

Imagined Dystopia – Have Orwell and Huxley Prepared Us for Today’s Reality?

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“Executed rebel alive again, three days after his death!”

Let’s imagine that type of announcement in a tweet or on the front page of today’s newspaper. With the tweet, we’d assume click-baiting, and with the newspaper we’d assume some degree of sensationalism. The article would proceed to provide some background information, report on torture and execution and the burial, and then relate with some skepticism the supposed eye-witness accounts of some fellow rebels. Perhaps a few experts would be asked whether the story could be true. Depending on their affiliations, these experts would give a range of answers. Religious experts might offer the concept of resurrection. Scientists would have to take recourse to considerations of apparent-death phenomena. Based on all the scientific *facts* that have been collected, falsified and verified in the past centuries, it is impossible for a person who was *actually* dead for three days to begin to live again. This story definitely does not scientifically prove a case of life after death.

However, contrary to these scientific facts, billions of people still believe today that these events were reality 2,000 years ago.

And why not? It is a wonderful story that has been offering boundless hope for two millennia. So why destroy it with scientific facts? Or, to put it a different way: If I have an opinion (or a belief), why would I need facts?

I Lying and Trust

Denying facts, or even claiming the opposite is true, i.e. lying, is considered objectionable in almost all philosophies, religions and worldviews. Mainly because lies are viewed as making coexistence more difficult, destroying society and thus ultimately hurting us all.

And people who continue today, contrary to all scientific fact, to claim that dead people can come back to life, that there is life – according to the scientific definition – after death, would be described as lying. But that doesn’t make believers lose their trust in their faith, in the religious representatives of that faith or in society. (Of course, they certainly may lose that trust for other reasons.)

At the same time, many worldviews occasionally look the other way when it comes to various forms of lying, such as when a lie serves to help people coexist more successfully. If we really want to, we could classify the crucifixion story as this type of “white lie.” Still, in many cases, we have to ask: Whose successful coexistence is *really* served here?

In any case, the example illustrates a number of things. For instance, how the definition of reality and truth changes over time. And what influence stories have on history. After all, the narrative of the New Testament was without a doubt one of the most influential stories of the last 2,000 years. We see that stories about the unimaginable have been inspiring people for millennia. Regardless of how real or true they are.

II Edible or Poisonous?

Is that a lion approaching us, or a gazelle? Are these berries edible or poisonous? Facts determine whether we live or die. It is therefore advantageous to know the truth and stick to reality.

So why do we often not do so? Why do we often prefer to *believe* stories that have little or nothing to do with reality? And sometimes *even though we know better*?

There are various theories about this, but we still know very little about the physical and chemical processes involved in what we call consciousness and the formation of consciousness. We cannot even begin to talk about understanding these processes. That is, if we assume that there are just physical and chemical processes, and that there is no form of body-mind dualism involved.

There has, on the other hand, been more observation and research in recent decades about the fact that people *do* form views and opinions in a certain way, and about how they behave.

As a rule, the observations have led to various assumptions and models about the formation of consciousness and of people's opinions. These have made it possible to describe phenomena quite well, whereas the models' predictive abilities are often limited. Today, therefore, we only have partial knowledge and techniques for addressing the resulting human conduct.

It has also been observed that the opinions and conduct of homo sapiens (*framing!* – but we'll get to that) often deviate from what we describe as rational or "reasonable." Which really just means that the underlying model assumes a fundamentally reasonable being is involved. Which may be a problematic way of modeling the situation. The problem could lie either in the assumption that people *are* reasonable, or in the model's definition of *reasonable*.

An interesting example of this is the subject of my most recent novel, *Gier* (which means "greed," or "voracity"). The real work of the likewise real scientists at the London Mathematical Laboratory, which plays an important role in *Gier*, models human decision-making processes in a mathematically different way than does the dominant economic doctrine, with its focus on the utility function. If we use the conventional utility function as a human decision-making model, a number of human behaviors, such as aversion to loss and inexplicable assessments of risk, appear to be "irrational." For example, the behavior displayed by some people of choosing 10 euros right away over 100 euros in three months. The London scientists' model, on the other hand, can explain these (and other "irrational") behaviors – or the behaviors may suddenly seem completely rational according to this model. The model thus explains the empirical observations better than the previous one did. As a consequence, all models that are based on the conventional utility principle would thus need to be called into question. This may also include the model for the formation of consciousness.

In principle, however, this example is simply meant to illustrate the diffuse scientific basis with which we have to work. Here, we make do without the well-known discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of models. Lacking better knowledge, we are only able to use these models as the basis for our work.

Bearing this in mind, we must, in the final analysis, view the interpretations below conditionally.

Nevertheless, it is possible to work with observations that have been made. Therefore, here are just a few examples from among them. (Considering all of them in a comprehensive way would go far beyond the scope of our discussion.)

One known factor in this context would be, for example, what is known as confirmation bias or confirmation error: the fact that most people often, more or less unconsciously, seek information in order to confirm their existing opinion rather than in order to form an initial opinion. They give less weight, or no weight at all, to information that contradicts their opinion. This even holds true for people who would describe themselves as very rational, neutral and balanced. And they rarely change this behavior when it is pointed out to them. Other interventions are needed in order to dissuade them from behaving in this way. Observe yourself while you read this article (and all the background information). What did you think about what you have read thus far? What will you think about what's to come?

We can apply the phenomenon of confirmation bias directly to our present theme: "Imagined Dystopia: Have Orwell and Huxley Prepared Us for Today's Reality?"

In light of today's reality, it is essential that we ask why we are discussing Orwell and Huxley and their dystopias. Why not utopias that perhaps describe worlds with more equality and prosperity than existed when the narratives were written – and some aspects which have likewise become reality?

The answer has to do with the nature of the imagined worlds, but also with that of the worlds in which they came to be.

III Spaces of Not Knowing

Utopias and dystopias, imaginings of ideal or catastrophic worlds, have long been projected into unknown or unattainable space, into spaces we know nothing about, spaces of not knowing, of unknowing, of faith, hope, desire, fear, but also of endless possibilities.

Sometimes, this has been the *past*, generally a long-ago era in which, perhaps, a natural, harmonious "state of nature" is thought to have existed – a kind of backward-looking utopia. An example of such projections is the Christian idea of paradise. Or these imaginings may describe dramatic, conflict-ridden circumstances, the equivalent of dystopias, as we find around the world in many sagas of heroes and gods, in fairy tales and legends.

Likewise, many people continue to project such imaginings into a *belief in their own life after death*, as we find in many religious views: heaven (utopia), hell (dystopia), reincarnation (depending), etc.

As long as every square inch of the world had not been explored, it was possible to displace such imaginings into *unknown realms*, usually mysterious islands, sometimes the interior of the earth, in which a lost traveler became stranded and which, upon their return, was then described. Today, the focus has shifted to a different as-yet-unexplored realm: the universe and distant planets, or even parallel worlds and other dimensions, favorite settings for science fiction and fantasy.

And finally, there is also the realm that many people first think of for projections of other worlds: the future.

Essentially, there are two kinds of imagined worlds. One may describe the present in a somewhat cryptic way, or imagine a linear continuation of the present. Therefore, works of this kind can often be described more as critiques of the present than as utopias or dystopias. The most well-known examples of this type from recent centuries include George Orwell's *1984*. As in his *Animal Farm* allegory as well, he is concerned primarily with critiquing totalitarian systems like the former Soviet Union under Stalin.

Another kind of imagined world attempts the opposite: to overcome the present by proposing a counter-world, or alternative version. Both kinds can be instrumentalized in particular ways and have been used accordingly.

Ultimately, this is a critical point only for those projections that can at some point be tested. That is, for which opinion, attitude or belief can and must be measured against facts and knowledge.

With the past, this is often difficult because its tracks and traces have disappeared. For life after death, it is impossible. (Although many would, as indicated above, deny this, and then the discussion starts all over again...) The remote locations were never found during the narrators' lifetimes, and they therefore did not experience the embarrassment of having their visions tested. That left the future. Which at some point, arrives. And as we can see from the many imaginings that were created once upon a time and then often forgotten and sometimes unearthed again, almost none of the visions became reality just as their authors described them. Not even the great classics, from Jules Verne to H.G. Wells to Huxley or Orwell.

After all, the same thing happens to them as happens today with shorter-term prognoses: If something is asserted long enough, it is considered prophetic as soon as the circumstances of conditions arise. Which brings us back to confirmation bias. At least as long as less value is placed on other information.

IV Cui Bono?

So far, I have purposefully not differentiated between utopias and dystopias. After all, they are two sides of the same coin. Projects of a different life, sometimes more positive and sometimes more negative. (And even that depends on one's perspective. For example, not all readers welcomed the ideas described in Sir Thomas More's novel *Utopia*, which gave the genre its name).

Therefore, the real question to be asked is why dystopias are currently so much more en vogue than utopias, or why they are viewed as more correct descriptions of our world (which, by the way, has definitely not always been the case, for example if we think about Jules Verne's technologically optimistic utopias).

Perhaps it is just the mere-exposure effect, one of the most important psychological effects in communication and thus in the formation of consciousness or reality: More frequent observation causes things that were originally viewed as foreign or neutral to become familiar and be assessed (more) positively over time. In other words, you can get used to anything.

Maybe we've just been offered certain dystopias for a long enough period of time. But, cui bono?

Of course, there are different assumptions about the current popularity of dystopias, which we can choose to accept or reject. However, that doesn't really play a role in our question here, because – as mentioned earlier – we can only draw on partial aspects of past dystopias and utopias to describe our current reality. Or, to put it differently, reality is a mix of past dystopias and utopias, mixed with a lot of unpredicted circumstances as well.

Some utopias and dystopias, like *1984* or *Brave New World*, were disseminated so broadly in part because they were, at the time of their publication, also especially well suited for propagating particular ideas – or for countering certain ideas such as dictatorship, in the case of *1984*, which appeared during the Cold War. In the right place at the right time, a narrative will find suitably

motivated fans. For example, without Peter and Paul as its great disseminators, what would have become of the story of one obscure sectarian among many in the Middle East?

V What Is Truth?

When searching for the truth, we quickly stumble across obstacles; the truth is that we don't even agree on just what the term means. The same applies for associated concepts like actuality, reality, certainties and facts. The attempt succeeds best for facts and certainties. Maybe that's why we especially like to refer to facts today – because we are most likely to be able to agree on what the term means.

That also constitutes the big advantage and thus the success of the scientific approach as the foundation of our modern interpretation of the world.

Even if I, as a layperson, have to *believe* scientists' claims, I could myself *know* what they do, if I had the time needed to conduct all the experiments that many of them have conducted over centuries in order to disprove or prove hypotheses. I could – at least, if I had enough time – view and read the documentation of those experiments in order to understand them.

Developing scientific understanding gives me a foundation for at least a possibility of learning the truth. It was this approach that first made progress possible, as we have experienced it since about the time of the Enlightenment.

The spiritual experiences of individuals represent the opposite of this. Information about such experiences remains a claim, whether it is (subjectively) true or not, and must remain so, because scientific methods cannot be used to experimentally reproduce it in a neutral fashion or to experimentally prove or refute it. Such claims are therefore difficult to distinguish from lies.

With the scientific method, we are in any case on more solid ground.

And facts don't change just because people cling to false ideas despite the presence of those facts, or because people lie about them.

The facts of a case can be demonstrated and proven. Thus, if a case involves particular facts, it doesn't involve others (better here not to consider the particle/wave question from quantum physics). Thus, there cannot be any "alternative" facts. Or "false" facts. If there really are additional facts, then it's because the case was not comprehensively described by the original facts. It's like the analogy of the blind people and the elephant: A person who touches only the leg describes the animal as a column, one who touches only the tail says it's a rope, one who touches the trunk calls it a snake, and so on.

Language is simultaneously traitorous, treacherous and useful here. The "alternative facts" formulation at first glance creates the impression that the other side has so far only described the elephant's trunk – even if the "alternative fact" is a total lie. And, on the other hand, anyone who can demonstrate that their interlocutor has told such a lie should call it that, and not describe it as "alternative" or "false facts," since those phrases still acknowledge the existence of facts – i.e. of a truth.

Which also applies for other, newer phenomena, such as "virtual reality." Although it is called reality, the object of the description will, for the foreseeable future, remain merely virtual, not more – a copy

or image. And people know and recognize that it is not reality, as is also the case with painting, newspapers, television and computer games. There is nothing new under the sun.

Modern methods of counterfeiting are to a certain extent problematic: Software can be used to put faces of celebrities into pornographic and other videos, or a politician's gestures and speech can be imitated in a video in such a way that the human senses cannot perceive the deception; these methods are described as "deep fakes." However, counterfeiting is nothing new. Sooner or later, there will be mechanisms to correct and shed light on such forgery. The question here is just whether "later" will be too late.

One of the biggest challenges remains, as it always has been, the trustworthiness of an information source, or how trustworthy people deem that source to be (two aspects that are certainly not always equivalent).

As the "alternative facts" or "virtual reality" examples show, all formulations and stories necessarily place their communication, unconsciously or intentionally, in a particular context, a framework; they supply certain prerequisites and influences for the interpretation of the (alleged) facts that are provided. Depending on the phenomenon, terms like "priming" and "framing" are used. (This is, after all, exactly what Orwell's "newspeak" term from *1984* meant: conscious changes to the meaning of language, or the creation of new words, a technique we ourselves are also using the moment we accuse others of "newspeak" in a conversation). These are techniques that have also long been intentionally used to shape consciousness and opinion, for example "nudging," a term that has likewise become relatively well known in recent years.

The debate about these techniques points, as the title of the Trilogue Salzburg also implicitly does, to the heart of the matter: What resources can we use, and what possibilities do we have, for (re)gaining a shared understanding of reality and truth? And this leads us to an important question: Was there ever a shared understanding of truth?

VI The Democratization of Truth

For a very long time, interpretive authority in the discourse about "truth" was reserved for a select few: the Church, rulers, nobility, philosophers. Whoever had power defined the truth.

The earth is the center of the universe.

The societal order is determined by God.

Even within 20th-century democracies, for a long time only a select few had this authority, primarily the mass media and those who could use the media as a megaphone or who were used by those media. In dictatorships it is still the ruling groups, now using means that make Orwell's *1984* look like a birthday party. Think, for example, of the surveillance and "social credit" system that is arising in China.

In Western democracies, all that changed with the Internet. Here, interpretive authority has been jettisoned, at least superficially. Today, almost anyone is permitted and able to say and disseminate almost anything without being penalized. We are experiencing "the democratization of truth."

This circumstance makes it clear that truth and reality are far from being perceived as having such clear definitions as they appeared to have in the past, when other voices simply were not heard. That of course irritates, above all, the past holders of interpretive authority, who see their power

disappearing. This is no different from what has often happened before, for example when the Church lost its interpretive authority within society to science during the Enlightenment, or the nobility to the bourgeoisie.

The new agents of power in this process are the enablers of this cacophony that have emerged in recent years – and become its moderators. Ultimately, the form of the discourse depends on their moderation.

Which makes it all the worse for those who once held all the power. After all, these new possibilities allow the former interpreters of the truth to be caught more often than ever as they themselves fail to adhere to the truth demanded of others, and even to be confronted with their own Machiavellian and narcissistic lies. As in the past, the examples today are still innumerable, ranging from decades-long, often deadly propaganda lies by various companies in industries such as tobacco, oil and pharmaceuticals, to ongoing incidents in the financial industry (money-laundering, interest-rate manipulation, etc.), to fraudulent emissions software, to corruption, to illicit funds in business and politics or alleged weapons of mass destruction in order to instigate a war, to demanding respect for human rights while torturing and doing business with despots oneself (preferably – careful, language and framing again! – under headings like “realpolitik,” as if the particular decision were the only one to be anchored in general reality and, thus, possibly true, and not subject to certain very specific interests), to lies about sexual and other violence. To name just a few.

VII The Power of Truth

So, is this discussion even about truth or reality, or even about a shared understanding thereof? Or is it simply about power? And is the appeal to the lost shared understanding of truth and reality just the helpless complaint of those who have been stripped of their power because their interpretations and their lies are no longer dominant?

Tellingly, the new holders of power do not join in that complaint. At most, they may take occasional small pretend measures against lies, false reports, etc. (e.g. deleting fake accounts, calling out lies).

As the lies of those who were stripped of power became clearer and clearer, there was a drastic loss of trust in traditional societal, political and economic institutions. Thus, what happened was exactly the reason why most religions, philosophies, doctrines and worldviews condemn lies.

This circumstance is made even worse because individuals who become witnesses of this unmasking and victims of the loss of trust often do not trust the new authorities either. And rightly so, when we consider the increasing number of scandals and the scope of their influence (secret surveillance, data theft, manipulation, fraud, etc.).

Which is why it doesn't matter at all whether the new holders of power tell the truth or not. On the contrary, to a certain extent, with all their lies, half-truths and contradictions they are actually more truthful than their predecessors. Which does not, however, make them authentic or honest.

The solution to the problem, if there is one, may thus lie less in complex communicative, discursive and manipulative techniques with which all the observed psychological phenomena – from mere exposure to confirmation bias to framing, nudging and all the others – can be leveraged or instrumentalized in order to bring the great majority of people back to a (supposedly) shared picture of the truth, or reality. In a diverse, open society, at least, this desired homogeneous picture of truth

will be impossible to create, and may not even be desirable at all in light of the idea of openness and diversity.

The actual focus in such a society is probably more on agreeing on discursive forms of talking *about* truth finding in order to begin to approximate the necessary shared understandings.

However, the solution may even be something that is much easier, that people have long known of and asked for, something that requires no special skills: Those who demand the truth must strive for it themselves and deliver it themselves when possible. Ultimately, that may help us live more easily even with a few lies.