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Power and Control in *Brave New World* and *1984*

Molly Keisman

In reference to *Brave New World*, Brian Smith once wrote, “as one immediately discerns, the story is a satirical, though sincere, prognosis and sociopolitical warning: unless humans are careful, we might just permit political realities to emerge that redefine and fundamentally subvert what we consider human freedom and dignity to be” (349). Smith’s words ring quite true in regard to the dystopian genre as a whole. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984* are two of the most famous dystopian novels of all time and both, as Smith articulates, are sociopolitical warnings. Yet, they warn against two very different things. Neil Postman writes, “Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance...” (qtd. in Diken 156). Due to the contrast between these two men’s fears, the societies of *Brave New World* and *1984* are radically different. *Brave New World*’s World State is governed by ten world controllers and is comprised of stringent class distinctions enforced from the embryonic stage of life. Natural reproduction has been abolished, and embryos are raised in “hatcheries and conditioning centers” where they are bred to fit into their assigned caste. Consumption and consumerism are highly enforced, and people are encouraged to be as promiscuous as possible. The entire society is built upon maximum happiness, thus, any time negative emotion is felt, citizens take “soma,” a hallucinogenic drug. Contrastingly, the world of *1984* is ruled by a mysterious figure named “big brother,” and is in a perpetual state of war (or so

the government claims), the only classes are the inner party, outer party, and the proles who remain largely ignored. Sex, as well as all other forms of attachment or connection, is strictly prohibited, and citizens are monitored around the clock by telescreens that watch their every movement. In this paper, I will argue that both governments' strategies to hide reality from their citizens can be explained through the same philosophical, cultural and critical theories, yet the World State manipulates and controls in a subtler, more insidious way than does The Party in *1984* and, thus, has a stronger and more permanent grasp over its citizens.

To support this idea, I will be looking at the works of multiple theorists. First, I will analyze how the two societies employ Michel Foucault's theory of the Panopticon. Next, I will discuss how Jeffrey Cohen's monster theory connects to both societies' dehumanization of their ancestors. I will next look at Plato's ideas about representation posing as truth and how these societies employ tactics to conceal the truth from their citizens. After this, I will analyze how each government, in order to brainwash their citizens and maintain control, utilizes forms of teaching that closely resemble Paulo Freire's concept of banking education. Lastly, I will discuss the similarities between all these theories, how each government uses them differently, and why all this matters within the context of our own society.

The Panopticon

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault discusses Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a circular prison with a tower in the middle. The guards in the tower are able to watch the prisoners at all times, yet the prisoners are unable to verify whether or not they are being observed. This constant visibility leads to self-regulation, as prisoners have no idea when they're

being monitored (250). Foucault uses the Panopticon as an analogy for power in societies. This can certainly be applied to both *Brave New World* and *1984*.

In *Brave New World*, citizens are strongly dissuaded from ever spending time alone. While conversing with the Savage, a doctor tells him, “If our young people need distraction, they can get it at the feelies. We don’t encourage them to indulge in any solitary amusements” (163). The World State discourages solitude because it is a means to introspection and deeper thinking. Furthermore, it is difficult for the government to regulate people’s activities if they are by themselves. Thus, all solitary activities are forbidden and looked down upon with disgust. While talking about Bernard, Lenina’s friend Fanny even says with horror that people claim “he spends most of his time by himself—*alone*” (45). The World State’s abolishment of both the state of solitude and its enjoyment can be seen as an example of Panopticism. If people are forced to always be in the company of others, they will never commit heretical acts. This campaign against solitude is really a method in which the World State ensures permanent visibility of its citizens. The government knows that its citizens will monitor and regulate each other. Bernard becomes very conspicuous in his dissenting beliefs because his penchant for solitude has already drawn a great deal of attention to him.

In *1984*, The Party employs the Panopticon in a far more literal way. Telescreens (devices that function as both televisions and surveillance cameras) are placed in public establishments as well as the homes of all citizens, except for those of the non-threatening lowest class. The telescreens cannot be turned off—even when people are sleeping. Thus, citizens are in a constant state of surveillance just like that of the Panopticon prison. Winston contemplates, “it was terribly dangerous to let your thoughts wander when you were in any public place or within

range of a telescreen. The smallest thing could give you away. A nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety, a habit of muttering to yourself..." (62). The consistent presence of the telescreens makes it nearly impossible for citizens to commit any acts against the government. Later, when Winston finally gets up the courage to act on his beliefs, he has an unimaginably difficult time hiding his activities from the telescreens, leading us to even wonder if such dissent is even worth the effort and pain.

Therefore, the difference in these governments' applications of the Panopticon comes down to conspicuousness. Both governments effectively utilize Panopticism, yet in the World State, this is behind the scenes. Citizens believe that solitude is abhorrent, yet do not realize that this belief has been carefully constructed and imbued within them by their government. They take this sentiment to be their own and, therefore, fully embrace it. On the other hand, *1984*'s people are acutely aware of the telescreens and the purpose that they serve. It is significantly easier to discern governmental manipulation and control in this tactic simply because it is so much more obvious. In this way, the World State succeeds at a greater degree in its control of its citizens because they do not even realize that their aversion to solitude is their government's form of panoptic control.

Monster Theory

In *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Cohen discusses the significance of monsters, and how such monsters are intrinsically linked to the values, fears, and concerns of the cultures that create them. Cohen has seven different theses about these monsters. I will be focusing on his fourth thesis, entitled "The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference" (7). In this thesis, Cohen asserts

that cultures create monsters in order to discriminate against certain groups of people—the Other.

In *Brave New World*, the World State monsterizes its ancestors in order to garner and maintain support for its current way of life. Cohen writes, “Representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic” (7-8). The World State certainly does this. In one scene, the Controller explains to a group of students what older times were like. He says, “Maniacally, the mother brooded over her children...brooded over them like a cat over its kittens” (37) and goes on to say, “no wonder these poor pre-moderns were mad and wicked and miserable” (41). Just as Cohen claims, this government monsterizes and dehumanizes its ancestors in order to make them into the Other, and depict its current society as civil, therefore maintaining the support of its citizens. By alluding to previous generations as monstrous savages, through language like “maniacally” and “wicked,” the World State justifies this group’s defeat and lends support to the current system, which was necessitated by the failure of these “savages.” Thus, by representing their ancestors as monsters, the World State manages to seem like it is doing things right.

In *1984*, the Party dehumanizes its ancestors in a similar way. Winston remembers a section in his childhood textbook that attacked capitalism by monsterizing capitalists. Winston, recalling what his textbook claimed about capitalists, says, “everything existed for their benefit. You—the ordinary people, the workers—were their slaves... they could ship you off to Canada like cattle. They could sleep with your daughters if they chose” (90). The Party portrays capitalists as evil, impregnating people with this idea from an early age. By instilling fear and loathing in the citizens when it comes to the “bad” capitalists, the Party ensures that it will

continue to earn their support. Such ideas point a finger at the people, implying that they could be enslaved or attacked if capitalism was allowed to dominate once more.

This is another case in which the World State utilizes subtler and less harsh tactics to rule its citizens. The World State wants its denizens to be disgusted by their ancestors, even laugh at them and mock them. The Party wants its people to fear their ancestors. The World State brings to light its monsters to explain why life is better now. The Party uses its monsters to threaten its citizens—to tell them that capitalism is a danger to them all. In *Brave New World*, the monsters are an inconceivable joke. In *1984*, the Party wants its people to know that the monsters were very real, very serious, and, if people don't abide by society's rules, could come back to haunt them. It seems to me that the World State's method of monsterizing its ancestors is far more effective than that of the Party. A government best maintains control over its people by keeping them happy—not frightening them. The World State is able to explain to its people why their ancestors were monsters, but in a way that portrays them as clowns and ridicules them. These people become active participants in reveling in their ancestors' stupidity and foolishness. They take pleasure in reflecting on how civil and intelligent they are currently and think of their ancestors as an extinct breed, far in the past. Contrastingly, the Party seeks to frighten its citizens into submission. It wants to make sure that no one would ever consider capitalism over the party's politics. These people feel frightened when they think of the monsters in their country's closet. They feel no pleasure in thinking about the past in the way that citizens of the World State do because these monsters don't feel so removed from life now. The World State's people are clearly happier and more content than are the people in *1984*.

Plato's Theory on Representation

In *The Republic*, Plato writes, “When people tell us they’ve met someone who’s mastered every craft, and is the world’s leading expert in absolutely every branch of human knowledge, we should reply that they’re being rather silly. They seem to have met the kind of illusionist who’s expert at representation and, thanks to their own inability to evaluate knowledge, ignorance, and representation, to have been so thoroughly taken in as to believe in his omniscience” (67). I will be looking at how both the World State and the Party employ tactics to hinder their citizens’ abilities to evaluate knowledge, ignorance, and representation.

In *Brave New World*, the government and leaders like Mustapha Mond construct a society that functions smoothly and effortlessly through the careful brainwashing of its citizens who whole-heartedly believe in the system. The World State uses hypnopaedia (sleep teaching) to condition its citizens to believe certain things. For example, children that are in the Beta caste listen to this as they sleep at night: “Oh no, I don’t want to play with Delta children. And Epsilons are still worse. They’re too stupid to be able to read or write... I’m *so* glad I’m a Beta” (27). This is just one method that the government uses in order to prevent its citizens from evaluating the things around them. Because these ideas are instilled within them from such an early age, no one thinks to question them. Therefore, there is no reflection or analysis. The people do not stop to think about the arbitrary and unfair nature of their class system or the cruelty of its deliberate and enforced divisions. They also do not doubt its validity. No member of the beta class, for example, stops and thinks “why are epsilons so bad? Why is it good that I am a beta?” These people are taught to simply believe and not question. It is their inability to evaluate their situation (caused by years of mindless brainwashing) that allows the government

to continue its subtle and discrete oppression. Furthermore, whenever citizens feel any kind of discomfort (any emotion other than happiness) they are encouraged to take “soma,” a hallucinogenic drug. Soma further hinders their ability to evaluate knowledge, ignorance and representation. It simply transports them to another reality where they do not have to think about their problems or any kind of negative emotion they may feel. These people do not dwell on anything that is not positive, and therefore have learned to avoid thinking deeply about anything.

In *1984*, truth is manipulated in a far more literal, physical way. The Party alters and destroys newspapers, photographs, and all other evidence of the past in order to suit its agenda. The people have learned not to doubt anything the Party claims—if the Party says it, it must be true. In order to accommodate this constant changing of “the truth,” citizens use “doublethink.” This is the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs simultaneously and express whichever the Party requires you to believe at that given moment. Citizens forget any information that has become inconvenient or contradictory and acknowledge that there is no objective reality. Therefore, when the Party claims that Oceania is at war with Eurasia, when in fact, just yesterday it had claimed Oceania to be at war with Eastasia, the citizens are able to simply believe what is being told to them. Thus, in the context of *1984*, the government manipulates truth and the people are able to receive this manipulation without question as they have trained themselves mentally to do so. Therefore, the Party is expert at representation and the people are also completely unable to evaluate knowledge, truth, and reality. The Party has all the power.

The Party’s form of deception is far riskier than that of the World State. The Party alters reality in an extremely conspicuous, blatant manner, and relies on citizens’ effort to doublethink. The World State, however, employs a form of brainwashing that is far less noticeable—one that

occurs as its citizens sleep or acts as an escape from their problems. Once again, the Party imposes itself upon its people while the World State invites its citizens to believe that their ideas and beliefs are their own. Additionally, in *Brave New World*, the World State acts as a sort of savior for the people, providing them with soma, which they can use to escape pain. Therefore, the government assists and enables the peoples' ignorance. In both societies, the people are unable to evaluate the reality of their lives, yet in the World State truths remain constant and are firmly instilled within the individuals from childhood to adulthood. The Party, on the other hand, requires that its citizens constantly adapt to new truths. Therefore, the World State's methodology is sneakier, far less risky, and it earns the approval of its citizens by providing them with drugs.

The Banking Concept of Education

In *The Banking Concept of Education*, Paulo Freire discusses the traditional education system in which students passively receive information from their teachers. His term "the banking concept" is derived from the idea that education is an act in which teachers deposit information into their students who are containers or receptacles. Freire characterizes this type of education as passive and devoid of any real thought or analysis (244).

In *Brave New World*, the primary form of education is hypnopaedia, which I discussed earlier. This form of teaching is as passive and depository as they come, as its recipients are literally unconscious. Professors Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison conducted a study in 1991 about the meaning of active education. They write, "students must do more than just listen: They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems... Students must engage in

higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation” (5). This is exactly the type of education that the World State seeks to combat through hypnopaedia. Due to this form of education, citizens never learn to analyze, synthesize, or evaluate. They learn only statements and facts—no skills or helpful mindsets. The banking concept of education ensures that its recipients lack the ability to think critically. This, however, is clearly of great use to the World State. It doesn’t want its citizens to analyze their situations. It only wants that they be able to repeat, like robots, what their government tells them. Active education is the opposite of banking education—such a type of learning would send the World State crumbling to the ground.

In *1984*, the banking concept of education is used in a couple of ways. A great deal of emphasis is placed on slogans, which the citizens mindlessly repeat and internalize. The Party tells its citizens: “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.” These ideas are key to the Party’s control over the people. Furthermore, the party has certain ideas and methods of thinking that it simply expects the population to accept. Winston, for example, is unable to perform doublethink. At the end of the novel when he is being interrogated and tortured, O’Brien holds up four fingers and asks Winston how many he sees. Winston replies, claiming that he sees four fingers. O’Brien responds, “And if the party says that it is not four but five—then how many am I holding?” (249). When Winston once again replies, “four” he is given an electric shock. This is another example of the banking concept of education. The party expects that its citizens brainlessly absorb the information they are being presented with. Learning is not a discussion between two people but rather a demand of the passive acceptance of information. O’Brien, a man who embodies all of the party’s ideology and beliefs, cannot understand why Winston will not simply take in the information he is giving him. Winston literally cannot make himself

understand O'Brien, yet he is still expected to ingest and internalize what O'Brien is telling him. In this case, Winston and O'Brien are not equal partners. Instead, O'Brien has all the power and is attempting to fill Winston with the information that he believes Winston should know.

The World State and the Party both apply the banking concept of education however, the World State does so in a way that is more discreet and less invasive. Citizens in the World State never gain the ability to think. In terms of education, the World State is even more dystopian than the world of *1984*. In *1984*, we get the sense that people attended school at one point or another (Winston recalls his history textbook). In *Brave New World*, however, education is purely hypnopædia. People never learn how to discuss, analyze, synthesize, or problem-solve. Education involves no interaction. There are no books, no other students. It is a solitary and passive act. Therefore, the World State does a better job of applying the banking concept of education to its citizens. In turn, its citizens are even more mindless than those of Oceania, which is clearly the government's ultimate and primary goal.

Summation

By analyzing *Brave New World* and *1984*'s very different applications of Foucault's, Cohen's, Plato's, and Freire's theories, we can observe the two societies' difference in values and to what degree they succeed in controlling their citizens. Even though they draw their power from the same ideas, their societies are run extremely differently. The World State prioritizes happiness therefore, its tactics of control are subtle and seek to contribute to the people's happiness. For example, soma hinders awareness (allowing the government maximum power) but at the same time ensures happiness—the World State would never threaten its citizens'

happiness. The Party, on the other hand, prioritizes control. To achieve and maintain the level of control that it seeks, the Party employs far more overt measures. It is less concerned with pleasing its citizens and more focused on earning their submission and reliance. As a result of these governments' different motivations and priorities, they apply the aforementioned theories in contrasting ways. Both governments manage to gain control of their citizens, yet the Party is forceful, even when it attempts to be sly, and the World State is very focused on administering its control in a way that does not draw attention to itself. Therefore, the World State is more successful at controlling its citizens as they are largely unaware of the extent of its influence, and the government keeps them in a constant state of blissful ignorance, consequently ensuring their obedience.

Governments such as those of North Korea and Cuba are effortlessly reminiscent of The Party. Their extreme censorship, lack of freedom and manipulation of the media paint pictures of societies that are clearly not free. Comparing our government, however, to the World State or The Party is far more difficult. It is easy to look at these two different societies and criticize their people for being so mindless and oblivious, yet we may be more similar than we care to admit. Prevalent NSA surveillance is akin to telescreens. The destruction of language (through the creation of Newspeak) can be compared to the increasing popularity and dominance of texting abbreviations and lingo. The encouragement of soma use is disturbingly similar to our society's growing dependence on prescription drugs. Today's advanced Assisted Reproductive Technology calls to mind images of the World State's genetic engineering. Essentially, it is important to note that, despite our status as a wealthy, democratic country, we are subject to some of the same traits as these fictional dystopias we love to berate. The ways in which we are

controlled and oppressed are sneakier and more inconspicuous than the ways in which North Korea, Cuba, and similar countries are oppressed. However, that certainly does not mean that we are safer or that we are immune to the consequences suffered by the people of *Brave New World* and *1984*. As I argued in this paper, it is the secretive, camouflaged methods of control that are the most dangerous. We cannot act only once we have become Oceania or North Korea. It is imperative that we remain vigilant of our discreet oppression, and that we act in our defense before it is no longer discreet.

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