

Giant Economy Size BROTHER<sub>o</sub>

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Good News From The Free World

According to a Gallup Poll published in February of 1984, few people in Western countries believe that the "grim visions" of Orwell's book "have come true." In a survey taken in six nations, most of his "predictions" were judged not to have become reality. At one extreme are the Germans and Swiss, who see little evidence of Orwellian conditions, while a bit more is noticed by the Americans, Canadians, and British. Perhaps not surprisingly, Brazillians are capable of perceiving some signs of the existence of the authoritarian state, but even they are divided on the question of whether such developments have progressed very far. In all countries, the greatest concerns expressed were that government officials achieve luxury at the expense of the majority, and that government snooping threatens personal privacy—hardly an exoression of belief that the Totalitarian Nightmare has become reality, or that it is imminent.

The most interesting questions posed in the survey refer to conditions that do, without ambiguity, prevail today. Asked whether the government "uses false words and statistics to hide bad news about the economy and quality of life," only 40% of the Americans, 53% of Canadians, and 57% of the British expressed their awareness of these practices. A mere 12% of the Germans and 13% of the Swiss maintain this minimal contact with reality. Another telling question asked whether "the government urges people to surrender freedom in order to gain greater security." Given that every government requires people to surrender freedom in exchange for its brand of "security," a failure to respond positively indicates a remarkable ideological blindness. Yet with the

exception of Brazil's 35% (itself astoundingly low), the percentage of people expressing agreement was miniscule (ranging from 6% in Switzerland to 12% in Canada).

Despite all the recent discussion of "1984" and its dangers, if one listens to the public it becomes apparent that there is manifestly a great deal of complacency in the face of a considerable loss of freedom in the contemporary world. Or, this seems to be the case if one looks at people's literal responses. Perhaps the failure to get the correct "Orwellian" answers results from the fact that the major constraints on liberty have not occurred in the classic Orwellian manner.

#### 1984 Vs. 1984

While some may lament the recent "misuse" of Orwell's novel in the service of anti-communism, this criticism is misdirected. The inspiration for the work is, above all, Stalinism, and it depicts brilliantly the monstrous character of the totalitarian "socialist" state. Attempts to project the Orwellian model on Western societies, so that virtually everything today takes on an "Orwellian" coloring, are doomed to fatuity. Of course, the West has something to learn from 1984—it is a great work of literature and helps illumine important realms of human existence. Yet its author makes no attempt to show any universally-fated course of development for all modern societies. Big Brother is a striking symbol of authoritarian rule. Yet he should not be taken as the image of unfreedom in the contemporary Western world. For in fact that world has another despot who is at present a more formidable foe, and who should be feared with greater intensity. In the consumer society—the dominant form of "advanced" society—our Brother is a much more agreeable fellow than was Orwell's.\* It is the commodity that rules above

all other tyrants (and there are others in our Oligarchy). In 1984 people could be driven to love Big Brother by the occasional frenzy of orgiastic political rituals. In difficult cases they could be tortured into love. In 1984 (the real one), our Brother has no difficulty in capturing our affection. He is with us always as the ubiquitous object of desire.

The Contemporary Relevance of 1984  
today

The principal relevance of 1984 can be summarized in one word: "\$\$\$\$." Anyone with any serious interest in the socio-political implications of the book has been studying such issues for some time. One did not have to wait for the magic year to arrive in order to explore its profundities. Ninety-nine percent of the academics who squeeze each word of the book dry of every ounce of portentousness have never conceded even a single grudging footnote to Orwell's magnificent political classic Homage To Catalonia. But now the word "Orwell" will be immortalized in thousands of résumés.

In the real world the exploitation is even more blatant. According to John Hurt, star of the latest film version of 1984, "We're moving closer to what it describes." His evidence for this momentous conclusion is far from astounding. "Look," he says, "at the bickering between East and West." (N.B.—in the book the Superpowers were in a state of constant war, so perhaps all can be subsumed under the more general rubric of "bickering"). It matters little whether we are overwhelmed by this tour de force of historical analysis. The point is to talk Orwell, talk 1984, talk Big Brother.

As Hurt remarks acutely, "Orwell is a hot topic."

Needless to say, advertising itself has not failed to make use of "1984" themes in order both to sell products and to promote the ideology of free choice (for as we were told as early as 1970 by Toffler in Future Shock, the problem today is not lack of choice, but rather the dilemmas of "overchoice" in the affluent society).

An exquisite example of "1984" marketing comes from "United Technologies," who tell us that "Orwell was wrong about technology. Technology has not enslaved us. It has freed us." Orwell overlooked technological progress--in particular, the fact that large, expensive computers would give way to small, accessible machines. He knew nothing of The Chip, which has "made the computer so widespread" that it "removes the fears coming from Orwell's belief that the power of the computer would rest exclusively in the hands of an elite few."

Readers of the book will notice that this is a "belief" of which the "believer" himself was not aware. For in 1984, information was concentrated not in computers, but rather in "vast repositories where the corrected documents were stored." Yet Orwell must hold this "belief" about computers, since the point of the ad is to show that he was wrong. "The electronic <sup>the</sup> chip has put/power of the computer at the fingertips of anyone who wants to expand the scope and clarity of his thinking."

What is suppressed in this paean to the machine is the vast dimension of unfreedom entailed in such technological development: the workers who must adapt to the computer whatever their "wants" or desires, and no matter how much it routinizes their labor; the students who are compelled to learn to use it by the dictates of school authorities; the unconsciously chosen effects of the technology in reducing the "scope and clarity of thinking." Perhaps above all, this technology threatens autonomy by incorporating people into the technological system as information consumers (and very few are information creators!). Like Orwell's telescreen, the computer cannot be an effective means of control to the extent that it is monopolized by a few. The "network" must cast its net as broadly as possible in order to maximize integration into the system.

"United Technologies" indeed!

An even more blatant exploitation of the "1984" theme is Apple Computers' celebrated ad. In this brief but evocative drama, masses of zombies sit hypnotized before a giant telescreen, immobilized by the dominating image of Big Brother. Suddenly a woman rushes down the center aisle brandishing a sledge hammer. In a spectacular Olympian gesture of anti-authoritarianism she hurls the hammer across the hall and smashes the screen. The message: We are out of the grip of Big Brother.... "Apple Computers."

But why "Apple Computers?" A translation for the literal-minded. The "big names," like IBM, stand for big power, for manipulation and control. The Apple stands for the little guy, for "small is beautiful," for individual freedom. The images of Big Brother and the rebelling individual are thus appropriate. They represent the small and independent entrepreneur against the corporate giant, and personalized technology in opposition to totalitarian megamachines. Whether the company is really more David- than Goliath-like, whether the machines are really warm and cuddly, is irrelevant. We are given two good symbolic reasons to buy an Apple.

Other symbolic connections are, however, to be avoided. While United Technologies argues <sup>that the computer offers</sup> us new levels of knowledge, we are presumably not to associate the byte of the Apple with Original Sin and the Fall from Paradise, an event occasioned by a similar promise.

"Who Needs The Thought Police?" Or "What's On Tonight?"

Oceania, the society of 1984 is, in a sense, the direct antithesis of the consumer society of today. It is a society of material scarcity which maintains this condition, not through the ceaseless expansion of demands and desires, but through the planned limitation of supply. The populace is kept dependent by the necessity of abject reliance on the state for basic necessities, and either through the perpetual maintenance of a condition of terror (in the case of the Outer Party), or one of ignorance and disorganization

(in the case of the proles). The unsophisticated nature of its social conditioning makes it not surprising that the state would have to resort to terror to maintain order among the party members. And considering the abysmal standard of living provided to the second-class elite, one suspects that it is not only our hero, Winston, but most of his coworkers who also yearn to slit B.B.'s throat.

The ineptness of the rulers is illustrated best by their naive use of the telescreen. It serves primarily as a means of surveillance. While people do watch it, they are controlled not so much by their obsessive attachment to it as by their fear that it is constantly watching them. The big hit of every season is "The Hate," a repetitive miniseries which momentarily arouses malevolent passions in this passionless society. The state seems never to have discovered the potential of electronic media for control through positive feelings of attachment and dependence. In fact, the proles, who correspond most closely to the masses of today, are not even required to possess telescreens. As "Mr. Charrington" is able to comment, "I never had one of those things. Too expensive."

B.B., you blew it! The proles definitely revolted in 1985. No doubt they got pissed off after a bad football match, rampaged through the streets, and slaughtered the entire Inner Party so they could drink wine, not vile Victory Gin, for one delirious night.

In 1984 control is much more effective. The typical American family exercises its freedom of choice by watching over seven hours of television per day, as of 1983. While it took 15 years for viewing to increase from five to six hours, the next increment of an hour took but 11 years. If viewing continues to accelerate at this rate, it will reach 24 hours per day well before the middle of the next century, causing difficulties for other popular activities, like working and shopping.

So effectively have TV images invaded the collective consciousness that characters take on a supernatural, paradigmatic quality. While children were once named after favorite saints, admired historical figures, or beloved relatives, the preferred models are now soap-opera stars. The naming of children has always been a revealing ritual in every culture, showing the society's most deeply-held values and aspirations. Apparently, today's parents desire their daughters to partake of the essential qualities of "Heather" and "Monika" of General Hospital and "Tara" of All My Children.

Media images expand their dominance into every sphere of existence, as the culture of consumption generates a morbid dialectic of dehumanization. On the one hand, it drains life from organic culture and from the person by its substitution of prefabricated images for elaborated forms of life. It creates as the end of all its manipulations a spectral non-person, an Untermensch of pure externality, a being defined by image and "life style." On the other hand, it appropriates this very being in its perfection and presents it to the consumer as an idealized image of the present.

Examples of such media heroes are abundant --their number is legion. Perhaps the most appealingly grotesque is rock music star Billy Idol. As his name indicates, he is a demigod, both man (the mundane "Billy") and deity (object of worship--"Idol"), thus allowing both identification with a personality and proper awe in the face of the spectacular. As usual, the imagination reveals more than reason intends, for everyone (presumably even rock fans) knows that an idol is a false god. Thus the manifest intention of the ritual is both to worship and to identify with the false. Even more obvious is the significance of "idol" as "image." There is then an ironic progression from the human("Billy") to its negation by the pure image ("Idol").

The content of the image is no less revealing, for we find in Mr. Idol's presentations a vision of violence, necrophelia, and total alienation. In

his video "Dancing With Myself," our hero is left alone in a completely solipsistic world. The only other semi-human images presented are hordes of mangled, decaying creatures attempting to invade his (presumably post-holocaust) citadel, and the silhouette (even more radically diminished image) of a naked, chained woman. In "White Wedding" he brutally forces a wedding ring onto his bride's finger, causing her to bleed. Not surprisingly, Mr. Idol has been attacked for his demeaning depiction of women in his pursuit of striking images. His response to criticism is that his intention is merely to depict the exploitation of women. Presumably we are to make the civil libertarian judgment that "depictions" can only edify and enlighten, rather than corrupt and demoralize, the viewer.

While it is the modus operandi of electronic media to commodify culture, the music video is perhaps the genre which is most advanced in perfecting this process. All values, social, political, moral, or spiritual, are a suitable resource for the creation of stylized images and superficial themes. What was once done with perhaps greatest sophistication in fashion photography is now accomplished with vastly expanded impact on consciousness in videos.

Several have / <sup>recently</sup> taken up the theme of "revolution." China is a popular subject-matter, since it offers the powerful image of flowing red flags and exotic characters. The choicest travesty is, however, Duran-Duran's "New Moon on Monday," which takes place in some Communist-looking mystery country. The singers parade around as revolutionaries against the authoritarian state, giving out leaflets, carrying torches, and singing incomprehensible, but no doubt profoundly symbolic lyrics. The authorities call out the troops, but these menacing characters are so intimidated by the growing "movement" that they scatter without a fight. One Duran seems more confused than the next by the entire chain of events. But what matter? The song is a super-hit and the revolution does not need coherence in order to be an effective



choreographic backdrop.

### What Is "Truth?"

One of Orwell's most powerful insights is his understanding of the breakdown of the concept of objective truth. It would have been entirely natural to present the leaders of the Inner Party as ideological fanatics who are unconditionally committed to their beliefs and prejudices. By avoiding this option, he made it possible to present them as much more authentic representatives of modern nihilism (and, as Nietzsche pointed out, the modern state is one of history's preeminent expressions of nihilistic will to power). They exhibit in its most extreme form the decomposition of all ideals of truth, justice, and goodness. As O'Brien states, "Reality exists in the human mind and nowhere else." Accordingly, "nothing exists except through human consciousness." All barriers to triumphant subjectivity are eliminated. The ego can therefore assert itself without moral or metaphysical limitation.

The abolition of objective truth, in the sense of objective value, is a premise not only of the authoritarian society in which might makes right, but also of the consumptionist society, in which the image must be right. The only "objective" world becomes the world of "facts," of "brute matter," and of the processes of production and material transformation--the realm of "necessity," as it has been called. Meaning and value reside in an entirely different sphere, the realm of the relative and subjective. Subjectivity is thus banished from nature, and objectivity from the human spirit.

But objective value does not truly disappear. Rather it is retained in a completely alienated form. For the sphere of production includes not only mere material objects, but also commodity-images imbued with intensely experienced value. In so far as these images take on the illusion of objective reality and gain power over the subject, objective value remains in existence, but in an entirely opaque, mystified form. The fetishism of commodities

thereby permits the simultaneous disintegration of authentic objective values and domination by illusory objective values.

### The Land of Spam

If one were pressed to find a single image for the society of commodity consumption, perhaps the most felicitous choice would be Spam. Spam succeeds in embodying at once the productivist power of material transformation and the consumptionist power of imagination. It is the ultimate symbol of the transformation of natural substance and qualities into artificial material with a fabricated image. So thorough has been its metamorphosis that consumers surveyed have difficulty speculating as to its makeup. No one really knows what it is. It is the closest thing to generic "food," and might easily be taken to be the materia prima of the entire universe. As Thales (not to be confused with any computer language THALES) might say, "All is Spam."

Yet it is, in fact, real animal protoplasm that has been transformed into the commodity "Spam." But while Spam arose from the destruction of living animals, it has in turn itself generated its own non-living animal image, "The Spam Animal." This is an image created by the Hormel Company to be loved by consumers, who can then transfer their affection to the product itself. Unfortunately, however, dangers lurk in this seemingly innocuous concept. For as a company executive noted, "If we put too much emphasis on the Spam animal, people will be afraid that we kill it and put it in the can."

Interestingly, there is no anxiety about the possibility that Hormel Co. might be killing actual, real-world animals to put them in cans. For not being familiar commodities, these creatures have no place in the consumptionist universe. (Urban children grow up unaware of the fact that meat comes from animals, rather than factories, and the truth never really sinks in).

In the Free Market of Ideas one is not likely to hear "messages" like

"Mommy, can I have another glob of reconstituted pigflesh?" "Why, of course, Jason, dear, and wash it down with a big glass of Kemical Kola!" No, the only realistic fear in such a world is that the poor imaginary Spam animal might be put back into the very product that generated it (sent like a Spam to the slaughter, as it were).

But the dialectic of delusion moves one brilliant step forward. Our executive asks, "Remember the 'Pet Rock?'" Of course, we remember, but if not we can always be reminded, for in the universe of images nothing is ever lost. In 1984 the past was obliterated. In 1984 everything goes into the memory banks, since all is potential capital.

The Pet Rock was a pet that was not a pet. Its development is instructive. First moment: Irony of a thing lacking all the qualities that make it what it is. Latent signification: the inorganic quality of our world—a petrified pet for plastic people. Second moment: Humor of treating a rock like a pet. The rough edges of this rock are rounded off, an absurdity domesticated as a conversation piece. Third moment: Herd-Instinct, as the good consumer acquires whatever is seen or talked about. A new contribution to the Gross National Garbage.

How can some elements of this classic fad be recycled for the greater glory of Spam? "We will create a cage for the Spam Animal!" suggests our creative marketing executive. The cage will, of course, be empty. The logic is unimpeachable: If the Spam Animal is not in the cage, it cannot be thought of as being slaughtered and put in the can. One can thus safely show ones allegiance to Span (product loyalty) by exhibiting in ones home the absence of the imaginary Spam animal.

Lest anyone doubt the persistence of Mind in the land of images, this quadruple negation (which puts to shame the pitiable double negations of ancient dialecticians) is one which can be comprehended by any child today.

While it is true that some types of rationality atrophy in consumer society, it is equally true that others flourish extravagantly.

No Orwellian world, this! When confronted with the cage for the non-animal, the Orwellian newspeaker would be speechless, or at best might mutter "Where's the animal?" Today's newthinker recognizes immediately that the cage is not designed for animals.

### Sex In The Ruins

In Oceania a traditional productivist view of sexuality and reproduction prevails, at least for the party members. Sex is/for the production of offspring, and is assimilated into the sphere of duty to the state. Desire and pleasure are stigmatized as subversive of the regimentation on which the system depends. Sexual repression performs the important function of capturing instinctual energy, which can then be channeled into authoritarian political hysteria. The process roughly follows Reich's analysis in The Mass Psychology of Fascism. In view of the political nature of repression, desired sexual activity becomes an act of rebellion against the state.

The limitations of this theory of repression and its negation were long ago demonstrated in Marcuse's analysis of repressive desublimation. If sexual expression can be redirected according to the requirements of commodity consumption, sexuality can be effectively neutralized as a subversive force. This is what has, in fact, occurred in contemporary society, though to a degree unimagined in Marcuse's discussion. Such a solution is hinted at by Orwell, in so far as the proles are controlled in part by the availability of pornography, prostitution, etc. Yet it is not clear precisely how these controls operate. Presumably, they perform an entirely negative function—draining off instinctual energy which in their case is not manipulated politically. But the possibility of using the instincts to better integrate the populace into the system of power is not explored.

In the society of consumption, on the other hand, no resource is left unexploited in the pursuit of capital accumulation. Businessmen can charge the services of prostitutes to their Visa or MasterCard, customers of sexually explicit telephone messages are billed automatically, swingers magazines can cater profitably to a lower-middle class Republican clientele, and Playboy, Penthouse and their ilk have long been established as respectable Big Business.

On the level of the individual there is also an imperative demanding the exploitation of sexuality. "Sex appeal" is essential for the successful marketing of ones personality, "image," and "successful life style." In the world of commodities the self becomes a commodity, and the body becomes highly valued capital. Accumulation of sex appeal requires investment in health clubs, exercise equipment, Jane Fonda workout books, plastic surgery, cosmetics, and a variety of sports and diet doctors. In 1984 Winston looked around the canteen of the Ministry of Truth, and was shocked that everyone was so ugly. In 1984 the society of consumption requires beautiful people. To project the correct image, one must possess the right "assets"—calculable in qualities of calf, biceps, thigh, waste, etc. And having developed these qualities, the good consumer can then buy some "designer band-aids" (only "three for 99¢!") These ingenuous commodities are designed not to "aid" in healing cuts and scratches, but rather to "aid" in drawing attentions to ones most well-developed body parts. The Body Politic may be sick, but the Body/  
Economic thrives!

#### Crimes Against Nurture

In the authoritarian society of 1984 the production of children is an obligation to the state, and youth are subjected to rigid discipline and control (membership in the Spies, for example). In the consumptionist society the very production of offspring conflicts increasingly with the "independent life-style" (read: dependence on maximized commodity consumption) that is the ideal self-image. The result is a decline in the birth rate, except among

the most backward and uneducated, and a tendency to "warehouse" both the very young and the very old in the most efficient, cost-effective manner, resulting in minimal interference with productive and consumptive activity.

The long-term effects of the consignment of young children to commercial day-care centers can only be speculated upon. Presumably, the displacement of much of early-childhood experience from the family to a more depersonalized milieu will have far-reaching implications for the evolution of character-structure. While the decline of the intense relationships of the nuclear family may signal the obsolescence of the patriarchal, authoritarian conditioning excoriated by Reich, it may also mean the decomposition of the developed, complex personality which flowered (however faded the flower may often have been) in the bourgeois epoch.

An index of the callousness of consumer society is the extent of mistreatment--ranging from indifference to needs to cruel and abusive acts--prevailing in institutions like day-care centers. The extreme of ill treatment that can be reached is indicated by the recent, widely-publicized case in Southern California (that Oasis of the Bizarre) in which over 100 children were molested by their caretakers over a period of years. The children were abused in multifarious ways, including being sodomized and used for making pornographic films. Presumably, having exhausted the means of exploiting the children on the premises, the ingenuous entrepreneurs offered their adult clients kiddies to-go, taking the children to "health clubs" for the sexual use of customers. The parents of the children involved had no suspicion that any such activities took place, and few seemed disturbed by a regulation that they not visit the center during the day.

While widely condemned, such an enterprise is a model of the capitalist virtue of maximum exploitation of resources, for it permits: 1) the parents to carry on their functions as commodity-producers and consumers, unhampered

by familial demands; 2) children to begin their lives as commodity consumers by using day-care services; and 3) children to be recycled as sexual commodities as they consume, thus allowing a triple contribution to the GNP.

Politics, The Opiate Of The Masses;

Or, Hart Of A Heartless World

In Oceania, politics was abolished. In the consumer society politics as authentic participation in civic life is virtually non-existent; yet, the political is retained as an important element of the legitimating process. While the public has long had a dim awareness of the nature of the game, and cynicism continually erodes whatever political faith persists, people still cling tenuously to some remnants of the political illusion.

While the masses' true loyalty is to the commodity and not to the political system, every four years the American state—much like its counterparts elsewhere—takes a new stab at mending its fractured legitimacy. The means, needless to say, is the marketing of a fresh crop of politicians as new, improved commodities. The latest Grade A product offered to the political consumer is Gary Hart. It is well known that Sen. Hart has attempted to recycle several aspects of the JFK image with moderate success mystique-wise. What is less known is his excellent pedigree of generations of image-consciousness. The Senator's surname originally derived from the family name "Eberhart Penz." This alien, Germanic patronymic was wisely Americanized into the more acceptable "Hartpence." But this was still a somewhat unusual denomination. It remained for Gary himself to take the decisive third step, reducing it to "Hart," a name evoking both a noble beast and the seat of all benevolence within the human person.

It is fitting that someone possessing such originality should base his appeal on his commitment to "new ideas." Sen. Hart assures the public that he has them, and many Hart fans do indeed report that they support him because of these very ideas. His opponents (especially Mr. Mondale, who

represents "the traditional Democratic coalition," an old, worn-out, but still useful idea) have not failed to point out that he has yet to reveal the precise content of the ideas, or explain in what sense they are "new." Yet this only shows their hopeless confusion concerning the electoral process (or would, if their "analysis" were anything other than the counter-image that it is). Sen. Hart's "new ideas" in no way signify that he actually possesses specific concepts in his mind that are in some way novel. Rather, they signify that he is to have the image of "a person having new ideas"--the question of their existence is at best irrelevant. In fact, the disclosure of truly innovative concepts might make the candidate threatening to large segments of the populace, and would certainly complicate and hinder the process of selling him as a generally consumable product.

#### Do Images Have Standing?

As political institutions are ever more perfectly absorbed into the spectacle of commodity-consumption, "justice" has its turn to become a media commodity. While courtroom drama has been a media staple since Perry Mason, the exploitation of this theme reached new heights with the introduction of authentic courtroom testimony in the New Bedford "Barroom Gang-Rape Trial." Cable News Network, which presented hour after hour of detailed testimony concerning the rape, solemnly defended its decision to do so, on grounds that it was important to inform the public about this crucial issue. In other words, CNN will present anything, no matter how lurid and fascinating, no matter how positive the effect on ratings, so long as it promotes the cause of Good Citizenship.

This profaning of the sacred judiciary did not go uncriticized, albeit confusedly. A professor from the prestigious Annenberg School of Communications proclaimed such phenomena "show trials," and likened them to practices in



Stalinist Russia, China, and Iran. Yet this particular Orwellian allusion is misplaced, for the traditional authoritarian function of the cases mentioned is confounded with the consumptionist function of media trials today. The professor confuses the "show trial" of the past with the "trial show" of today.

If TV trials present us with the image of justice, we are now faced with the even stranger possibility of justice for images. For images have become so central to contemporary society that they may soon earn entitlement to protection by the judicial system. The image raising this question is found at the "Cadillac Ranch" in Texas, where 10 Cadillacs are buried in a vertical position with their tailfins protruding into the air. The three creators of this valuable image have sued the "Hard Rock Cafe" of Hollywood, California for \$1.5 million for having a 1959 Cadillac protruding from the Cafe's roof. The heinous crime committed by the Cafe operators is "image appropriation," a serious offense in a society in which images are among the most highly valued properties.

Image-rustlers beware! The folks from the Ranch will give you your come-uppance.

#### Decadence Hits Workers' Paradise

While consumptionist values are firmly established in Western societies, they increasingly infect the "Eastern bloc" also as production continues to climb and Western influences maintain their slow but continuous process of infiltration. Symbolic of this historic tendency is the introduction of high fashion modelling in Moscow. Recently, the elite of the state capitalist regime sat back and enjoyed their Vodka Colas, as they were treated to the same parade of ghostly figures that one is accustomed to seeing in New York, Paris, or Milan. While the models went through the same mechanical posturing as do their Western counterparts, the themes differed somewhat. While in New York one can see expensive characatures of, for example, the Ecuadoran peasant,

the Astronaut, or (irony of ironies!) the Bag Lady, the Muscovites were served their own unique brand of cultural vampirism. The big hit of the show followed a Socialist theme: Not Proletarian Realism, however, but rather stylish, and highly stylized outfits based on the Great October Revolution. While it is no secret that the Revolution has long been dead in Russia, such an event indicates a surprising degree of ideological disintegration, and suggests unexpected advancement toward the general substitution of consumptionist values for authoritarian ones.

The People's Republic of China has been no more successful in preventing the return of the repressed commodity. It is no secret that/post-Mao regime is making a concerted effort to incorporate into the socialist system all the advances of Western technological society. Presumably "economics in command" will lead to rapid commodification of the culture. Already the state has begun to build luxury condominiums near Hong Kong, so that rich capitalist executives can commute between the People's Republic and the sweatshops in which they oppress the toiling masses. While this apparent sin against socialist morality can no doubt be explained away in the name of the exigencies of socialist development, the true and mortal sin is the poisoning of the minds of the workers by the spectacle of the "beautiful people" living the "good life."

Another force destined to transform China is the invasion by Western tourists. The People's Republic is now investing in tourism in a big, and often ingenuous way. For example, there are two kinds of hotels offered to the Western visitor. One is typified by a newly-built structure we might call the "Running Dog Hilton." A Western-style high-rise luxury hostelry, it is topped by that pinnacle of sophisticated elegance, the revolving lounge. So awe-stricken are the Chinese by this magnificent edifice, that they allegedly photograph themselves with it as a background

at all hours of the day.

At the other extreme of tourist accommodations is a complex we might call the "Immiseration Inn," a remodelled commune with just enough comforts of home to make the atmosphere exotic rather than oppressive. Here the visitor can play peasant, inhabiting homely dwellings, taking the oxen for an occasional spin, and even doing a Marie-Antoinette-like stint in the rice paddies.

Even more menacing to the remnants of socialist ideology is the growing interest of Chinese leaders in advertising. As two American advertising executives recently testified: "They want to believe in advertising." And, indeed, they should, since 25 years after the Revolution it would be naive to think that a billion people could be kept under control by reciting the various inanities of Mao's Little Red Book (Little-Read Book?). True, the Socialist Leaders still had reservations about the quintessential capitalist techniques of marketing, but their misgivings were rapidly laid to rest. As the executives reported: "They asked us, 'Does advertising lie?' We had great answers and the Chinese accepted them!"

Presumably, elites East and West have found common ground: The truth is what works.

### The Sick Society

In Oceania, "there were fear, hatred, and pain, but no dignity of emotion, no deep or complex sorrows." Today we find a similar loss of complexity of feeling, but with it a loss of the intensity of feeling that was retained even in Orwell's dystopia. Instead of fear, hatred, and pain, we increasingly encounter anxiety, annoyance, and malaise. Life is perceived as a burden, but not because of the oppressiveness or injustice of our mode of existence. Rather, the "cost of living" seems too high. "The bottom line" is slightly in the red.

Strangely, as "lifestyle" flourishes, life increasingly has less meaning. An epidemic of suicide has broken out, for example, among teenagers, the

vanguard of the consumer society. The rate of suicide among the young has increased 50% in only a decade. Especially in suburbia, the most advanced sector of contemporary society, shocking outbreaks appear. In a single Dallas, Texas suburb, seven teenagers killed themselves in a single year. In a northern California suburb the total reached twelve. In one case a child allegedly chose this path as the result of severe depression following the news that he would have to wear braces for several years. Presumably, non-existence was preferable to the projection of an incorrect image. Whether this report is accurate or not, there is certainly a severe crisis resulting from the growth of narcissistic personality structures. Increasing numbers of people are unable to plan for, or even conceive of, a meaningful future that is worth struggling for, and become locked in an eternal present of passive, uncreative consumption.

Much in line with the proliferation of such problems, one popular model of the contemporary world depicts it as "the therapeutic society." This concept contains a partial truth, for many institutions have been transformed according to the therapeutic perspective. Thus, prisons as a means of dispensing retributive justice, or even as pragmatic instruments for "impacting positively" upon "social problems," increasingly give way to therapeutic "treatment" of the maladjusted. This is just one aspect of a generalized trend. As society progressively disintegrates into a collection of atomized, egoistic consumers, every element of the alienated personality spawns hordes of therapeutic experts inundating the public with manuals, guides, tapes, videos, courses, groups, sessions, etc.

All becomes technique. As a "sleep expert" was recently asked by a television interviewer, "Should we regard sleep as a natural function, or as a skill to be learned?" One may indeed wonder.

Yet all is not therapy, and the model in question is a flawed one. Therapy is just one, albeit pervasive, aspect of the consumptionist and

productivist sectors. It is another commodity aimed at satisfying the ever-expanding needs and desires generated by consumer society. Just as every organ, tissue, and even cell of the body must ultimately be exploited by the medical industry, so every dark recess of the psyche must ultimately be exploited by the therapy business. And to the degree that we produce alienated, but at the same time narcissistic and self-indulgent consumers, we create the ideal customers for this growth industry.

#### The End Of History?

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the society of 1984 and the society of consumption is in the striving of both to eliminate history. In 1984 "history has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right." In 1984 history is indeed coming to an end. This is the imminent fate of Western society and the eventual fate of all that comes under its suzerainty. Beginning with the secularization of the Judeo-Christian eschatological vision, the West has been an historical civilization. Historical time has been the framework in which human destiny has worked itself out, whether this destiny has been conceived of as the conversion of all nations to Christianity, the triumph of civilization over savagery and barbarism, or the establishment of universal Communism. This historical movement is now being definitively terminated by the expansion of capital to its limits. There is now a consensus in the "developed" world that material production and commodity consumption are the fundamental tasks of humanity (the ultimate "bottom line"). Consequently, there are for the "advanced" societies no transcendent or ideal standards by which to judge historical movement or even the value of particular forms of life. We are left to wait for the dawning realization that under the mask of "economic growth" hides an eternal recurrence of the same. We begin to fall into a

new cyclical time lacking the mythic dimension of primitive temporality. We are left in an "endless present" in which not the Party but the Commodity is always right.

### The End Of Humanity?

Perhaps it is not only history but humanity itself that is now dispensable. Presumably, as the self becomes more and more shadowy in a world of images, we can eventually disappear completely. The technology is, in any case, ready to step into the breach. One can imagine the home of the not too distant future. The reassuring sound of the television set drones on, as all the best programs are faithfully recorded on the VCR machine. The computer terminal is on-line, bringing in all the latest news, in addition to information about sales and specials at leading department stores. Our user-friendly computer is programmed to order automatically key products at preselected prices, and to print-out news items of special interest. The telephone answering machine is always alert, repeating its witty message concerning no one being at home, and taping all the prerecorded calls that increasingly bombard it. All the dials are set, so the washing-machine washes our clothes and the automatic dryer dries them, while the oven—better yet, the radar range—cooks to calculated perfection our pre-packaged, processed and prepared food products. It is, of course, a self-cleaning oven. All the while, the digital clock pulsates facelessly onward.

### The End Of Thinking?

In 1984 Newspeak was created to narrow the range of thought through a continual process of simplification and elimination of vocabulary. Today the range of thought has not so much been narrowed as rechanneled. The language expands regularly, above all with technical vocabulary and terminology needed to keep pace with the process of commodity-production. On the other hand, modes of thought and expression at variance with the requirements of technological and consumptionist society begin to disappear. For example,

mass-media and the educational system work to dissolve local and cultural diversity, which produce conflict with dominant values. There has thus been a process of homogenization and standardization of thought and language, while at the same time an expansion and diversification has taken place within these limits.

The psychology of belief has changed accordingly. Orwell's Doublethink required a certain quantity of mental discipline, since one was obliged to hold two contradictory opinions which one knew to be in conflict. This and clarity / willfulness worthy of a Tertullian no longer exists today. While people are expected to accept ideological principles, they are seldom aware of any conflicts between various articles of faith, or between these and other areas of experience. A vague and confused adherence to amorphous beliefs is all that is expected. Furthermore, as the "information society" overwhelms the mind with an endless clutter of disconnected and unanalyzed data, the chance of any particular belief or combination of them becoming a threat to the order of things is increasingly less likely.

#### The Enduring Relevance Of 1984

Having said much about the ways in which 1984 does not describe contemporary Western society, I feel compelled as I conclude to add a few words concerning the profundity and relevance of the work. My final reference to the book will therefore be to the passage that I believe to be its most brilliant. Near the end of the book O'Brien comments that it is clear enough to everyone how the Party rules. The more significant and challenging question is why. He poses this question to Winston: "Why should we want power?" Winston replies that "You are ruling for our own good.... You believe that human beings are not fit to govern themselves, and therefore—", at which point he is administered an excruciatingly intense shock for having given such a ridiculous answer.

As O'Brien explains, "The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake."

What is desired is not merely any kind of power, but "pure power." A contradiction is encountered in the individual's search for power, for the quest is doomed to end in failure. All human beings will weaken, die, decay. The entire undertaking therefore seems futile. But if one can "make complete, utter subjugation, if he can escape from his identity, if he can merge himself in the Party so that he is the Party, then he is all-powerful and immortal." Power can once more have meaning, especially in so far as its truest form is attained—not mere power over matter, "but, above all, over the mind."

Orwell thus gives us a perceptive insight into the psychology of authoritarianism, but even more importantly, he touches on some universal aspects of modern humanity. Indeed, he is hinting at some essential qualities of civilization itself. For if in authoritarian society the elite are driven by the quest for a power which raises them above their limitations and mortality, this is no more than a striving that is identical with the history of civilization. It is equally the truth of the society of consumption. The commodities which become the raison d'être of the person as consumer are not mere objects, but images also. The consumer does not only buy a collection of products, but also a constellation of commodity-images constituting an imagined self. While society is rather frank in admitting that to be successful one must "sell oneself," it has been less explicit in stating the corollary: that one must also buy oneself. Yet everyone knows that this is true. In consumer society one does not have to dominate in the style of an authoritarian elite in order to exercise significant power. Instead, one may invest in the production of the correct self-image and successfully sell it to others. Given the multitude of levels of status within the technobureaucratic system and the extensive and ambiguous hierarchy of commodities, one has enormous possibilities for relative success or failure in image-credibility. The promise of the society is, though, that to the extent that one succeeds in



this endeavor, one rises above mundane existence—"everydayness"—and achieves a kind of idealized Being. Consequently, it is possible to escape, however precariously, from mortality and the limitations of the actually existing self. The entire project is fraudulent, but it is no more fraudulent than the identification of the self with the authoritarian state or party that Orwell describes. In both cases there is a denial of reality in the pursuit of recognition by self and others—of "power over mind."

### The End Of Civilization

Our theme has been the dominant position of consumptionism in contemporary advanced capitalist society. While Big Brother stands in the wings, ever ready to apply the electrodes, at center stage in today's spectacle of power is our Giant Economy Size Brother, the commodity. There is a danger that one might infer that since ideological control is so powerful today there is even less opportunity for escape from our Brother than from Orwell's. This is not necessarily the case.

First, it must be recognized that consumptionism has in fact challenged the traditional authoritarian structure of society. To the extent that productivist society in its classical period labored under the yoke of the performance principle, we have gained a degree of freedom with the deterioration of this principle. Thus far the consequences of this freedom have been deeply disturbing (as I have stressed in this discussion), linked as they have been to the dissolution of the organic fabric of society. As Janis Joplin so aptly pointed out, freedom can be "just another word for nothing left to lose."

Yet, there are two moments in the development of contemporary culture, and the fulfillment of each is a real historical possibility. On the one hand, there is the obsessive consumption that has been described here, an endless striving toward an elusive fulfillment, the progressive destruction of

all existing values in the name of a dream that is incapable of definition. But this quest is doomed to failure. It can only lead to a spiritual immiseration less bearable than the material immiseration of the early industrial era. The true crisis of capitalism (in both its corporate and statist varieties) is a crisis of the spirit.

The impasse confronting consumptionism creates hope that the way will open for the unfolding of another moment of consumptionist society—the submerged utopian moment whose fate lies with the radical imagination. To the extent that the imagination has unbound itself from its subservience to the commodity, it has engendered a vision of completeness, happiness, fulfillment, self-realization, and reconciliation. With the dissolution of the authoritarian structure of productivist society, civilized humanity can for the first time dream of wholeness—or, to speak more accurately, allow the dream to make its way into consciousness.

The fate of this vision rests with our success in reconciling imagination with theoretical and practical reason, that is, with a new understanding of humanity and nature, and a new practice of liberatory social transformation. If this can be achieved, then, when the dialectic of civilization has finally played itself out, disinherited humanity may finally awaken to the abyss in which it has been falling. And, in the face of the void, it may then take up in earnest its quest for a plenitude of being.

## NOTE

\*The identification of contemporary society as "consumer society" or "consumptionist society" indicates its most salient characteristic and points out the direction of its movement. Yet this is a vast oversimplification of a complex system. On the most general level, it underemphasizes the centrality of the technological and political spheres, which are profoundly conditioned by commodification, but remain irreducible. Furthermore, consumption is itself dependent on the realm of production, so that the "economic" (even in its expanded sense implied here) contains mutually interdependent, dialectically interacting productivist and consumptionist sectors, with corresponding productivist and consumptionist ideologies.

One of the most significant facts about contemporary society is that while these two realms are interdependent, an increasing degree of contradiction between them is developing, especially as consumptionism becomes the far more powerful ideology and its values begin to invade even the most classically productivist institutions. Thus, the famed "revolt against work." Yet one should not rashly conclude that one has discovered fatal contradictions in the system, especially when these depend on largely unconscious and instinctive activity. The consumptionist desire for gratification does not necessarily lead to a rejection of alienated labor, merely displeasure with it. Most good consumers recognize that they must (so they think) subject themselves to mindless toil if they are to consume at a satisfactory level. Perhaps what is undermined most by consumptionism is not the capacity to engage in meaningless labor, but rather the capacity to engage in meaningful labor. Once intrinsic goodness is drained from production, only enforced labor is possible. The consumer submits him or herself to more or less regimented work out of a necessity for

"survival" (i.e., survival as a commodity consumer, rather than existence in any other mode of being). Beyond this, only the passivity of consumption is conceivable. When called upon for more creative activity (voluntary association, political activism, etc.) the alibi is that all ones "energy" is wasted in the pursuit of "survival," when, in fact, it is all ones imagination that is depleted. (For a more extensive discussion of productivism, consumptionism, and their possible contradictions, see "The Labyrinth of Power and the Hall of Mirrors" in The Anarchist Moment (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1984)).

As is hinted at later in this discussion, the possibility of liberatory social transformation depends finally on the growth of critical consciousness of the ways in which both productivism and consumptionism brutally cut off the opportunities for humanity and nature to achieve a process of non-dominating self-realization. This consciousness depends, in turn, on an understanding of the meaning of the good in relation to human nature and the cosmos. (I take up this issue in "On Taoism and Politics" in the Journal of Chinese Philosophy, Vol. 10, no. 1, reprinted in The Anarchist Moment).