Historical Context for 1984

Excerpt from Warning, Alternatives, and Action: The Totalistic Dystopias of the Twentieth Century in *We, Brave New World,* and *Nineteen Eighty-four. –*Peter G. Stillman

The first half of the twentieth century in Western Europe shattered many nineteenth-century hopes of peace, progress, and human flourishing. The Great War destroyed illusions about Western civilization, democracy, and humanism, as Western Europeans fought and killed each other in wars that were supported by their citizens and popular political parties—and obliterated towns, churches, and cultural artifacts in the process. After the war, democracy seemed fragile, disorderly, and ineffective in many countries, from Russia during the 1917 revolutions to Weimar Germany, Italy before Mussolini, and Spain before Franco, and capitalism seemed vulnerable to recessions, inflation, and then the Great Depression. The rule of a single party or person promised not only political peace but also the continuation and expansion of the scientific, technical, and organizational accomplishments of Western modernity. Dictators, fascist leaders, and totalitarian rulers all promised that order would be restored (and the causes of disorder removed), that trains would run on time, and that modern complex societies would be managed effectively.

Concurrently, the optimistic utopias of Edward Bellamy, William Morris, and H. G. Wells were countered in the first half of the twentieth century with dystopias—imagined bad societies, created by intensifying menacing current trends. These dystopias recognized the malignant uses of political power and

the ominous potential of modern scientific technology to enslave human beings. The three most famous dystopias of the first half of the twentieth century are Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Writing during times of political and cultural malaise, increasing organization of social life, and pessimism about the humane uses of science and technology, Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell are attuned to the dangerous new possibilities for scientistic or totalistic societies,' where modern scientific technologies are welded to the increasingly powerful modern state, promising stability and even happiness but also generating a totalistic or totalitarian collectivism that undermines individual freedom, societies in which "people love their servitude."^

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