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## Totalitarianism and Individualism Unveiled: Hobbes and Orwell

**Abstract:** George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* holds significant importance today partly because it remains relevant to contemporary society and partly because it warns the societies against totalitarianism. On the other hand, Thomas Hobbes holds a contrary view in terms of the political system he defends, a view shaped by the circumstances his country was in. The present study aims to examine the portrayal of totalitarianism in Orwell's dystopian masterpiece, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and to explore what Hobbes contrarily argues about the necessity of a powerful authority in the establishment and continuity of a harmonious society. The writings by Orwell and Hobbes, the implications the novel carries for fundamental questions about personal freedom, autonomy, and the stifling of individuality will be analyzed by addressing to the concept of totalitarianism that is related to the arguments proposed by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*. A philosophical consideration of the novel and comparison of how Orwell and Hobbes reacted the idea of totalitarianism in two different ways in their own contexts will encourage us to examine our own political systems, media, and societal norms today.

**Keywords:** George Orwell, 1984, Totalitarianism, Individualism, Hobbes.

## Totalitarizm ve Bireyciliğin Açığa Çıkışı: Hobbes ve Orwell

**Öz:** George Orwell'in *Bin Dokuz Yüz Seksen Dört*'ü, kısmen çağdaş toplumla alakalı kalması, kısmen de toplumları totaliter rejimlere karşı uyarması nedeniyle bugün büyük önem taşıyor. Öte yandan Thomas Hobbes ise yaşadığı dönemde ülkesinin içinde bulunduğu koşullar çerçevesinde şekillenen tam tersi bir siyasi bir görüşü savunmuştur. Bu çalışma, Orwell'in distopik başyapıtı *Bin Dokuz Yüz Seksen Dört*'te tasvir edilen totaliter rejimi Analiz ederken, Hobbes'un uyumlu bir toplumun kurulması ve devamlılığında güçlü bir otoritenin gerekliliğini savunduğu görüşüyle karşılaştırma yapmayı amaçlamaktadır. Orwell ve Hobbes'un yazıları, romanın kişisel özgürlük ve özerklik kavramlarına ilişkin temel sorulara yönelik vurguları ve Thomas Hobbes'un *Leviathan*'da bireyselliğin bastırılmasına yönelik ileri sürdüğü argümanlarla desteklediği totalitarizm görüşüne değinilerek analiz edilecektir. Romanın felsefi açıdan ele alınması ve Orwell ile Hobbes'un totalitarizm fikrine kendi bağlamlarında iki farklı şekilde nasıl tepki verdiklerinin karşılaştırılması, bizleri, bugün, kendi siyasi sistemlerimizi, medyamızı ve toplumsal normlarımızı incelemeye teşvik edecektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** George Orwell, 1984, Totalitarizm, Bireysellik, Hobbes

### Introduction

In George Orwell's (1903-1950) dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the story unfolds in a nightmarish future where a totalitarian regime known as the Party exerts absolute control over the people of Oceania. Set in a world perpetually at war, the narrative follows the life of Winston Smith, a disillusioned Party member who secretly thinks of rebellion against the oppressive system. The protagonist Winston's name is open to many implications however the most straightforward one is that links him to Winston Churchill, representing a resistance to evil (Sherborne 1988). Oceania is a society characterized by constant surveillance, where Big Brother, the omnipresent leader, watches every move its citizens make and listens to every conversation they make. Individuality is suppressed, and independent thought is considered a crime. Newspeak was described as the official language of Oceania. "With Newspeak, terms like crimethink, (any thought against the party ideology), sexcrime (sexual immorality), facecrime (non-compliant facial expressions in Public), and ownlife (individualism and eccentricity) are engineered as system to foreclose the

possibility of formulating a thought outside of Party orthodoxies.” (Murray 2020: 249). Newspeak serves as the official Party language within Oceania. The Ministry of Truth is in the process of creating the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary. While official messages are crafted in Newspeak, many Party members still communicate in Standard English, known as Oldspeak. Predictions suggest that by 2050, Newspeak will entirely supplant Oldspeak. The purpose behind Newspeak is to streamline the English language by reducing word count, constraining thought range, and potentially erasing the capacity for thoughtcrime or expressing dissenting ideas. (Connelly 2018).

Winston delves further into his dissenting contemplations and quests for knowledge about the past, he stumbles upon prohibited literature and unveils the existence of a covert rebellion called the Brotherhood. His interactions with O'Brien, a Party member who masquerades as an ally, serve to intensify his determination to defy the Party's dominance. However, Winston's aspirations for freedom and a life outside the Party's grasp are noticed, he is captured, tortured, and subjected to the Party's brutal reconditioning methods. Ultimately, Winston is shattered, his spirit crushed, and his rebellion extinguished. He transforms into a faithful and obedient member of society. He fully embraced the Party's principles and eradicates any traces of his own individuality. The novel reaches its resolution as Winston completely surrenders to the authority of Big Brother, symbolizing the resounding victory of totalitarian control over the human spirit.

Orwell has written *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1948 when the greatest and the bloodiest war in the history of the world in which more than one hundred million of soldiers were engaged and nearly fifty million people have died has come to an end. Orwell who witnessed the practices of great dictators like Hitler and Stalin has written *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to criticize all totalitarian regimes. Even though it is thought that the novel is a criticism of Stalin's Soviet Regime, Orwell emphasized that any totalitarian regime would arrive at such a plight. “The dictator Big Brother resembles Stalin; his Jewish nemesis Goldstein mirrors Leon Trotsky; Oceania's

sudden shift in alliances draws on Stalin's unexpected non-aggression pact with Hitler." (Connelly 2018: 128).

Similarly, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) experienced the English Civil War during the 17th century and *Leviathan*, published in 1651 reveals how he was affected by the context of the war. The chaos and evil he witnessed led him to a belief in the existence and governance of a powerful authority. Hobbes holds a contrary view about the state authority, individual rights, and freedoms. Hobbes did not explicitly advocate for totalitarianism in the modern sense of the term, as the concept of totalitarianism emerged much later in history. However, some aspects of Hobbes' political philosophy have been interpreted as laying the groundwork for certain totalitarian principles.

Both Orwell' and Hobbes' writings reflect a reaction against the evils they observed. Hobbes' context lacked a powerful authority while, ages later, Orwell witnessed the oppressive authorities in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. In this study, we find it significant to explore the themes of totalitarianism and individualism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as it raises an awareness of the protection of individual rights and freedoms, stimulates ethical discussions, encourages societal critique and examination, and provides literary and philosophical insights that resonate far beyond the pages of the novel. It serves as a cautionary warning about the dangers of totalitarianism and deterioration of individual freedoms.

### **1. Hobbes, the context, and the desire for authority**

Thomas Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* in the 17th century, during a time of significant political and social upheaval in England. The book was published in 1651 and is a comprehensive exploration of the structure and authority of the state. The context in which Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* was influenced by the key historical events and intellectual developments in his era. His writings were influenced by the English Civil War. During the mid-17th century, England was engulfed in a civil war between the Royalists (supporters of the monarchy) and the Parliamentarians (supporters of the

Parliament). The war resulted from longstanding tensions between the king's absolute rule and the desire for greater representation and liberties among the Parliamentarians. Second, the execution of King Charles in 1649 by the Parliamentarians, leading to the establishment of the Commonwealth of England, and the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 under Charles II affected his view of politics.

The political climate and intellectual currents of the time shaped Hobbes' ideas, making *Leviathan* a response to the challenges posed by the English Civil War and a significant contribution to the development of modern political thought. Hobbes' work laid the groundwork for discussions on the nature of government, the role of the state, and the rights and responsibilities of individuals in society. "In such condition, there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently, not culture of the earth, no navigation, nor the use of commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and, which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." (Thomas Hobbes 1961: Chapter 17) In the quote Hobbes describes the necessity of a powerful authority by giving a picture of what will be without it.

Hobbes sought to address the pressing questions of political order and authority. He witnessed firsthand the destructive consequences of civil strife and chaos during the English Civil War and sought to develop a political theory that could provide a foundation for stable governance and prevent the return to a state of anarchy. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes proposed the concept of the social contract, wherein individuals agree to surrender some of their freedoms to a central authority to avoid the chaotic state of nature. He argued for an absolute monarchy or a sovereign with near-absolute power to maintain order and provide security. It is essential to note that Hobbes' political philosophy aimed to prevent disorder and promote stability, not to endorse oppressive rule. However, interpretations of his ideas, when taken to extreme or misapplied, could be seen as conducive to totalitarian tendencies. "Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are

in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man.” (Hobbes 1961: Chapter 17) Hobbes’ view on the establishment of order in society revolves around the necessity of a strong and centralized authority. Here, Hobbes highlights the dire consequences of a society without a common authority. Hobbes emphasizes that without a centralized authority, individuals are driven by their own self-interests, leading to a chaotic and hostile environment. In such a state, there is no security, no predictability, and no assurance of safety for anyone.

Hobbes introduces the term “Leviathan” in Chapter 17 “... this done, the multitude so united in one person is called a Commonwealth, in Latin CIVITAS. This is the generation of that great Leviathan (or rather, to speak more reverently, of that mortal god) to which we owe, under the immortal God, our peace and defense” (Hobbes 1961: Chapter 17). The concept of the “Leviathan” is a metaphorical representation of the state or commonwealth. He compares the state to a mortal god, created through the collective agreement of individuals forming a social contract. The Leviathan is given authority through this contract, acting as a centralized and sovereign power that governs the entire body of the state. The notion of mortal god suggests that the authority of the state is not derived from divine right or natural law, but rather from the agreement and consent of its citizens. The state’s authority is therefore a product of human creation and agreement, established to provide protection and security to its members.

## **2. Orwell, the context, and aspiration for individualism**

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written in the mid-20th century and was published in 1949. The context in which Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was heavily influenced by the political and social events of the time. Orwell was deeply disturbed by the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century, particularly the Soviet Union under Stalin and Nazi Germany under Hitler. These regimes suppressed individual freedoms, utilized propaganda and surveillance, and controlled every aspect of their citizens’ lives. Orwell witnessed the atrocities and dangers of these regimes, which greatly impacted his writing. Additionally, Orwell lived through the Second World War, experiencing the horrors of war, and witnessing the devastation caused by the conflict.

The war left a profound mark on him and shaped his views on the abuse of power and the importance of preserving individual liberty. After World War II, the world was engulfed in the Cold War, characterized by the ideological struggle between the democratic West and the communist East, led by the Soviet Union. The fear of nuclear annihilation and the constant threat of state surveillance contributed to a climate of suspicion and anxiety, which is reflected in the dystopian society of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The aftermath of World War II brought about a period of reconstruction and changing social norms. The advent of technology and mass media also played a role in shaping society, with Orwell warning about the potential abuse of these tools for controlling the masses. The early post-war years saw the rise of authoritarian governments in various parts of the world. Orwell's concern about the consolidation of power in the hands of a few was evident in his portrayal of Big Brother and the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These historical events and societal developments deeply influenced Orwell's writing in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The novel serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of totalitarianism, government surveillance, and the erosion of individual freedoms. Orwell's vision of a dystopian future, where the government exercises absolute control over its citizens and manipulates truth, resonated with readers, and continues to be relevant in discussions about government overreach, censorship, and the importance of safeguarding individual liberty.

Orwell as opposed to totalitarianism, explores the theme of individuality and the dangers posed by totalitarian regimes. The book's protagonist, Winston Smith admits he does not understand the how and the why when he highlights the importance of individuality (Orwell 1984). Winston's struggle to comprehend the motivations and methods of the oppressive regime he lives under is implied in his quote. It reflects the suppression of individual thought and critical thinking in the dystopian society of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where conformity to the Party's ideology is enforced, and independent thinking is actively discouraged. Throughout the novel, Winston seeks to reclaim his individuality and autonomy, longing for the freedom to question, understand, and think for himself. Orwell's exploration of individuality serves as a stark warning about the dangers of a society that seeks to erase personal identity and

independent thought, emphasizing the fundamental importance of individuality in preserving human dignity and freedom.

Dignity relates to autonomy. To honor someone's dignity, we must grant them the capacity to make independent decisions. Yet, if we engage in surveillance of that person, their ability to choose autonomously is compromised. Consequently, by observing them without consent, we demonstrate a lack of regard for their dignity (Tännsjö 2018). Within this bleak version of London, there is limited space for individual thinking, refined culture, or, as the protagonist Winston Smith describes it, genuine emotional integrity. This is due to the absence of profound or intricate forms of sorrow (Hietalahti 2018).

### **3. Totalitarianism and individualism in two separate contexts**

Roughly totalitarianism is a political system characterized by centralized and authoritarian control, where the ruling government or party exercises absolute authority over all aspects of public and private life. In a totalitarian regime, there is typically no separation of powers, limited political pluralism, and minimal individual freedoms. Key features of totalitarianism include single-party rule, ideological conformity, state control over information, surveillance and policing, and suppression of individual rights. Individualism, a contrasting ideology emphasizes personal autonomy, freedom, and self-reliance. It prioritizes the rights and liberties of individuals who are empowered to make their own choices and pursue their own goals.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Party employs an array of control mechanisms and establishes a pervasive surveillance state to maintain absolute authority over the citizens of Oceania. "Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing." (Orwell 1984: 266) The Party's ability to control and manipulate the thoughts and identities of individuals exemplifies the profound measures taken by totalitarian regimes to establish dominance and fundamentally alter the core of human existence.

These control mechanisms and surveillance tactics are instrumental in suppressing individuality, eradicating dissent, and perpetuating the Party's dominance.



One key control mechanism utilized by the Party is the constant surveillance of its citizens. The ubiquitous presence of tele-screens, which function as both televisions and surveillance devices, ensures that every aspect of individuals' lives is monitored. This all-seeing eye of Big Brother instils fear and self-censorship among the populace, as they are aware that any deviance from Party's principles can be swiftly detected and punished. The Party also employs the Thought Police, a covert organization responsible for identifying and eliminating dissenters or those who exhibit independent thought. With their pervasive presence, the Thought Police create an atmosphere of paranoia, as citizens are compelled to constantly monitor and report on one another. "In keeping with Orwell's tendency to write from experience, Orwell focused mostly on the damage that he saw imperialism causing the imperialist oppressor rather than the oppressed." (Satta 2022). Orwell argues that in this system both the oppressor and the oppressed are physically and mentally damaged. Because of the feeling of guilt and moral damage no one is genuinely free.

The Party enforces strict conformity through the imposition of Newspeak, a language designed to restrict individual thought and expression. By limiting the vocabulary and reducing linguistic nuances, Newspeak aims to constrain independent thinking and eliminate concepts that challenge the Party's authority. This linguistic control serves as a powerful tool to maintain ideological conformity and suppress any form of dissent. "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak 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." (Orwell 1984: 70). The Party's deliberate efforts to manipulate language and restrict the range of permissible thoughts can be seen in this quote. It highlights the ultimate goal of eliminating independent thinking by constraining the vocabulary and altering the very means of expression, rendering dissent and critical thoughts impossible to articulate.

"Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness." (Orwell 1984: 71) The Party's objective to foster an environment where individuals unquestioningly accept Party ideology and cease critical thinking is outlined in this quote. It emphasizes the indoctrination tactics employed by the Party,

wherein conformity and adherence to orthodoxy are equated with compliance and a lack of independent thought. "The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command." (Orwell 1984: 96) The Party's manipulation of truth and reality is emphasized in this quote. It illustrates their control over the minds of the citizens, demanding them to deny their own perceptions and accept the distorted version of reality presented by the Party. It serves as a powerful portrayal of the extent to which manipulation is used as a tool for maintaining control and suppressing individual autonomy.

On the 8th of June 1949, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was released, half a year after the UN's approval of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris. The novel appears to advocate for human rights by depicting the disturbing consequences that arise from their complete disregard. The Declaration asserts principles such as protection against torture and inhumane treatment, yet the protagonist Winston endures these at the hands of O'Brien. Similarly, the Declaration emphasizes the right to a fair trial, but the book portrays a society where impartial justice is nonexistent. Despite the Declaration's affirmation of the right to privacy (Article 12), Oceania lacks such a privilege. The concept of "thoughtcrime" directly contradicts Article 18, which upholds the freedom of thought. If these transgressions evoke shock or discomfort in readers, these emotional responses appear to reinforce a deep-seated commitment to fundamental moral standards. Determining whether the primary issue lies with 'liberalism' or 'humanism' is a challenge (presumably, it's both), yet it's not entirely evident that either of these beliefs are proven as failures in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The concepts of autonomy and dignity are portrayed as susceptible ideals, more dependent than we usually acknowledge, but this doesn't imply they should be abandoned. The novel does propose that humanism frequently exaggerates the distinctions between humans and animals, causing us to distance ourselves from our innate animality, while simultaneously fostering a superiority complex over other creature. (Dwan 2020).

## Conclusion

Orwell's critical vision in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving individual liberties and in the novel, he emphasizes the dangers of unchecked authority and the oppressive grip of totalitarianism. On the other hand, centuries before Orwell, Hobbes argued that a powerful authority is needed for the sake of the good for all. Hobbes and Orwell have differing views on individualism. Hobbes viewed individualism without governance as problematic, while Orwell valued individualism as a defence against totalitarianism and oppressive regimes.

In this study, we aimed to consider *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from a philosophical perspective, revealing the thoughts of Orwell and contrasting them with those of Hobbes. We have pointed that Hobbes and Orwell were both influential thinkers, but they lived in different contexts and were affected by the happenings around them and in the world. Hobbes was a 17th-century philosopher known for his work *Leviathan* while Orwell was a 20th-century novelist and essayist. Despite the temporal and contextual differences, a comparison of their ideas reveals some striking similarities and differences in their views on human nature, government, and the potential dangers of unchecked power.

It can be concluded that Hobbes and Orwell shared a common understanding of human nature as inherently flawed and driven by self-interest. Hobbes famously stated that without government and authority, people would live in a state of “war of all against all,” resulting in a chaotic and violent society. In the same way, Orwell illustrated the negative aspects of human behaviour in his dystopian book, presenting characters who gave in to the temptation of authority and repression. Both authors shared the belief that humans could display selfishness, greed, and a desire for power, even if it meant harming others.

However, Hobbes' and Orwell's views on government and authority diverged significantly. Hobbes argued that a strong and centralized authority, like an absolute monarchy, was necessary to maintain order and prevent the state of nature's chaos. He believed that people should surrender some of their individual rights to a sovereign ruler who would protect them in return. On the other hand, Orwell was deeply critical of

totalitarian regimes, particularly in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where he depicted a nightmarish world ruled by an all-powerful, oppressive government. Orwell emphasized the importance of safeguarding individual freedoms and warned against the dangers of unchecked state power.

While Hobbes and Orwell shared a pessimistic view of human nature, their ideas on government, authority, and individual liberties differed significantly. Hobbes advocated for a powerful central authority to prevent chaos, whereas Orwell warned against the dangers of totalitarianism and emphasized the importance of protecting individual freedoms. Both Hobbes and Orwell believed in the contribution of the examination of history to the development of social existence. They inferred from the historical circumstances and the cruelty they witnessed in their era. Despite their contrasting views, both thinkers have left a lasting impact on political philosophy and continue to be relevant in understanding the complexities of human society and governance.

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