

## The abolition of the Past: History in George Orwell's 1984

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**Abstract.** Sometimes novels teach us more about a certain age or period than many history books. A work of fiction, by a Balzac, a Dickens or a Dostoyevsky, is more illuminating about nineteenth century's French, British or Russian societies, and its social conditions, mores, mentality, than many historiographical studies dealing with that period. George Orwell's *1984* is mainly considered a book about political totalitarianism. For Bertrand Russell it depicted, 'with very great power, the horrors of a well-established totalitarian regime of whatever type.' Almost everything is under control: the individual, family, society, emotions, sex, feelings, thoughts, and History. By reading *1984* and by following Winston Smith, the main character, who works in the Ministry of Truth and whose work reminds us and resembles what historians do, we are faced with history's and historian's fundamental problems: what is the Past? How do we know it? What is knowledge and, in this case, the knowledge of the past? What is History? Is it there for historians to discover or is it a historian's construction? Current and future historians have more to learn with this novel, and with other works of fiction, about their own craft than with many books on historiography, epistemological theory or methodology. This paper tries to use this novel as a guide for our own *métier*.

**Keywords:** George Orwell; 1984; history; historian; epistemology; ontology

### 1. Introduction

'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen' (Orwell, 1949).

From the very beginning, with this opening sentence from George Orwell's *1984*, we are made aware of the fact that the clocks were striking, not one, but thirteen. This is a society where Time, and its very notion, how it is perceived and materialised, has certainly suffered some kind of mutation, has been modified. When Winston, the main character in the novel, begins to write his diary he does not know 'with any certainty that this was 1984' because 'it was never possible nowadays to pin down any date within a year or two' (Orwell, p. 8).

According to E. H. Carr, 'history begins when men begin to think of the passage of time in terms not of natural processes - the cycle of the seasons, the human life-span - but of a series of specific events in which men are consciously involved and which they can consciously influence' (Carr, 1961). Historians have to deal with Time and if Time has changed, its notion altered, what are the consequences and the implications?

In chapters II and III of part Three, during the interrogation and dialogue between Winston Smith and another character of the novel, O'Brien, we are faced with two different conceptions of Time, in this case the Past, conceptions which summarise all the angst of a historian. O'Brien asks Winston if, in his opinion, the past has real existence and, saying that Winston is no metaphysician, he continues by affirming that 'until this moment you had never considered what is meant by existence. I will put it more precisely. Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects where the past is still happening?'

Winston replies in the negative and O'Brien questions him 'then where does the past exist, if at all?'

'In records. It is written down.'

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‘In records. And - ?’

‘In the mind. In human memories.’

‘In memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?’

‘But how can you stop people remembering things? [...] It is involuntarily. It is outside oneself. How can you control memory? You have not controlled mine!’ (Orwell, pp. 251-252).

Replying to Winston, O’Brien says that ‘reality is not external’ and only exists in the human mind, and nowhere else (p. 252), and that nothing exists except through human consciousness (p. 268).

Margaret Macmillan quotes an episode which occurred in 2002 when a senior adviser of the White House said to journalist Ron Suskind that ‘we’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do’ (Macmillan, pp. 144-145).

We find that dialogue between O’Brien and Winston Smith in the final part of the book and throughout the novel other problems are raised, like what is History, with capital H, and what is history, the science/art/discipline done/made by historians. These themes and others like forgery, falsification, selection of facts or evidences, the role and importance of a historian’s personal memory and personal experience, as well as the memories and experiences of those who are the object of study, problems posed by language and its evolution, and the responsibilities of a historian as a citizen, will be developed with more detail below.

## 2. A historian’s craft

In chapter IV of part One (Orwell, pp. 38-48), we can follow Winston Smith’s job, which is similar to what historians do, constructing history, updating the past. As soon as he discovers or uncovers new facts, in this case the messages or orders from the Party, through the Ministry of Truth, Winston Smith alters, ‘or as the official phrase had it’, rectifies speeches, news, economic figures and so on.

‘As soon as all the corrections which happened to be necessary in any particular number of the *Times* had been assembled and collated, that number would be reprinted, the original copy destroyed and the corrected copy placed on the files in its stead. This process of continuous alteration was applied not only to newspapers, but to books, periodicals, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, films, sound tracks, cartoons, photographs – to every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance. Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date. All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary. In no case would it have been possible, once the deed was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place’ (Orwell, pp. 40-41 and 183).

As E. H. Carr said in his famous George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures in 1961, particularly in the first one, ‘The historian and his facts’, the historian is necessarily selective. ‘The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate. He has the dual task of discovering the few significant facts and turning them into facts of history, and of discarding the many insignificant facts as unhistorical’. Then he quotes the American historian Carl Becker, who, in 1910, argued that ‘the facts of history do not exist for any historian till he creates them’. The facts of history never come to us *pure*, since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder.

It is true that the events depicted in *1984* occur in a society with a totalitarian regime, but how aware are the people of that fact? A future historian wanting to know better the society and history of the world depicted in Oceania, the place where the novel occurs, would actually know it? A history of Oceania in 1984, based on material evidence, reliable records and other trustworthy sources, would not reflect the actual History, would not have any connection with anything in the real world. People who had actually existed, would no longer be heard of because they had been vaporised, abolished. Every single record or trace of that person had been destroyed and, so, it would have never existed. On the other hand, people who had never

actually existed were brought into existence, with a few lines of print and a couple of faked photographs, like Comrade Ogilvy.

‘Comrade Ogilvy, unimagined an hour ago, was now a fact. Comrade Ogilvy, who had never existed in the present, now existed in the past, and when once the act of forgery was forgotten, he would exist just as authentically, and upon the same evidence, as Charlemagne or Julius Caesar’ (Orwell, pp.47-48). ‘It might very well be that literally every word in the history books, even the things that one accepted without question, was pure fantasy. For all he knew there might never have been any such law as the *jus primae noctis*, or any such creature as a capitalist, or any such garment as a top hat. Everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth’ (Orwell, pp.74-75). ‘It was always difficult to determine the age of a London building. Anything large and impressive, if it was reasonably new in appearance, was automatically claimed as having been built since the Revolution, while anything that was obviously of earlier date was ascribed to some dim period called the Middle Ages. The centuries of capitalism were held to have produced nothing of any value. One could not learn history from architecture any more than one could learn it from books. Statues, inscriptions, memorial stones, the names of streets – anything that might throw light upon the past had been systematically altered’ (Orwell, p. 98). ‘Just once in his life he had possessed – *after* the event: that was what counted – concrete, unmistakable evidence of an act of falsification’ (Orwell, pp.74-75).

As Marc Ferro (Ferro, 2002 and 2003) and Margaret Macmillan have shown, one does not have to live in a totalitarian society or under an authoritarian government to witness the kind of ‘use and abuse’ of history depicted above. In France, the *lois mémorielles* try to impose the official position of the state, in this case the French one, regarding some historical facts, and in 2005 a group of prominent historians and other intellectuals formed *Liberté pour l’Histoire* to fight against political pressures on the work of historians, who are facing a growing mingling between politics, ideology and history. In Australia, the United States or Canada, the pressure is on those historians who want to talk about the fate of the Aboriginals, or what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the role in Second World War (Macmillan, pp. 122-128).

### 3. What we feel most, we remember best

Ordinary historians, when practising their craft, voluntarily or not, select facts, choose some and leave aside others. And since we are dealing with human beings, personal memory and personal experience also have an important role in that task. But, as Kim Stanley Robinson says, through Hjalmar Nederland, a character in his novel *Iccheng*, memory is the weak link (Robinson, pp. 67-68), and it was extraordinarily difficult for Winston ‘to think his way backward into the dim period of his early childhood’ because ‘beyond the late Fifties everything faded. When there were no external records that you could refer to, even the outline of your own life lost its sharpness. You remembered huge events which had quite probably not happened, you remembered the detail of incidents without being able to recapture their atmosphere, and there were long blank periods to which you could assign nothing’ (Orwell, p. 33). If there are not written records to refer to, or spoken records for that case, you cannot demonstrate that things and events were different. For instance, it was announced that the chocolate ration would be reduced from thirty grams to twenty (Orwell, p. 27), but in the next day people were demonstrating to thank Big Brother for raising the chocolate ration to twenty grams a week - ‘Was he *alone* in the possession of a memory?’ (Orwell, p. 59).

At that moment, ‘in 1984 (if it was 1984), Oceania was at war with Eurasia and in alliance with Eastasia’, and although the official line said that it had always been like that, Winston knew that it had been ‘only four years since Oceania had been at war with Eastasia and in alliance with Eurasia’. His personal memory, which ‘was not satisfactorily under control’, reminded him that History had been different, putting him at odds with the official line, that the change of partners, of allies and enemies had never happened. Winston knew that because he remembered, it was a knowledge that existed only in his own consciousness, but ‘if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed – if all records told the same tale – then the lie passed into history and became truth. [...] And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered’ (Orwell, p. 35).

One of the questions raised here, for historians, is how to accommodate personal experiences and personal memories in the narrative. What to do when the personal testimony of someone who suffered, or caused, some kind of violence, be it at war, concentration camps, dislocation, displacement, expulsion,

colonialism, torture, or any other personal experience, is not recorded or registered in any place or goes against what is taught in history books or, for that matter, at schools?

In Spain, nowadays, there are many conflicting memories, not only at a personal but also collective level, to use Maurice Halbwachs' expression. Many individuals, who were at one side or the other of the 1936-39 Civil War conflict, or their descendants, have different feelings and memories derived precisely from their personal experiences, and at a collective level one can find conflicting perspectives on History. On one side we have those who talk about, and share, a Spanish historical memory, and on the other side we have those who talk about and defend a Basque, Catalan or Galician collective memory, different from the Spanish one and, sometimes, in opposition to it. And a powerful and effective mean to inculcate 'official history' is through the educational system.<sup>2</sup>

In Winston's schooldays it had only been the helicopter to be claimed as a Party invention, and a dozen years later when Julia, Winston's lover and much younger than him, was at school it was already claiming the airplane; 'one generation more, and it would be claiming the steam engine' (Orwell, p. 154). 'The past', for Winston, 'had not merely been altered, it had been actually destroyed. For how could you establish even the most obvious fact when there existed no record outside your own memory?' (Orwell, p. 36). 'Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality was tacitly denied by their [the Party] philosophy. The heresy of heresies was common sense. And what was terrifying was not that they would kill you for thinking otherwise, but that they might be right. For, after all, how do we know that [...] the past is unchangeable? If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind itself is controllable – what then?' (Orwell, p. 80). For O'Brien, Winston suffers 'from a defective memory. You are unable to remember real events, and you persuade yourself that you remember other events which never happened' (Orwell, p. 249).

Memory, as Psychology shows us, can be elusive. We all remember fragments of the past, sometimes with great detail, but we do not always remember with accuracy. There are many occasions when we think that we were in a certain place or did something specific, but that was not the case, or the other way around; or that we did something or someone did something to us but we decided to forget it. We think that memories are like carvings in stone; once done, they do not change. But the fact is that memory is not only selective but also malleable. We edit our memories over the years partly out of a natural human instinct to make our own roles more attractive or important, and because times and attitudes change over the years (Macmillan, pp. 45-47).

Talking to Julia, Winston asks her if she realises that the past, 'starting from yesterday, has been actually abolished? If it survives anywhere, it's in a few solid objects with no words attached to them, like that lump of glass there. Already we know almost literally nothing about the Revolution and the years before the Revolution. Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book has been rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the party is always right. I *know*, of course, that the past is falsified, but it would never be possible for me to prove it, even when I did the falsification myself. After the thing is done, no evidence ever remains. The only evidence is inside my own mind, and I don't know with any certainty that any other human being shares my memories' (Orwell, p. 156).

Another important aspect of personal memory has to do with the value that we attach, or choose to attach, to personal experiences. When Winston Smith is in a bar trying to obtain information from an old man, who with 'a few others like him were the last links that now existed with the vanished world of capitalism', Smith gets disappointed. What he wants to know is different from what the old man has to tell and the importance that each one gives to the past is divergent, because for Winston Smith, like a historian choosing what is considered useful for a research, 'the few scattered survivors from the ancient world were incapable of comparing one age with another'.

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<sup>2</sup> For real examples of how the educational system 'uses and misuses history' see Macmillan, pp. 74-78, 88-89, and 113-122.

It is a curious attitude, because although Winston considers one's personal experience as valid, in this case, for him, the old man's, and others', experience was worthless. 'They remembered a million useless things, a quarrel with a workmate, a hunt for a lost bicycle pump, the expression on a long-dead sister's face, the swirls of dust on a windy morning seventy years ago; but all the relevant facts were outside the range of their vision' (Orwell, pp. 81-93).

Who defines what is worthless, useless, or not? Based on what criteria do historians consider some facts as relevant? And how sensitive, and sensible, should historians be when dealing with painful memories? Something that is a 'scientific inquiry' may provoke the recalling of very deep and profound personal experiences and memories on others. Even if a personal memory is not real, and we have seen that it is very difficult to establish the veracity or not of something so personal, the one who is experiencing it feels it like being true and, if it feels true, is it true?

When O'Brien is interrogating Winston, he says 'You believed that three men, three one-time Party members named Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford – men who were executed for treachery and sabotage after making the fullest possible confession – were not guilty of the crimes they were charged with. You believed that you had seen unmistakable documentary evidence proving that their confessions were false. There was a certain photograph about which you had a hallucination. You believed that you had actually held it in your hands. It was a photograph something like this.' Then O'Brien shows to Winston an oblong slip of newspaper with another copy of the photograph of Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford at the Party function in New York, which Winston had chanced upon eleven years before and destroyed.

'It exists!' cried Winston.

'No', said O'Brien.

O'Brien then destroys that fragment of history, of the past, in a memory hole, an orifice in the wall for the disposal of waste paper, and says:

'Ashes. Not even identifiable ashes. Dust. It does not exist. It never existed.'

'But it did exist! It does exist! It exists in memory. I remember it. You remember it.'

'I do not remember it', says O'Brien (Orwell, pp. 250-251).

#### **4. Conclusion**

In 1998, Michael Gazzaniga, a Professor of Psychology, wrote that the left side of the brain 'weaves its story in order to convince itself and you that it is in full control. The interpreter influences other mental capacities, such as our ability to accurately recall past events. We are poor at doing that, and it is the interpreter's fault. We know this because of neuropsychologists' research on the problem. The memory's accuracy is influenced by which hemisphere is used. Only the left brain has an interpreter, so the left hemisphere has a predilection to interpret events that affect the accuracy of memory. The interpreterless right hemisphere does not. This finding is consistent with the idea of a left-hemisphere interpreter that constructs theories to assimilate perceived information into a comprehensible whole. In so doing, however, the elaboration processing has a deleterious effect on the accuracy of reconstructing the past. What is so adaptive about having what amounts to a spin doctor in the left brain? Isn't telling the truth always best? Still, the interpreter is working on a different level. It is really trying to keep our personal story together. To do that, we have to learn to lie to ourselves. In order to convince someone else of the truth of our story we have to convince ourselves. We need something that expands the actual facts of our experience into an ongoing narrative, the self-image we have been building in our mind for years. The spin doctoring that goes on keeps us believing we are good people, that we are in control and mean to do good' (Gazzaniga, pp. 25-27).

In 1971, Paul Veyne shocked French historians, particularly from the *Annales* School, by saying that history was a narrative in which the historian constructed a plot around certain facts chosen by him. In 1961, as we have seen, Edward Hallett Carr, had already said that historians selected from a wide variety, not to say infinity, of facts those that they considered as historical. With those facts they construct a narrative which they consider as having an internal coherence and logic, to convince themselves and others that things happened in a certain way.

May we consider, and paraphrasing Michael Gazzaniga, that the historian is the interpreter that influences our ability to accurately recall past events? Is the historian really looking for something new or for something that will reinforce what we already know, or think to know? Will people only remember, or recall, what the historians have considered as history, affecting with that the way we interpret events, which, in turn, affect the accuracy of memory, of history?

Historians, by constructing history, with their personal preferences, elaborate theories to assimilate new information, new facts, into a comprehensible whole, and, in doing so, like the left side of the brain, they have a deleterious effect on the accuracy of reconstructing the past. But, since we cannot apprehend the past in its entirety, perhaps that effect is the price to pay for our internal well-being. And, once more, like the description made by Michael Gazzaniga, do historians try to keep our personal, collective history together and, to do that, they have to learn to lie to themselves and to society at large? In order to convince someone else of the accuracy, of the historicity, of our history we have to convince ourselves. That is why new facts are integrated in a way that they make sense with what we already know. Or should historians deconstruct history even if that means going against ‘what is true’?

In 1949, George Orwell, with his *1984*, using fiction, showed and raised, perhaps unintentionally, all the questions that in 1961 Professor Carr, a historian, would raise, and something that Psychology and Neuroscience are only finding now.

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