,000 years into the future. Mankind, he discovers, has divided into two species: the diurnal Eloi; and the nocturnal, subterranean Morlocks. The Eloi are soft, weak creatures, small in stature and effete in gesture and conduct, who devote their time to the simple pleasures of erotic play and eating delicious fruit. The Morlocks, toiling in their underground factories, make everything the Elois need for their easeful existence. But like human spiders, the Morlocks emerge after dark to prey upon the Elois, who are meat for them.

Wells's outdated social Darwinian and eugenic preoccupations are clear enough from his fantasy. Society, Wells thought, was splitting into two castes that eventually would evolve into separate species because of their different conditions of existence. On the one hand were the owners of capital, doomed to mental and physical enfeeblement because they never had to struggle to survive; on the other were the workers, made increasingly stunted, amoral, and angry by the harshness of their labor. Wells's future dystopia showed what he thought would happen when this division reached its end.

Four years after *The Time Machine* first appeared, the Boer War broke out, and British army recruitment centers seemed to bear out Wells's worst fears. An astonishing number of British working-class men failed to measure up to the army's undemanding physical requirements—so much so that recruiters had to lower their standards. Eton adolescents stood six inches taller than slum school pupils of the same age: here were two nations indeed, and a division into two species might have seemed imminent to someone as steeped in Darwin as Wells.

Yet a mere half century after Wells's death, his countrymen's average height had increased by an inch per decade: both the Eloi and the Morlocks grew larger as the struggle for existence grew less desperate and survival more assured.

**T**he division of society into separate castes also preoccupied Jack London's dystopia, *The Iron Heel*, published in 1907. London foresees an America in which the plutocracy of the Gilded Age, with hired mercenaries, confronts an immiserated proletariat. Determined to protect their wealth, the plutocrats mobilize their fascistic organization, the Iron Heel, to destroy U.S. constitutional liberties so thoroughly that mass terror ensues and Latin-American-style disappearances (which London describes with frightening prescience) become commonplace. London accepts *in toto* Marx's theory of the ever widening disparity between the owners of capital and those with only their labor to sell, with one important exception: he believes that the proletarian revolution lies in the distant future. In the meantime, man will squirm under the Iron Heel, like a worm under a boot.

Like all dystopians who favor the common man, London does not stoop to flatter. He hates the Iron Heel, but that does not mean he loves the proletariat as anything but an abstraction. When London portrays it in revolt, you begin, despite the author's intentions, to side with the Iron Heel: "It was not a column but a mob, an awful river that filled the street, the people of the abyss, mad with drink and wrong, up at last and roaring for the blood of their masters. I had seen the people of the abyss before, gone through its ghettos, and thought I knew it; but I found that I was now looking on it for the first time. Dumb apathy had vanished. It was now dynamic—a fascinating spectacle of dread. It surged past my vision in concrete waves of wrath, drunk with hatred, drunk with lust for blood—men, women and children, in rags and tatters, dim ferocious intelligences with all the godlike blotted from their features and all the fiendlike stamped in, apes and tigers, anemic consumptives and great hairy beasts of burden, wan faces from which vampire society had sucked the juice of life, bloated forms swollen with physical grossness and corruption, withered hags and death's-heads bearded like patriarchs, festering youth and festering age, faces of fiends, crooked, twisted, misshapen monsters blasted with the ravages of disease and all the horrors of chronic innutrition—the refuse and the scum of life, a raging screaming, screeching demoniacal horde."

And this, to London, is the last—the only—hope of humanity. Even the Morlocks seem preferable.

**I**t is not surprising that the two greatest literary dystopians, Huxley and Orwell, were English. For to be English in the twentieth century was to breathe in a climate of unrelieved pessimism. It was a period of continuous national decline. Starting from a position of world power and influence, England ended up a mere province, struggling to keep pace with the likes of Belgium or Holland. True, its people were much better off in material terms at the end of the century than at its outset, but man's sense of well-being depends upon comparison with others as well as upon his absolute condition. Material progress and despair went hand in hand in England: a nourishing brew for the dystopian imagination.

Huxley's book was published in 1932; Orwell's appeared in 1949. Huxley feared the growing Americanization of English life (though soon after publishing the book, he emigrated to California, America's *ne plus ultra*); Orwell feared the growing Sovietization of English life that had taken place during World War II. It seemed to both men that their native land no longer had sufficient intellectual, cultural, or moral energy to chart its own course through history and was caught in the grip of forces that the individual could struggle against only in vain.

Both dystopias retain their power to alarm because they are prophetic, almost in a biblical sense: they issue permanent calls to resist trends that, irrespective of the political regime we happen to find ourselves under, will impoverish human life.

**H**uxley's *Brave New World* is set in an indefinitely distant future: it will not be possible for many years to say that Huxley's apprehensions have not proved justified. It is unlikely that populations will undergo genetic and environmental manipulation in the exact way that Huxley foresaw: there will never be a fixed number of predetermined strata, from Alpha Plus to Epsilon Minus Semi-Morons. But as an Italian scientist prepares to clone humans, and as reproduction grows as divorced from sex as sex is from reproduction, it is increasingly hard to regard Huxley's vision as entirely far-fetched.

***Brave New World*** describes a sexual regime that increasingly resembles the one that rules today. A little boy, younger than ten, must visit a psychologist because he does not want to indulge in erotic play with a little girl, as his teachers demand: a situation we seem to be fast approaching. Not only does sex education start earlier and earlier in our schools, but publications, films, and television programs for ever-younger age groups grow more and more eroticized. It used to be that guilt would accompany the first sexual experiences of young people; now shame accompanies the *lack* of such experiences.

In Huxley's dystopia, as among liberals today, enlightenment and permissiveness are synonymous. The Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning tells his students how it was in the old, unenlightened times: " ‘What I'm going to tell you now,’ he said, ‘may sound incredible. But then, when you're not accustomed to history, most facts about the past do sound incredible.’

"He let out the amazing truths. For a very long period . . . erotic play between children had been regarded as abnormal (there was a roar of laughter); and not only abnormal, actually immoral (no!): and therefore had been rigorously suppressed. A look of astonished incredulity appeared on the faces of his listeners. Poor little kids not allowed to amuse themselves? They could not believe it. . . .

" ‘But what happened?’ they asked. ‘What were the results?’

" ‘The results were terrible . . . Terrible,’ he repeated."

Later, the director's superior, Mustapha Mond, one of the ten World Controllers, notes: "Freud had been the first to reveal the appalling dangers of family life. The world was full of fathers—was therefore full of misery; full of mothers—therefore full of every kind of perversion from sadism to chastity; full of brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts—therefore full of madness and suicide." As for home—"a few small rooms, stiflingly over-inhabited by a man, by a periodically teeming woman, by a rabble of boys and girls of all ages. No air, no space; an understerilized prison; darkness, disease, and smells." In *Brave New World*, the word "mother" is smutty, in the same way that it is indelicate in the area of the city where I work to ask about the identity of a child's father. As in *Brave New World*, the word "father" is "not so much obscene as . . . merely gross, a scatological rather than a pornographic impropriety." In the matter of human relations, we are halfway to Huxley's dystopia.

Huxley himself was highly ambivalent about the family as an institution. He not only felt that it would, but that it should, disintegrate. His powers of imagination, however, overwhelmed his ratiocination, so he was able to convey the horror of a world in which "everyone belongs to everyone," a world in which no one formed any deep attachment to anyone else.

**T**he ultimate target of Huxley's dystopia was the idea of the good life as the instant gratification of sensory desires. Mustapha Mond tries to prove to his students their good fortune to live in the *Brave New World*:

" ‘Consider your own lives,’ said Mustapha Mond. ‘Has any of you ever encountered an insurmountable obstacle?’

"The question was answered by a negative silence.

" ‘Has any of you been compelled to live through a long time-interval between the consciousness of a desire and its fulfillment?’

" ‘Well,’ began one of the boys, and hesitated.

" ‘Speak up,’ said the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning. . . .

" ‘I once had to wait nearly four weeks before a girl I wanted would let me have her.’

" ‘And you felt a strong emotion in consequence?’

" ‘Horrible!’

" ‘Horrible; precisely,’ said the Controller."

This passage reminds me of the advertising slogan of a credit card launched in Britain about 30 years ago: it "takes the waiting out of wanting." The advertisement showed no recognition that immediate gratification usually presents a bill, with extortionate interest.

Huxley surmised that life lived as the satisfaction of one desire after another would result in shallow and egotistical people. True, he had a poor opinion of mankind to start with: "About 99.5% of the entire population of the planet are as stupid," he once wrote, "as the great masses of the English." But after gratifying their desires instantly throughout their lives, people would cease to carry the divine spark that distinguished man from the rest of creation. They would seek entertainment unto death: at *Brave New World*'s Park Lane Hospital for the Dying, "at the foot of every bed, confronting its moribund occupant, was a television box." I think of my own hospital, where the dying usually depart this world to the sight and sound of driveling television soap operas.

Those who live lives of immediate gratification, Huxley thought, would not be able to bear solitude of any kind. As Mustapha Mond explains, "people are never alone now. We make them hate solitude; and we arrange their lives so that it's almost impossible for them to ever have it." A life devoted to instant gratification produces permanent infantilization: "at sixty-four . . . tastes are what they were at seventeen." In our society, the telescoping of the generations is already happening: the knowledge, tastes, and social accomplishments of 13-year-olds are often the same as those of 28-year-olds. Adolescents are precociously adult; adults are permanently adolescent.

**O**rwell's *1984* refers more directly to contemporary events than does Huxley's book: the narrative takes place in the near rather than the distant future and obviously sets its sights on Stalinism. When I traveled in the communist world before the fall of the Berlin Wall, I found that everyone I met who had read the book (clandestinely, of course) expressed immeasurable admiration for it and marveled that a man who had never set foot inside a communist country could not only describe the physical environment so well—the universal smell of cabbage, the grayness of the dilapidated buildings—but also its mental and moral atmosphere.

It was almost as if the communist regimes had taken *1984* as a blueprint rather than as a warning. How could one watch North Korea's "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung enter into a vast stadium in Pyongyang, as I did in 1989, without recalling the "hymn to the wisdom and majesty of Big Brother"—"an act," Orwell writes, "of self-hypnosis, a deliberate drowning of consciousness by means of rhythmic noise," during which "to dissemble your feelings, to control your face, to do what everyone else was doing, was an instinctive reaction": instinctive because self-preserving. The Great Leader stood there impassively for minutes on end as 150,000 people threw up their arms in organized spontaneity, worshiping him, exactly as Orwell described. It was 40 years, more or less to the day, after the publication of *1984*.

In Rumania under Ceauşescu, the television reported in mind-numbing detail the figures from the annual harvest, while everyone stood in line for hours to obtain a few miserable potatoes: just as the telescreen in Big Brother's Oceania tormented the population with news of the over-fulfilment of the Three-Year Plan, while there was never a sufficiency of anything. Often I washed with precisely the same kind of soap that Orwell's "hero," Winston Smith, had to use; and when Smith reflects upon the quality of life in Oceana, I hear the voices of Albanians or Rumanians under communism: "was it not a sign that this was not the natural order of things, if one's heart sickened at the discomfort and dirt and scarcity, the interminable winters, the stickiness of one's socks, the lifts that never worked, the cold water, the gritty soap, the cigarettes that came to pieces, the food with its strange evil tastes?"

People with no experience of life except under communist regimes would tell me that they knew—though they were unsure how—that their life was not "natural," just as Winston Smith concludes that life in Airstrip One (the new name for England in *1984*) was unnatural. Other ways of life might have their problems, my Albanian and Rumanian friends would say, but theirs was unique in its violation of human nature. Orwell's imaginative grasp of what it was like to live under communism seemed to them, as it does to me, to amount to genius.

**T**he totalitarian world Orwell describes in *1984* is thankfully today more a historical curiosity than a serious threat, except in an Islamist version. Yet, many of Orwell's ideas, like those of Huxley, remain pertinent, even though the threat of Stalinism has passed, for Orwell warned us about undesirable trends that arose from the condition of modernity as much as from Stalinism. His fears arose not just from his intuitive grasp of Stalinist states and his knowledge of communist conduct during the Spanish Civil War but from his experiences with the BBC's bureaucracy during World War II, where he witnessed firsthand the potential of the modern mass media to mislead and manipulate.

Consider his treatment of the family. In *1984*, parents fear their children, whom the Spies, the Party's youth organization, have indoctrinated. The Spies encourage and reward the denunciation of every political unorthodoxy, even in the nooks and crannies of private life, the very possibility of which is lost as a result. In modern England, parents fear their uncontrollable children, whom their peers, saturated with the violent and selfish values of a degraded popular culture, have indoctrinated. In both cases, parents are no longer the source of moral authority. Orwell forces us to confront imaginatively this overthrow of the natural order.

**Doublethink**—the ability to hold two contradictory ideas and assent to both—is with us, too, and will remain so as long as we have large bureaucracies that claim to act for our own good while pursuing their own institutional interests. And what is political correctness but Newspeak, the attempt to make certain thoughts inexpressible through the reform of language?

**O**rwell's book also offers a prophetic view of modern politicized history. Winston Smith copies a passage from a child's history textbook: "In the old days, before the glorious Revolution, London was not the beautiful city that we know today. It was a dark, dirty, miserable place where hardly anybody had enough to eat and where hundreds and thousands of poor people had no boots on their feet and not even a roof to sleep under. Children no older than you are had to work twelve hours a day for cruel masters, who flogged them with whips if they worked too slowly and fed them on nothing but stale breadcrusts and water. But in among all this terrible poverty there were just a few great big beautiful houses that were lived in by rich men who had as many as thirty servants to look after them. These rich men were called capitalists. They were fat, ugly men with wicked faces, like the one in the picture on the opposite page. You can see that he is dressed in a long black coat that was called a frock coat, and a queer shiny hat shaped like a stovepipe, which was called a top hat. This was the uniform of the capitalists and no one else was allowed to wear it. The capitalists owned everything in the world, and everyone else was their slave. They owned all the land, all the houses, all the factories, and all the money. If anyone disobeyed them, they could throw him into prison, or they could starve him to death. When any ordinary person spoke to a capitalist he had to cringe and bow to him, and take off his cap and address him as ‘Sir.’ "

The kind of historiography expressed in this satirical passage has become virtually standard in the various branches (feminist, black, gay, and so on) of academic resentment studies, in which history is nothing but the backward projection of current grievances, real or imagined, used to justify and inflame resentment.

**T**he object of such historiography is to disconnect everyone from a real sense of a living past and a living culture. Indeed, the underlying theme uniting the two great dystopias of the twentieth century is the need to preserve a sense of history and cultural tradition if life is to be bearable. This theme is all the more powerful, because both Huxley and Orwell were by nature radicals: Huxley was a socialist at Oxford, flirted with fascism in the 1930s, and then became a West Coast guru; Orwell was a socialist from an early age and a lifelong enemy of the status quo. Both implicitly realized as they contemplated the future that preservation was as important as change in human life: that the past was as important as the present and the future.

In both dystopias, people find themselves cut off from the past as a matter of deliberate policy. The revolution that brought about the Brave New World, says Mustapha Mond, was "accompanied by a campaign against the Past"—the closing of museums, the blowing up of historical monuments (as in the Taliban's Afghanistan), the banning of old books. In *1984*, "the past has been abolished." "History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right."

Such dystopian engineering is at work in my own country. By the deliberate decision of pedagogues, hundreds of thousands of children now leave school without knowing a single historical fact about their own country. The historical principles that museums have traditionally used to display art have given way to ahistorical thematic displays—portraits of women from a jumble of eras, say. A meaningless glass box now sits on a pediment in London's Trafalgar Square as a "corrective" to the historical associations of that famous urban space. A population is being deliberately created with no sense of history.

**F**or both Huxley and Orwell, one man symbolized resistance to the dehumanizing disconnection of man from his past: Shakespeare. In both writers, he stands for the highest pinnacle of human self-understanding, without which human life loses its depth and its possibility of transcendence. In *Brave New World*, possessing an old volume of Shakespeare that has mysteriously survived protects a man from the enfeebling effects of a purely hedonistic life. A few lines are sufficient to make him realize the superficiality of the Brave New World:

*Is there no pity sitting in the clouds,   
That sees into the bottom of my grief?  
O, sweet my mother, cast me not away!*

And when Winston Smith wakes in *1984* from a dream about a time before the Revolution, when people were still human, a single word rises to his lips, for reasons that he does not understand: Shakespeare.

This scene takes me back to Pyongyang. I was in the enormous and almost deserted square in front of the Great People's Study House—all open spaces in Pyongyang remain deserted unless filled with parades of hundreds of thousands of human automata—when a young Korean slid surreptitiously up to me and asked, "Do you speak English?"

An electric moment: for in North Korea, unsupervised contact between a Korean and a foreigner is utterly unthinkable, as unthinkable as shouting, "Down with Big Brother!"

"Yes," I replied.

"I am a student at the Foreign Languages Institute. Reading Dickens and Shakespeare is the greatest, the only pleasure of my life."

It was the most searing communication I have ever received in my life. We parted immediately afterward and of course will never meet again. For him, Dickens and Shakespeare (which the regime permitted him to read with quite other ends in view) guaranteed the possibility not just of freedom but of truly human life itself.

Orwell and Huxley had the imagination to understand why—unlike me, who had to go to Pyongyang to find out.