

The Repressive Governments of Zamiatin's We and Orwell's 1984

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Outline:

Thesis: Both Zamiatin's We and Orwell's 1984 have governments that repress actions and thoughts through the use of physical and psychological force.

- I. Intro.
- II. We's Government's Use of Psychological Force
 - A. Number system
 - B. Sexual Registration
- III. 1984's Governments Use of Psychological Force
 - A. Newspeak
 - B. Doublethink
- IV. Both Government's Use of Physical Force
 - A. Torture of Winston
 - B. Operation On Fancy
- V. Conclusion

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Throughout time, people have wondered what happens when government gains complete control not only over people's actions, but over the thoughts that precede them. Is it even possible to gain such omnipotence over human nature that human beings will renounce all individuality? If such a society could exist, would human nature truly be conquered, or just subdued sufficiently that the will of the few could be contorted into the will of the general population? The British author Eric Blair, better known by his pen name George Orwell, and the Russian born Eugene Zamiatin both attempt to address these questions in their respective books 1984 and We.

These novels depict, ". . . mechanized societies whose citizens are deprived of freedom through physical and psychological conditioning." (Bloom 17) The amazing thing about these civilizations is that the majority of the citizenry, at least publicly, applauds the government's totalitarian actions. Both Zamiatin's We and Orwell's 1984 have governments that repress thought and action through the use of physical and physiological force.

One of the most visible ways the government of the United State is able to control the thought and actions of its citizens is by the use and abuse of a system by which each member of society receives a number at birth instead of given a name (Goldstein 54). The numbers are assigned according to sex and occupation. For example, D-503, the main character in We, is male, and is thus assigned a consonant for his prefix while his female partner, O-90, is assigned a vowel. As D-503 is an engineer, he receives a 5 as his first number. All state poets such as O-90 have numbers under 100. (Zamiatin 46). This use of numbers instead of names creates a sense of unity and oneness of purpose in the contented, complacent Numbers of the United State. "The most striking thing about the Numbers' "names", is how easily they incorporate their assignment into their lives, and their contempt for the "old way" of naming." (Gregg 549)

The Numbers' numbers are sewn onto their tunics called "unifs", front and back in large enough print that anyone, ". . .up to one hundred meters away can read your Number from any direction." (Zamiatin 123) While there are some advantages to having your name known by everybody, such an innovation would completely rob one of any privacy they have. This deprivation of privacy, and how happy the people are about it, demonstrates exactly how the Well Doer is able to subtly take away other rights.

The most startling effect of the United State's control of all actions is their regulation governing the sexual act. "The United State, having mathematically conquered hunger, directed its attack against the second ruler of the world, against love." (Richards 547) The immortal Well Doer decreed over one thousand years prior to the current time of the novel that, "A Number may obtain a permit to use any other Number as a sexual product." (Zamiatin 22) This proclamation allowed any Number to file an application to enjoy the services of another without their knowledge or consent. The Number would receive a passbook by which he could visit the other Number and for fifteen minutes lower the curtains of his apartment.

The curtains normally stay wide open so that everyone can see inside at all times. Numbers are expected to watch each other for the most minute amount of impropriety, through the clear glass walls, floor, and ceiling of the apartments. Even this temporary lowering of the curtains doesn't completely conceal the activities of those inside. A closed circuit video recorder transmits every activity in every apartment to the Bureau of Guardians where it is watched constantly.

The purpose of this tyranny is to eliminate the human emotions of envy or jealousy that naturally arise from human sexual relations. (Richards 546) But by doing away with jealousy, love also is taken away, and thus the institution of marriage. The Numbers are free to pursue their lives free of any thought to the well being of a spouse or children while giving up the inherent need of companionship and relationships (Gregg 549). Replacing these vital establishments is the United State who orders the Numbers to accept of its substance and partake of its cold bureaucratic companionship.

In 1984, tyrannical government is exemplified by the mandated use of an altered form of the English language called Newspeak. As Orwell explains in his Appendix:

"The purpose of Newspeak is not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc (English Socialism), but to make all other modes of thought impossible." (246)

By limiting the choice of words available to a bare minimum, the language accomplishes its purpose of diminishing the range of human thought and expression. (Gardner 49). Big Brother's entire fictitious existence is devoted to the principle of thought reduction that Newspeak embodies. By eliminating even the possibility of thoughts considered heretical by Oceania, thoughtcrime becomes impossible by definition (Howe 32). The entire purpose of Newspeak is reduce the amount of thought possible by the citizenry thereby making it impossible to rebel against the indomitable, but fragile despotism.

The most noticeable way that Newspeak alters the public's perception of reality is through the use of an intentional distortion of truth known in Oceania as Doublethink. Doublethink, immortalized in phrases such as "War is Peace", "Freedom is Slavery", and "Ignorance is Strength", serves as a foundation upon which the government of Oceania can selectively change history and reality by convincing the population that history is what Oceania says it is (Bloom 147). "Even the names of the four Ministries by which they are governed exhibit a sort of impudence in their deliberate reversal of the facts. The Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war, the Ministry of Truth with lies, the Ministry of Love with torture, and the Ministry of Plenty with starvation. These contradictions are not accidental, nor do they result from ordinary hypocrisy: they are deliberate exercises in doublethink." (Orwell 178)

By using obvious contradictions the government can hold power indefinitely because the only state of mind conceivable in such an environment is insanity, and exclusively by controlled mass insanity can the power of the few can be maintained (Lief 267).

Although all conceivable attempts at control are made, some people, either through their own questioning of authority, or prompting by an external source, will try to exceed the boundaries of law and order (Crick 283). One such citizen is Winston Smith, the main character in 1984. When limitations are ignored by a

citizen in a totalitarianism, action must be taken by the government to restore order not only to the offender's actions, but to his thought process. When Winston is arrested for his treasonous behavior, he first goes to a Ministry of Love holding cell. After being held without food for several days he is severely beaten to the point of death many times. He admits to hundreds of crimes everyday simply to make the pain of the beating go away.

Then his battered body is taken to the dreaded Room 101. He is attached to a machine whereby pain is administered by means of electrical shock. Four fingers are held in front of him and he is asked how many fingers are held up. He responds, "Four." Pain racks his body. He is shocked until his joints pop out of socket from muscle tension and spasms.

You are a slow learner, Winston," said O'Brian gently.

"How can I help it," he blubbered. "How can I help what is in front of my eyes? Two and two are four."

"Sometimes Winston. Sometimes they are five. Sometimes they are three. Sometimes they are all of them at once. You must try harder. It is not easy to become sane." (Orwell 207)

By torturing his body, the government, personified by O'Brian, is actually able to change his entire conception of number theory. This example of power over Winston, exemplifies the basis for Oceania's government, that true power is power over human beings (Rees 54).

In *We* this power over humanity is ultimately achieved not by physical conditioning, but rather by surgical operation. The state newspaper describing the procedure reads:

". . .there in paradise they know no desires any longer, no pity, no love; there they are all blessed. An operation has been performed on their center of fancy; that is why they are blessed angels, servants of God [the Well-Doer]." (Zamiatin 167)

The government of the United State isn't confident enough in it's own precepts and principles that it is forced to rely upon a surgical procedure to exert control over its Numbers. It isn't enough to torture them into submission, or schedule every second of time for them on the table of hours, it isn't enough to have them convinced that their leader was the creator of the Universe or have them live in transparent homes. It is necessary to turn the population into an army of human robots. A mechanized force of drones is required to carry out orders without thought or pause, simply because if thought and imagination aren't medically terminated then the United State would lose it's workers, and thus power.

Although these worlds of oppressive governments that torture their own citizens may seem distant and detached from our perception of reality, how close really are we? Like in *We*, many people live and die by their schedules which must be followed to the most minute detail. During World War II, our own government, the supposed bastion of freedom, detained thousands of Japanese-American citizens simply because their parents were born in the wrong country. Americans are required to have We-like Social Security numbers which allows "our" I.R.S. to track our money to make sure we're "contributing" our fair share of taxes. Orwell himself summed up the feelings many Americans have about their government in a disclaimer published after publication of 1984:

"My recent novel [1984] is not intended as an attack on Socialism or the British Labor Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have been realized in Communism and Fascism. I don't believe that the society I describe necessarily will arrive, but I believe that something resembling it could arrive." (Gardner 82)

While practically no one wants to think about the possibility of totalitarianism in our country, it is something with which our country must deal. One can only have supreme faith in the triumph of human nature, with all its flaws and imperfections, over the evil forces of those who would subject us to their will for personal gain.

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