



Why Orwell matters

Description

Most people think that George Orwell was writing about, and against, totalitarianism – especially when they encounter him through the prism of his great dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

This view of Orwell is not wrong, but it can miss something. For Orwell was concerned above all about the particular threat posed by totalitarianism to words and language. He was concerned about the threat it posed to our ability to think and speak freely and truthfully. About the threat it posed to our freedom.

He saw, clearly and vividly, that to lose control of words is to lose control of meaning. That is what frightened him about the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia – these regimes wanted to control the very linguistic substance of thought itself.

And that is why Orwell continues to speak to us so powerfully today. Because words, language and meaning are under threat once more.

Totalitarianism in Orwell's time

The totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union represented something new and frightening for Orwell. Authoritarian dictatorships, in which power was wielded unaccountably and arbitrarily, had existed before, of course. But what made the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century different was the extent to which they demanded every individual's complete subservience to the state. They sought to abolish the very basis of individual freedom and autonomy. They wanted to use dictatorial powers to socially engineer the human soul itself, changing and shaping how people think and behave.

Totalitarian regimes set about breaking up clubs, trade unions and other voluntary associations. They were effectively dismantling those areas of social and political life in which people were able to freely and spontaneously associate. The spaces, that is, in which local and national culture develops free of the state and officialdom. These cultural spaces were always tremendously important to Orwell. As he

put it in his 1941 essay, [‘England Your England’](#): ‘All the culture that is most truly native centres round things which even when they are communal are not official – the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside and the “nice cup of tea”.’

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Totalitarianism may have reached its horrifying zenith in Nazi Germany and Stalin’s USSR. But Orwell was worried about its effect in the West, too. He was concerned about the Sovietisation of Europe through the increasingly prominent and powerful Stalinist Communist Parties. He was also worried about what he saw as Britain’s leftwing ‘Europeanised intelligentsia’, which, like the Communist Parties of Western Europe, seemed to worship state power, particularly in the supranational form of the USSR. And he was concerned above all about the emergence of the totalitarian mindset, and the attempt to re-engineer the deep structures of mind and feeling that lie at the heart of autonomy and liberty.

Orwell could see this mindset flourishing among Britain’s intellectual elite, from the eugenics and top-down socialism of Fabians, like Sidney and Beatrice Webb and HG Wells, to the broader technocratic impulses of the intelligentsia in general. They wanted to remake people ‘for their own good’, or for the benefit of the race or state power. They therefore saw it as desirable to force people to conform to certain prescribed behaviours and attitudes. This threatened the everyday freedom of people who wanted, as Orwell put it, ‘the liberty to have a home of your own, to do what you like in your spare time, to choose your own amusements instead of having them chosen for you from above’.



Edmond O'Brien as Winston Smith and Jan Sterling as Julia, in an adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 3 June 1955.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, this new intellectual elite started to gain ascendancy. It was effectively a clerisy – a cultural and ruling elite defined by its academic achievements. It had been forged through higher education and academia rather than through traditional forms of privilege and wealth, such as public schools.

Orwell was naturally predisposed against this emergent clerisy. He may have attended Eton, but that's where Orwell's education stopped. He was not part of the clerisy's world. He was not an academic writer, nor did he position himself as such. On the contrary, he saw himself as a popular writer, addressing a broad, non-university-educated audience.

Moreover, Orwell's antipathy towards this new elite type was long-standing. He had bristled against the rigidity and pomposity of imperial officialdom as a minor colonial police official in Burma between 1922 and 1927. And he had always battled against the top-down socialist great and good, and much of academia, too, who were often very much hand in glove with the Stalinised left.

The hostility was mutual. Indeed, it accounts for the disdain that many academics and their fellow travellers continue to display towards Orwell today.

The importance of words

Nowadays we are all too familiar with this university-educated ruling caste, and its desire to control words and meaning. Just think, for example, of the way in which our cultural and educational elites have turned 'fascism' from a historically specific phenomenon into a pejorative that has lost all meaning, to be used to describe anything from Brexit to Boris Johnson's Tory government – a process Orwell saw beginning with the Stalinist practice of calling Spanish democratic revolutionaries 'Trotsky-fascists' (which he documented in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938)).

Or think of the way in which our cultural and educational elites have transformed the very meanings of the words 'man' and 'woman', divesting them of any connection to biological reality. Orwell would not have been surprised by this development. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he shows how the totalitarian state and its intellectuals will try to suppress real facts, and even natural laws, if they diverge from their worldview. Through exerting power over ideas, they seek to shape reality. 'Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together in new shapes of your own choosing', says O'Brien, the sinister party intellectual. 'We control matter because we control the mind. Reality is inside the skull... You must get rid of these 19th-century ideas about the laws of nature.'

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the totalitarian regime tries to subject history to similar manipulation. As anti-hero Winston Smith tells his lover, Julia:

'Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right.'

As Orwell [wrote elsewhere](#), 'the historian believes that the past cannot be altered and that a correct knowledge of history is valuable as a matter of course. From the totalitarian point of view history is something to be created rather than learned.'

This totalitarian approach to history is dominant today, from the *New York Times*' 1619 Project to statue-toppling. History is something to be erased or conjured up or reshaped as a moral lesson for today. It is used to demonstrate the rectitude of the contemporary establishment.

But it is language that is central to Orwell's analysis of this form of intellectual manipulation and thought-control. Take 'Ingsoc', the philosophy that the regime follows and enforces through the linguistic system of Newspeak. Newspeak is more than mere censorship. It is an attempt to make certain ideas – freedom, autonomy and so on – actually unthinkable or impossible. It is an attempt to eliminate the very possibility of dissent (or 'thoughtcrime').

As Syme, who is working on a Newspeak dictionary, tells Winston Smith:

'The whole aim... is to narrow the range of thought. In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller... Has it ever occurred to you, Winston, that by the year 2050, at the very latest, not a single human being will be alive who could understand such a conversation as we are having now?'

The parallels between Orwell's nightmarish vision of totalitarianism and the totalitarian mindset of today, in which language is policed and controlled, should not be overstated. In the dystopia of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the project of eliminating freedom and dissent, as in Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia, was backed up by a brutal, murderous secret police. There is little of that in our societies today – people are not forcibly silenced or disappeared.

However, they are cancelled, pushed out of their jobs, and sometimes even arrested by the police for what amounts to thoughtcrime. And many more people simply self-censor out of fear of saying the 'wrong' thing. Orwell's concern that words could be erased or their meaning altered, and thought controlled, is not being realised in an openly dictatorial manner. No, it's being achieved through a creeping cultural and intellectual conformism.

The intellectual turn against freedom

But then that was always Orwell's worry – that intellectuals giving up on freedom would allow a Big Brother Britain to flourish. As he saw it in [The Prevention of Literature](#) (1946), the biggest danger to freedom of speech and thought came not from the threat of dictatorship (which was receding by then) but from intellectuals giving up on freedom, or worse, seeing it as an obstacle to the realisation of their worldview.

Interestingly, his concerns about an intellectual betrayal of freedom were reinforced by a 1944 meeting of the anti-censorship organisation, English PEN. Attending an event to mark the 300th anniversary of Milton's *Areopagitica*, Milton's famous 1644 speech making the case for the 'Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing', Orwell noted that many of the left-wing intellectuals present were unwilling to criticise Soviet

Russia or wartime censorship. Indeed, they had become profoundly indifferent or hostile to the question of political liberty and press freedom.

‘In England, the immediate enemies of truthfulness, and hence of freedom of thought, are the press lords, the film magnates, and the bureaucrats’, Orwell wrote, ‘but that on a long view the weakening of the desire for liberty among the intellectuals themselves is the most serious symptom of all’.

Orwell was concerned by the increasing popularity among influential left-wing intellectuals of ‘the much more tenable and dangerous proposition that freedom is undesirable and that intellectual honesty is a form of anti-social selfishness’. The exercise of freedom of speech and thought, the willingness to speak truth to power, was even then becoming seen as something to be frowned upon, a selfish, even elitist act.

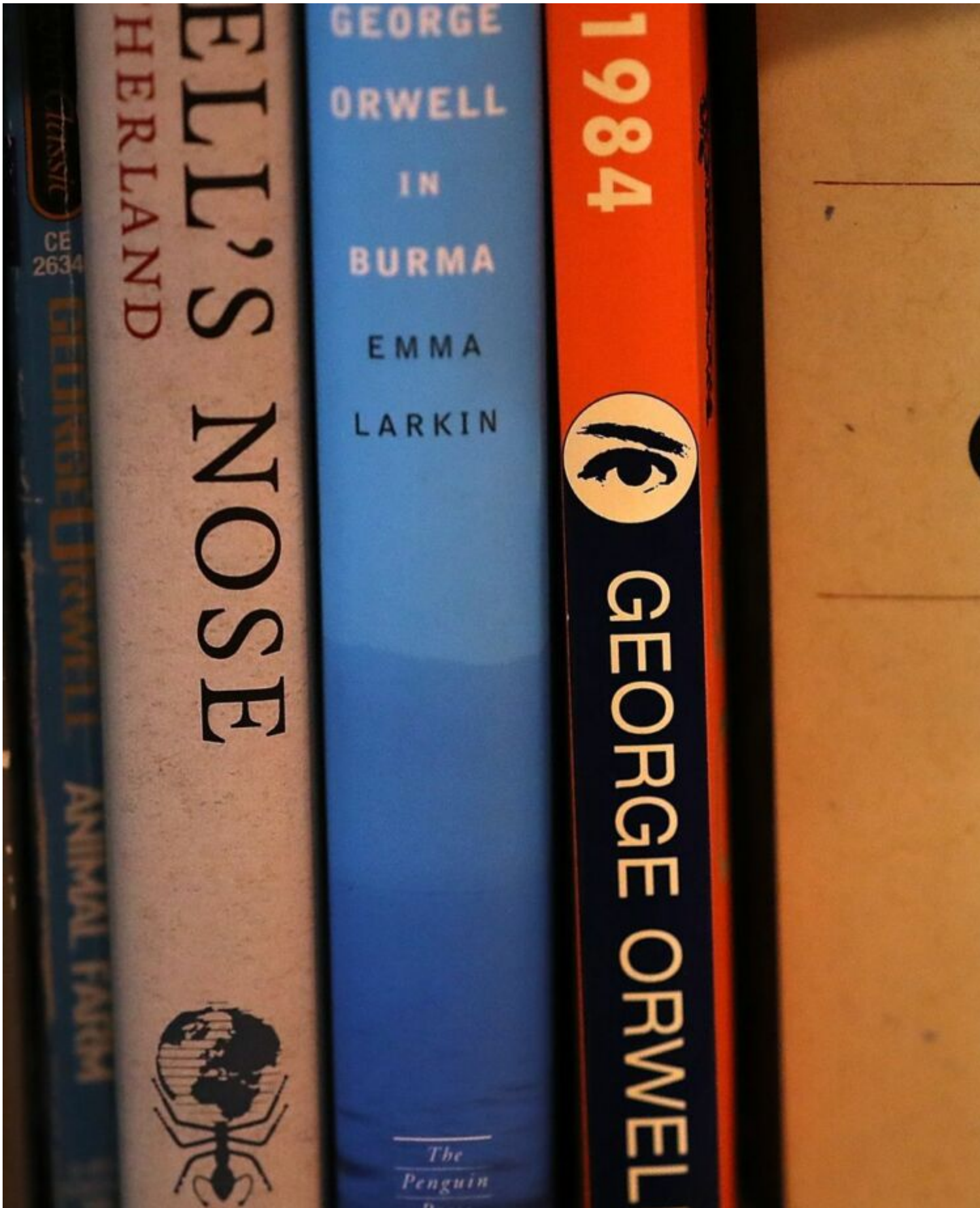
An individual speaking freely and honestly, wrote Orwell, is ‘accused of either wanting to shut himself up in an ivory tower, or of making an exhibitionist display of his own personality, or of resisting the inevitable current of history in an attempt to cling to unjustified privilege’.

These are insights which have stood the test of time. Just think of the imprecations against those who challenge the consensus. They are dismissed as ‘contrarians’ and accused of selfishly upsetting people.

And worst of all, think of the way free speech is damned as the right of the privileged. This is possibly one of the greatest lies of our age. Free speech does not support privilege. We all have the capacity to speak, write, think and argue. We might not, as individuals or small groups, have the platforms of a press baron or the BBC. But it is only through our freedom to speak freely that we can challenge those with greater power.

Orwell’s legacy

Orwell is everywhere today. He is taught in schools and his ideas and phrases are part of our common culture. But his value and importance to us lies in his defence of freedom, especially the freedom to speak and write.



His outstanding 1946 essay, 'Politics and the English Language', can actually be read as a freedom manual. It is a guide on how to use words and language to fight back.

Of course, it is attacked today as an expression of privilege and of bigotry. Author and commentator Will Self cited '[Politics and the English Language](#)' in a 2014 BBC Radio 4 show as proof that Orwell was an 'authoritarian elitist'. He said: 'Reading Orwell at his most lucid you can have the distinct impression he's saying these things, in precisely this way, because he knows that you – and you alone – are exactly the sort of person who's sufficiently intelligent to comprehend the very essence of what he's trying to communicate. It's this the mediocrity-loving English masses respond to – the talented dog-whistler calling them to chow down on a big bowl of conformity.'

Lionel Trilling, another writer and thinker, made a similar point to Self, but in a far more insightful, enlightening way. '[Orwell] liberates us', he wrote in 1952:

'He tells us that we can understand our political and social life merely by looking around us, he frees us from the need for the inside dope. He implies that our job is not to be intellectual, certainly not to be intellectual in this fashion or that, but merely to be intelligent according to our lights – he restores the old sense of the democracy of the mind, releasing us from the belief that the mind can work only in a technical, professional way and that it must work competitively. He has the effect of making us believe that we may become full members of the society of thinking men. That is why he is a figure for us.'

Orwell should be a figure for us, too – in our battle to restore the democracy of the mind and resist the totalitarian mindset of today. But this will require having the courage of our convictions and our words, as he so often did himself. As he put it in *The Prevention of Literature*, 'To write in plain vigorous language one has to think fearlessly'. That Orwell did precisely that was a testament to his belief in the public just as much as his belief in himself. He sets an example and a challenge to us all.

by Bruno Waterfield

Category

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