

Orwell Revisited: 1984 as a Critique of State Capitalism, Not Just Totalitarianism

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Abstract

This research study is strategically interpreted as a critique of state capitalism rather than dictatorship alone. A Qualitative methodology employing the textual analysis as its core method of 1984 and alongside Orwell's political essays, this research study intensively examines how Oceania represents oligarchical collectivism _ a system in which the state controls production and distribution while preserving class hierarchy. The findings explicitly depicts that the Party maintains power and authority not only through surveillance and through control, but through deliberate scarcity, perpetual war to destroy surplus, and Newspeak to eliminate economic discourses. Class persists without private property, with the inner Party acting as a new ruling elite. Orwell presents the three super states as economically identical, suggesting that both market capitalism and state capitalism converge into centralized oligarchy when the democracy is absent. This research paper concludes that 1984 is ultimately a warning about the fusion of political and economic power. Its relevance lies in showing that without democratic control of both the economy and information, any system risks producing inequality, oppression, and the erosion of independent thought.

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Introduction

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published more than seventy years ago, yet it continues to attract a wide readership. The novel is widely interpreted as a cautionary tale about political totalitarianism.

Through the vivid depiction of Big Brother, the *Thought Police*, and *Newspeak*, Orwell exposes the oppressive mechanisms of a surveillance state. These tools function alongside authoritarianism control, representing the dark strategies employed by such regimes to dominate citizens.

The novel also serves as a direct critique of Stalinist communism and fascist government. Orwell spotlights how these systems worked to destroy basic individual freedoms _ including freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and the suffrage rights. Central to the novel's dystopian narrative is the ruling party's reliance on fear, psychological pressure, and organized indoctrination. These methods are used deliberately to maintain strict control over the population and suppress dissent.

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George Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* not as a prediction of the future, but as a warning against totalitarianism. In a totalitarianism system, the government holds absolute authority and demands total obedience, often being portrayed as an unquestionable, “new god.”

The concept of totalitarianism itself was popularized by the Italian dictator *Benito Mussolini* in the early 1920s. He used the term to describe the new fascist regime in Italy and attempted to present it in a favorable way. He often repeated: “All within the state, none outside the state, and none against the state”, capturing the essence of totalitarianism _ absolute control over all facets of human life.

In 1984, Orwell rejects capitalism but not entirely. He criticizes the class divisions of traditional capitalism. However, in the world he depicts, capitalism itself has been abolished. The ruling party in Oceania controls the means of production. Private property has been eliminated, but a new elite _the Inner Party_ now holds all power. The majority of people work for the state, creating a system of state-controlled labor and surplus. The state deliberately creates artificial scarcity and produces poor-quality goods like *victory Gin*. This is not due to failure, but by design. As shown in 1984, the economy is strategically subordinated to political power rather than to human needs. A fixed level of poverty is maintained because state capitalism relies on constant accumulation, not on actual economic growth or prosperity.

This dystopian discourse tactfully unearths a system of state capitalism. The argument is that when the state takes over capital instead of democratizing it, the result is not socialism rather it becomes an even more total form of exploitation. Ideology being practiced in Oceania meant to justify the party’s monopoly on power and to thwart alternative ways of thinking. Contextually speaking, Ingsoc _ English socialism, has been the official ideology of Oceania, replacing traditional socialism with “Oligarchical collectivism,” _ a system where all political power is concentrated in the hands of the Party. In context of war ideology and the perpetual enemy doctrine, the state promotes a constant state of war. This ideology is based on hate and fear. It redirects public anger outwards and justifies scarcity, rationing, and sacrifice. Here, Big Brother functions as a personality cult. The ideology portrays him as infallible. Loyalty to Big Brothers replaces class consciousness and demands complete political and emotional devotion from citizens.

The party maintains absolute power and intellectual hegemony through three interconnected mechanisms of control. First, *linguistic control* is enforced through Newspeak, a language deliberately designed to limit thought and make dissent impossible by removing words that expresses rebellion or individuality. Second, the party exercises *control over truth* via the Ministry of Truth, which constantly rewrites history and facts. This erases objective reality and replaces it with whatever version of the truth serves the Party’s strategic interests at any given moment. Finally, *psychological control* is achieved through *Doublethink*, the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs simultaneously. This tactically forces citizens into mental compliance, prevents logical reasoning, and ensures loyalty to the Party despite obvious contradictions. Together these tools creates a system where language, history, and even thought are controlled.

This regime intentionally creates a society built on deprivation. Extreme poverty hinders the lower strata from gaining wealth, education, or even time needed to organize resistance and to incite rebellion. Instead of tapping surplus to uplift the poor and reduce inequality, the state waste them in

endless wars. This ensures that poverty and disparity are maintained by design, not by accident (Bouziane, 2021).

One of the integral concerns for political scholars is how the state exercises power. The most subtle yet dangerous form of this power is not through force, but through control of human mind. When a regime controls what people think, say, and believe, it achieves total dominance without needing constant physical coercion.

This is exactly what scholars identify in communism when it turns into totalitarianism. While the original idea of communism spoke of equality, in practice it often became a dangerous system where the state owned not just property, but also truth and thought.

A key outcome of such system is the dehumanization of the individual. Citizens are reduced from thinking, feeling persons to mere tools of the state. Personal identity, dissent, and privacy are erased in the name of collective ideology. George Orwell captured this fear brilliantly in his novel 1984. He created three fictional super states Oceania, Eurasia, and East Asia __ that are in perpetual war with each other. However, scholars argue that these three blocs don't really exist as separate entities. Orwell used them to show how totalitarian regimes manufacture enemies and false realities to keep citizens in fear and obedience.

Contextually speaking, the greatest threat of totalitarianism is psychological, not just political. Control the mind, and you control everything. But complete control may not be possible, because independent thought is hard to kill (Alboly, 2019).

The term ideology was first coined by the French aristocrat and philosopher *Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy* during the French Revolution. He intended to mean "the science of ideas" __ a neutral study of how humans form beliefs. But over time, the word took on a much more political meaning. Alongside, the Marxist Philosopher Louis Althusser gave ideology a sharper, more critical edge. He argued that ideology is not just false ideas. It is a material necessity for any system to function including state capitalism.

Unlike classical totalitarianism which controls via fear, state capitalism controls through economic ideology. It tells citizens that state-owned enterprises are for "the public good," even when they function like monopolies. Additionally, it uses education, media, and nationalism to make exploitation look like patriotism.

So, in this context, ideology turns out to be the glue that holds state capitalism together. Without it, people would see the contradiction: a system that claims to serve "the people but concentrates economic and political power in the hands of the state bureaucracy (Meryem, 2022).

At the heart of both totalitarianism and state capitalism lies a dangerous **anthropocentric arrogance** __ the belief that "*Man is the absolute master of the world*". A master who is supposedly free from nature, from social obligation, and from historical limitations.

In the context of **state capitalism**, this idea transforms into: "*The state, as the representative of the people and the manager of the economy, is the absolute master of development.*" State capitalist regimes justify massive infrastructure projects, resource extraction, and industrialization in the name of "national progress". Nature is treated as a raw material with no intrinsic value.

The state claims it can engineer society through 5-year plans, state-owned enterprises, and technocratic management. Citizens are reduced to “human capital” or “labor force” rather than political actors. Dissent is labelled as “anti-development”. In this way, the state builds what Hannah Arendt called **“fact-proof screens from reality”** — propaganda, statistics and nationalist narratives that shield the regime from criticism, failure, or lived experience of inequality. In addition to it, state capitalism borrows the totalitarianism impulse of total control, but redirects it towards economic ends. It erases alternative histories of cooperatives, commons, or decentralized economies. The official story becomes: *There is no alternative to state-led growth*. This closes off debate and makes the system appear permanent and natural.

Those “fact-proof screen” are now built with GDP numbers, mega-projects, and state media. They prevent society from seeing the contradictions: “growing inequality despite “collective” ownership, ecological collapse despite “planned” development, and elite bureaucracies despite “people’s” control.

When the state becomes convinced it is the unbound master of nature, society, and history, it creates an ideology that protects itself from reality. In state capitalism, this ideology is called “development”, but its function is the same — to prevent accountability (Hammad, 2022).

George Orwell’s 1984 is often read as a critique of totalitarianism political terror. But its deeper relevance today is in how it exposes the bureaucratic logic of state capitalism — where the state itself becomes the primary corporation, and party bureaucracies become the new ruling class. In this, the party doesn’t seek power for ideology. It seeks power for power’s sake. This mirrors state capitalism, where the state bureaucracy controls banks, industries, land, and others strategic resources. The motive shifts from “public welfare” to preserving the bureaucracy’s own position and privileges.

Anyone who questions state-run monopolies, corruption in public enterprises, or unequal distribution is not just a political dissent — they are an “enemy of national development”. The goal becomes crushing opposition to protect institutional interests, not people’s interests.

Orwell drew heavily from Hitler and Stalin, so he portrayed bureaucracy as synonymous with secret police, torture, and force. In state capitalism, repression is often less valuable but more structural. Force still exists, but the main tool is administrative power — licenses, regulations, and access to resources.

Putting in context, the dialectics of bureaucracy is the central contradiction. State capitalism claims to serve “the people” by owning the means of production. In practice, it creates a new class: the state bureaucrats. The bureaucracy therefore, has some strategic cherished interests in not dissolving itself. Reforms that would decentralize power or increase transparency threaten the bureaucrats directly. So the system reproduces itself, just like the Party in 1984 — permanent, self-serving, and hostile to genuine accountability (Kellner, 2010).

Orwell held a nuanced and critical view of both state capitalism and socialism. While he acknowledged that capitalism was an unjust and inefficient system, he was equally skeptical of socialism as it was being practiced in the 20th century. Orwell believed that state socialism, far from being the best alternative, could easily slide into totalitarianism. This concern closely mirrors the arguments made by economist Friedrich von Hayek in *The Road to serfdom*, where he warns that

centralized economic planning and the erosion of market freedom inevitably lead to authoritarian control. Orwell also critiqued what he called “the invisible hand” logic capitalism a system driven by competition the scramble for market, and profit, which he saw as breeding inequality, conflict, and ultimate war. Furthermore, he argued that collectivism, when taken to extremes, produces its own dangers: the concentration of power, cults of leadership, and the justification of a war in the name of ideology. For Orwell, both unregulated capitalism and bureaucratic state socialism and bureaucratic state socialism posed threats to individual liberty, and his political thought sought a third path rooted in democratic socialism, decentralization, and moral accountability (Roback, 1985).

One of the key *signals* of our contemporary ideological condition is that the very idea of truth has been emptied of stable meaning. This erosion has come from multiple directions in 20th–century thought. Relatives claim that truth is not universal but depends on culture, time, and perspective. Pluralists argue that there are many competing truths, none of which can claim superiority. Structuralisms reduce truth to the system of language and power that produces it, while formalists treat it as merely internal consistency within a text, detached from reality. As a result, truth is no longer seen as something to be discovered, but as something to be constructed or negotiated.

The second signal is the rise of what is called the “**SOCING**” doctrine – a political – ideological system whose structure rests not on reason or evidence, but on “sacred principles”. Its authority comes from three core features: *no speak*, *double speak*, and *the mutability of the past*. *No Speak* enforces silence on certain topics, *double speak* distorts language to mean its opposite, and *mutability of the past* allows history itself to be rewritten to serve present ideology. Together, these creates a system where ideology functions like dogma: it cannot be questioned, facts can be altered, and language is used to control thought.

Thus, the crisis is twofold: on one hand, objective truth is dissolved by theory; on the other hand, it is replaced by an ideological doctrine that demands faith, rewrites reality, and polices language (Horizonte, 2023).

Discussion and Analysis

George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been taught for 75 years primarily as a novel about totalitarianism. The telescreen, Big Brother, the Thought Police, and Room 101 have become universal symbols of political dictatorship. This reading is not wrong but it is incomplete. When we place 1984 back into the political and economic debates of the 1940s, and then read it forward into the 21st century. The novel reveals itself as something more specific and more unsettling: a critique of state capitalism, or what Orwell called *oligarchical collectivism*.

Orwell was not simply warning against Stalin and Hitler but he was warning against a new global structure in which the differences between *capitalism* and *socialism* had utterly collapsed, leaving behind only a managerial oligarchy that maintained power and authority through permanent war, manufactured scarcity, and the control of language. In the sense, 1984 is less about dictatorship as an abstract evil and more about the economic logic that makes dictatorship sustainable.

Oligarchical Collectivism: Orwell’s Theory of State Capitalism

The key to this reading lies in Emmanuel Goldstein's book, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*. Goldstein critically argues that by the mid-20th century the world had divided into three super states, viz. Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia. Ideologically they claim to be different but economically they are identical.

All these have abolished private property and free markets. But none have technically achieved equality. Instead, they have created a new class structure. The inner party functions as a collective ruling class. It does not own factories in the legal sense, but it controls allocation, distribution, and production. This is state capitalism _the state becomes the sole capitalist. Surplus is not distributed to workers. It is hoarded by the bureaucracy and is used to maintain the hierarchy.

Orwell developed this idea in essays like "*You and the Atomic Bomb*" 1945. He predicted that atomic weapons would make conquest impossible and thus freeze the world into three armed blocs. Without the possibility of total victory, war, would become permanent. Its purpose would no longer be territorial. It would be economic.

Scarcity and Waste as Economic Policy

The most distinctive feature of Oceania's economy is that it is designed to fail its citizens. Goods are deliberately shoddy. Rations are cut and then that cut is announced as a *raise*. Housing is crumbling and the poverty is intentional.

In classical capitalism, crisis comes from overproduction. Factories make too much, prices collapse, workers are laid off. In Oceania, the Party inverts this. It uses perpetual war to destroy the surplus. Bombs, aircraft, ships, and fuels are produced only to be blown up. As Goldstein explains, the war is waged by each ruling group against its own subjects. The purpose is to keep consumption low and to absorb labor. A society with high living standards and free time would begin to ask questions. A society kept at the edge of subsistence level cannot challenge the status quo.

Language, Labor, and the Control of Thought

State capitalism cannot survive if people can name it. This is why Newspeak is so central. Newspeak does not just ban political dissent. It bans economic analysis. Words like *exploitation*, *strike*, *unemployment*, and *class* are removed or given new meanings. Doublethink allows the Party to hold two contradictory economic claims: we are at war for peace, we have raised the chocolate ration by reducing it.

This is Orwell's critique of advertising and propaganda under capitalism, and of slogans under Stalinism. Both systems need to make exploitation unspeakable. Under market capitalism, we talk about labor flexibility instead of precarity. Under state capitalism, we talk about "sacrifice for the war effort." Newspeak is the endpoint of this process.

The mutability of the past serves the same function. If the Party can change economic data, the workers can never compare their wages or living standards across time. History becomes a PR department. Without records of the past, there can be no basis for demanding a better future.

Orwell's Alternative and the Tragedy of the Novel

George Orwell was a democratic socialist. He believed in common ownership, but also in free speech, free press, and elections. His critique in 1984 is therefore two-sided. He rejects corporate

capitalism for producing inequality and imperialism. He rejects state socialism for producing bureaucracy and tyranny.

The tragedy of Winston is not just that he is tortured. It is that by the time he tries to rebel. There is no material alternatives left. The Proles could revolt, but they have been kept ignorant. The Outer Party could organize, but they have been atomized and surveilled. Language itself has been crippled. This is Orwell's warning: *"If you wait until the boot is on the face, it is too late."* The economic and linguistic conditions for resistance must be defended before it is too late.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, 1984 cannot be reduced to a simple warning against totalitarianism dictatorship. At its core, it is Orwell's critique of state capitalism _ a system where political power and economic control fuse into the hands of a small oligarchy. Oceania shows us a world where scarcity is manufactured, war is used to destroy surplus, and language is narrowed to prevent people from even imagining alternatives. Class does not disappear; it is simply renamed, with the Party replacing private owners as the new ruling class. Orwell's message is that without democratic accountability over both the economy and information, any ideology, whether it calls itself capitalist or socialist, will collapse into the same structure of domination. 1984 remains urgent today because it forces us to look beyond labels and ask how power is sustained via poverty, propaganda, surveillance, and the erosion of free thought. The novel's final warning is that when people lose the ability to think and speak freely, they also lose the ability to resist.

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Dedication

“To my caring parents, whose unflinching love and support have been the ultimate guiding forces behind my every successful endeavor.”

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