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Rebellion and conservatism: the lessons of 1984

Jean-Claude Michéa

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A transcript of a 1995 talk in which Michéa discusses the continuing relevance of the ideas of the self-proclaimed “tory anarchist”, George Orwell, featuring: Orwell’s concepts of “generous anger” and “common decency”; the moral bankruptcy of the “totalitarian intellectuals” whose desire for power was rooted in resentment; the left’s disastrous “uncritical approval” of “the mechanization” and “unlimited modernization of the world”; and concludes the talk with a call for a “*critical conservatism*”, which Michéa characterizes as “one of the necessary pillars for any radical critique of supermodernity and the synthetic ways of life” it is imposing on us.

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*This article is a transcript of a talk given in November 1995 at a meeting of the Montpellier Group of the Anarchist Federation. It was published in Jean-Claude Michéa’s book on **George Orwell, Orwell, anarchiste tory**, Editions Climats, 1995. (There is a Spanish translation of Jean-Claude Michéa’s book, **La escuela de ignorancia**, Acuarela Libros, Madrid, 2002. [for an English language translation, see: <http://libcom.org/library/school-ignorance-its-modern-conditions-jean-claude-mich%C3%A9a>]) This online version of the present text was originally published on sinDominio’s Biblioweb on June 25, 2003, the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of George Orwell, in homage to his memory.*

In multiple aspects of his philosophy, George Orwell often comes close to the anarchist sensibility. He explicitly admits this himself in *Homage to Catalonia*, when he states: “As far as my purely personal preferences went I would have liked to join the Anarchists.” (Chapter 8). In fact, the defense of imprisoned anarchists was one of the main purposes of the *Freedom Defense Committee*, which Orwell directed along with Herbert Read. It

is impossible, however, to consider the author of *1984* as an anarchist in the doctrinal and militant sense of the term. In none of his essays does he advocate the idea that a stateless society is either possible or even desirable. In actuality, Orwell was simply a radical democrat, and therefore a supporter of a state of rights, one capable of exercising its functions “with the greatest efficacy and the fewest possible obstacles”.¹

Thus, the fact that Orwell defined himself on various occasions as a *tory anarchist* is above all else evidence for the complexity of his political thought. Nor should we forget that, for the author, these quips were more like jokes than theoretical concepts, although, as Simon Leys correctly observes, this formula constitutes “the best definition of his political temperament”.² This expression will constitute the starting point of my attempt to identify certain aspects of *1984* that are generally little known or underestimated.

The story told in *1984* is, above all, the story of the rebellion of the individual, Winston Smith, against the absolute powers of the rulers of Oceania. But at the end of the novel this re-

¹ See the manifesto written by Orwell for The League for The Dignity and Rights of Man (quoted in B. Crick, *Orwell: une vie*, 1984, p. 432).

² This observation on the part of Simon Leys (*Orwell ou l'orreur de la politique*, 1984, p. 27) coincides with the central analysis of George Woodcock, an anarchist militant and friend of Orwell (specifically, in Chapter 3, “Orwell, Radical or Tory?” of his book, *Orwell's Message: 1984 and the Present*, Harbour Publishing, 1984). We shall take this opportunity to point out that Orwell's main reproach against the contemporary forms of anarchism was more directed at their fascination with modernity rather than their proposal of a stateless society: for Orwell, “Read is too kind a critic. The range of his sympathies, as I pointed out earlier, is very wide, perhaps too wide. The only thing he acutely dislikes is conservatism [...] He is always on the side of the young against the old [...] he is in favour of anarchism because the political Conservatives, including the official Left, don't like that. The contradiction into which this leads him remains unresolved”. (*The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Volume 4, *In Front of Your Nose: 1945-1950*, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968, pp. 50-51. This quotation is from a 1945 review of Herbert Read's *A Coat of Many Colours: Occasional Essays*).

bellion is defeated. Thus, *1984* is apparently the story of a failure. What has rarely been pointed out about the failure of Winston's rebellion, however, is that it was not due to the fact that any rebellion against the power of Big Brother is impossible, but rather to the fact that his own rebellion is basically a false one. On the one hand, he chooses to do without the help of the proletarians, when, in reality, their massive and silent presence constantly hovers over the narrative. Later, when Winston finally decides to take action and organize, he joins the mysterious "Brotherhood" of the no less mysterious Goldstein, an organization that will finally be revealed as a spurious opposition group, created and manipulated by the Party. This is therefore the first political lesson of the novel: although the rebellion of the individual against tyrannical power is always understandable from the psychological point of view, there is no a priori guarantee that the ideas and actions that emerge from this rebellion will be legitimate or even just effective. There certainly are alienated rebellions, that is, rebellions that are perfectly adjusted to the logic of the systems that they claim to combat and which often contribute to reinforce those systems' effects. For Orwell, this occurs whenever a rebellion does not proceed from the "generous anger" that, for example, inspired Dickens (as we shall see, this generous anger is always linked to *common decency*), but when its deep psychological roots are located in envy, hatred and resentment. No authentic rebellion can arise from this poisoned spring.³ And in such cases, those

³ Carlyle is a good example of this kind of false rebellion. For "the other symptom of Carlyle's egoism was his personal unhappiness.... even Carlyle's occasional championship of the poor came more from a desire to thump society than from benevolence. Spleen, of course, is the exact word for Carlyle's peculiar temper; the spleen of the unconscious egoist, the denouncer of this and that, the discoverer of new sins." (George Orwell, "Review of The Two Carlyles by Osbert Burdett" (originally published in The Adelphi, March 1931), in George Orwell, The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: An Age Like This, 1920-1940, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1968, p. 35.)

who are possessed by their own hatred are perfectly capable of imagining that they are the living negation of the reigning despotism, but, to use cinematographic terms, they are merely the negative of the same movie. One need only read the famous scene in which Winston joins the “Brotherhood” to see to just what extent, as Evelyn Waugh pointed out, this peculiar organization is just another gang, otherwise indistinguishable from the Party.

He began asking his questions in a low, expressionless voice, as though this were a routine, a sort of catechism, most of whose answers were known to him already.

‘You are prepared to give your lives?’

‘Yes.’

‘You are prepared to commit murder?’

‘Yes.’

‘To commit acts of sabotage which may cause the death of hundreds of innocent people?’

‘Yes.’

‘To betray your country to foreign powers?’

‘Yes.’

‘You are prepared to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to encourage prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases — to do anything which is likely to cause demoralization and weaken the power of the Party?’

‘Yes.’

‘If, for example, it would somehow serve our interests to throw sulphuric acid in a child’s face — are you prepared to do that?’

respect to anything, a fear that stands out in the thinking of most left wing intellectuals, has ended up confirming the current unity of the radiant future of the cyberworld and its spiritual complement, the “liberal-libertarian” spirit that dominates the fallacious world of the spectacle and of the communications media.

An era in which the most elementary trivialities are considered to be paradoxes is a very curious one. When, however, over the entire course of the 20th century, the historical ambitions of the left have been capable of being so easily utilized against the people, when progressivism presents itself as the simple idealized truth of capital,¹⁴ it is time to openly adopt a certain critical conservatism, which, today, represents one of the necessary pillars for any radical critique of supermodernity and the synthetic ways of life that it is attempting to impose upon us. This was Orwell’s message. It is our task to restore the philosophical dignity that corresponds to his idea of the *tory anarchist*.

And this is so much the case that Socialists are often unable to grasp that the opposite opinion exists. As a rule the most persuasive argument they can think of is to tell you that the present mechanization of the world is as nothing to what we shall see when Socialism is established. Where there is one aeroplane now, in those days there will be fifty! All the work that is now done by hand will then be done by machinery: everything that is now made of leather, wood, or stone will be made of rubber, glass, or steel; there will be no disorder, no loose ends, no wildernesses, no wild animals, no weeds, no disease, no poverty, no pain—and so on and so forth. The Socialist world is to be above all things an ‘ordered’ world, an ‘efficient’ world. But it is precisely from that vision of the future as a sort of glittering Wells-world that sensitive minds recoil. Please notice that this essentially fat-bellied version of ‘progress’ is not an integral part of Socialist doctrine; but it has come to be thought of as one, with the result that the temperamental conservatism which is latent in all kinds of people is easily mobilized against Socialism.” (The Road to Wigan Pier.)

¹⁴ Concerning the critique of progressive mythology, one should reflect upon the excellent book by Pierre Thuillier, *La Grande Implosion*, Fayard, 1995, obviously condemned by the mainstream press.

‘Yes.’

‘You are prepared to lose your identity and live out the rest of your life as a waiter or a dock-worker?’

‘Yes.’

‘You are prepared to commit suicide, if and when we order you to do so?’

‘Yes.’

This passage leaves no room for doubt. Winston Smith does not symbolize the “ordinary man” so often praised in the works of Orwell; he represents instead simply an exact replica of those thousands of intellectuals, Party members who, due to a certain lack of humanity (or a lack of a minimum of critical intelligence), and for different motives in each individual case, choose to oppose the machine that will end up destroying them but which, up until then, they had served with absolute loyalty.⁴

As a general rule, power only fascinates those who seek to use it to avenge the humiliations they have suffered. Hence, the will to power would be the logical corollary of resentment. This decisive truth, already explored by Dostoyevsky, leads us to the core of Orwellian “anarchism”. The second lesson consists in the fact that the love of power constitutes the main obstacle that prevents men from attaining a just society. According

⁴ In the French translation of Amélie Audiberti (1950) one observes a curious error that has not been corrected in more recent editions. In her translation, the proletariat, that is to say all those who do not belong to the Inner or the Outer Parties, represents 15% of the population of Oceania. In the original, however, the proletariat constitutes 85% of the population, which is why Winston Smith does not represent the people but the lower classes of the elite (the Outer Party). Furthermore, it should be recalled that the character of Winston Smith is not even sympathetic or likeable. As the narrator reveals, his entire childhood was characterized by the terrified incapacity for giving or sharing. In reality, it was only his love for Julia and his sensitivity for nature and for ancient objects that gradually humanizes his rebellion.

to the excellent formula of Sonia Orwell, a just society is *the free, equal and decent society*. To the extent that the rebellion of the modern intellectual against the established order is often nourished on his own resentment (unlike the workers and the humble folk, whose rebellion is a spontaneous rejection of the real injustices that they suffer from or that they have witnessed), it is logical that the intellectual context of contemporary societies, in the broadest sense of the term, represents for Orwell the privileged embodiment of the will to power. This explains why, in the society of Oceania, “the new aristocracy was made up for the most part of bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organizers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists, and professional politicians. These people, whose origins lay in the salaried middle class and the upper grades of the working class, had been shaped and brought together by the barren world of monopoly industry and centralized government. As compared with their opposite numbers in past ages, they were less avaricious, less tempted by luxury, hungrier for pure power, and, above all, more conscious of what they were doing and more intent on crushing opposition.”

This hunger “for pure power”, that is, the psychological need to have another person at one’s mercy, can be manifested in many degrees. The first is evident in the everyday relations between individuals: thus, for example, the maniacal pleasure that some experience by controlling what other people do and say, manipulating their time or organizing their lives. At a more developed degree, one will also appreciate the strange taste for giving orders, for “surveillance and punishment”, for brutalizing and humiliating others. The highest degree of the love for power, however, is, of course, the need to exercise violent rule over the other, whether psychologically or physically. Totalitarian politics proceeds at this latter level. The best illustration of this idea is found in the speech by O’Brien that we reproduce below:

their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned....”
 (“The Communist Manifesto”, Chapter I)

In other words, capitalism is by definition a self-contestatory social system, whose authentic categorical imperative consists in the constant dissolution of all existing conditions. The modern left—that is, the left that does not even have the excuse of having to really confront the traditional powers of the Ancien Régime, since most of these powers disappeared after the First World War—with its determination to define itself purely and simply as the “Party of Change” and of the entire ensemble of the “Forces for Progress”, was doomed to definitively enmesh the workers and the ordinary people in the historic trap. From this unfortunate but modern perspective, the sole possibility that remained to the term “socialism” was to become just another word for the development *ad infinitum* of big industry, and more generally, of the uncritical approval of the integral and unlimited modernization of the world: the globalization of exchange, the tyranny of the financial markets, deranged urbanism, constant revolution of communications technologies, etc.¹³). Thus, it is logical that the pathetic fear of appearing to be “behind the times” with

¹³ After his study of Wigan Pier (1936), Orwell was already capable of describing this process with a shocking degree of precision: “What I am concerned with is the fact that Socialism is losing ground exactly where it ought to be gaining it. With so much in its favour—for every empty belly is an argument for Socialism—the idea of Socialism is less widely accepted than it was ten years ago. The average thinking person nowadays is not merely not a Socialist, he is actively hostile to Socialism. This must be due chiefly to mistaken methods of propaganda. It means that Socialism, in the form of which it is now presented to us, has about it something inherently distasteful—something that drives away the very people who ought to be nocking to its support.... The kind of person who most readily accepts Socialism is also the kind of person who views mechanical progress, as such, with enthusiasm.

that in France was carried out by the Dreyfus Case¹²) could not proceed without problems. In practice, this almost necessarily implied denominating as “socialist” or “progressive” the presumably coherent entirety of the different modernization movements, movements that, from the very beginnings of the 19th century, had been undermining the established order. As Arno Mayer has amply demonstrated (see *The Persistence of the Old Regime...*), this meant that it had been forgotten that the economic and social basis of that order had been, up until 1914, fundamentally agrarian and aristocratic. In these circumstances, the left’s call to break with all “archaic” and “conservative” mentalities was necessarily conflated with the cultural demands of liberal capitalism, which effectively would have nothing to do with the tyranny of the Church, the nobility or the army. In reality, it is linked to a type of civilization that can be called anything but conservative, as Marx, before J. Schumpeter and D. Bell, had clearly indicated.

“The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with

¹² Classical socialism (i.e., Marx) did not define itself with respect to the left/right divide, but with respect to the opposition between the working classes and the bourgeoisie. From this point of view, the idea of a “popular left” is an implausible theoretical monstrosity. The reference to the French Revolution is not even fundamental for this project, as Fourier has demonstrated quite well, for example. Concerning this particular case, one may consult Jonathan Beecher’s biography of Fourier.

He paused, and for a moment assumed again his air of a schoolmaster questioning a promising pupil: ‘How does one man assert his power over another, Winston?’ Winston thought. ‘By making him suffer,’ he said. ‘Exactly. By making him suffer. Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own? Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing. Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery is torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself. Progress in our world will be progress towards more pain. The old civilizations claimed that they were founded on love or justice. Ours is founded upon hatred. In our world there will be no emotions except fear, rage, triumph, and self-abasement. Everything else we shall destroy everything. Already we are breaking down the habits of thought which have survived from before the Revolution. We have cut the links between child and parent, and between man and man, and between man and woman. No one dares trust a wife or a child or a friend any longer. But in the future there will be no wives and no friends. Children will be taken from their mothers at birth, as one takes eggs from a hen. The sex instinct will be eradicated. Procreation will be an annual formality like the renewal of a ration card. We shall abolish the orgasm. Our neurologists are

at work upon it now. There will be no loyalty, except loyalty towards the Party. There will be no love, except the love of Big Brother. There will be no laughter, except the laugh of triumph over a defeated enemy. There will be no art, no literature, no science. When we are omnipotent we shall have no more need of science. There will be no distinction between beauty and ugliness. There will be no curiosity, no enjoyment of the process of life. All competing pleasures will be destroyed. But always — do not forget this, Winston — always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face — for ever.⁵

This ferocious homily, which is such a good description of the psychological structure of the totalitarian intellectuals, simultaneously and by default also defines the mentality of the ordinary man (whom Orwell calls the common man or the ordinary people), that is, the man who is indifferent to the temptation of power and who, in order to live with himself, feels no need to exercise violent rule over his kind. For “ordinary human feelings” are summarized in the ability to feel “love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity”, qualities frequently lacking in the powerful. Taken as a whole, these dispositions define common decency, that is, the everyday practice of mutual aid and gen-

⁵ This latter image often appears in Orwell’s essays. This may reflect the influence of Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*.

thought, “conservatism” is the “blanket word”¹¹ that designates the “thoughtcrime” par excellence: the one that marks our complicity with all those embodiments of political evil like the “Right”, the “Established Order” or the “society of intolerance and exclusion”. Given the fact that this mystification forms part of the core of modern capitalism and that it constitutes its first line of defense, it is incumbent on us to question its fundamental postulates, even if only for the purpose of measuring the extraordinary intellectual courage exhibited by Orwell in his rehabilitation, even in the form of a game, of a word that had been so thoroughly demonized by the sanctimonious left, if there is any other kind today.

In England, the opposition between the Whigs and the Tories emerged in the 17th century to distinguish the “Party of Movement” from the “Party of Conservation”. During that era, these terms designated, on the one side, the party of liberal capitalism, in favor of the market economy, the development of calculating individualism and all their corresponding customs; on the other side, the supporters of the Ancien Régime, that is, a social order that was simultaneously communitarian and extremely hierarchical. The philosophical trap into which the left was destined to fall became clear when it identified conservatism with the right, and thereby claimed for itself a large part of the founding myths of Whig progressivism. If, however, we understand by the word “socialism” the project formulated in the 19th century that sought to abolish the internal contradictions of liberal capitalism, it is obvious that the attempt to integrate socialism in the thematic of the progressive left (a task

¹¹ In Newspeak, “blanket words” are terms whose meaning has been expanded so that “every concept that can ever be needed, will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten”. Thus, “sexcrime” designates “all sexual misdeeds whatever”, whether “normal” or “perversions”.

'To the past,' said Winston.

'The past is more important,' agreed O'Brien
gravely

This is why, if Winston Smith, the competent and efficient official of the Ministry of Truth, preserves a part of his humanity (this is what leads him to approach the proletarians), it is above all because he is fascinated by all the forms of the past. This passion would lead to his downfall: Mister Charrington, the manager of the antiques shop, is actually a member of the Thought Police. Before his love for Julia gave his desire for resistance a more altruistic basis, throughout the novel it is this fascination that constitutes the psychological key of his rebellion against the Party. On the other hand, it is the effort to destroy that past that is the purpose that informs the policy of the "Engsoc". In the end, this implies that the rebellion of Winston Smith, however alienated it may have become,¹⁰ is originally a conservative rebellion. This is also why, unless your battle against modern servility is consciously based on the positive aspects of the past, you are doomed to a radical and definitive failure.

There is a real problem, however: everyone knows that in modern Newspeak, that is, in that way of speaking that is devoted to preventing any kind of "politically incorrect"

¹⁰ This rebellion is constructed solely on the basis of love and consideration towards the other, the basic elements of common decency, but too little and too late: 'You are prepared, the two of you, to separate and never see one another again?' 'No!' broke in Julia. It appeared to Winston that a long time passed before he answered. For a moment he seemed even to have been deprived of the power of speech. His tongue worked soundlessly, forming the opening syllables first of one word, then of the other, over and over again. Until he had said it, he did not know which word he was going to say. 'No,' he said finally. 'You did well to tell me,' said O'Brien. 'It is necessary for us to know everything.' It is obvious that the psychological universe of Winston Smith is very different from that of Dickens: his hatred is not generous, or else it is only slightly generous.

erous reciprocity, which may be "innate",⁶ and which in any event represent the minimum necessary for any good life and the indispensable precondition for any rebellion that aspires to be just. We must not forget that common decency, according to this definition, must not be reduced to the dimensions that Orwell attributes to it in the work of Dickens. It is not a literary idealization, but above all an evident everyday reality, an effective set of forms of giving, receiving and giving back that, after developing and purifying, constitute the psychological basis of socialism. From this point of view, the investigation of Wigan Pier and, even more so, the Spanish experience were the sources of his idea that the traditional civility of the people was the only guarantee that, some day, socialism will be more than just a utopian dream or a nightmare become reality. "There is a sense in which it would be true to say that one was experiencing a foretaste of Socialism, by which I mean that the prevailing mental atmosphere was that of Socialism" (*Homage to Catalonia*, Chapter 7).

Thus, the praise for common decency and the corresponding critique of resentment and the will to power are undoubtedly the most relevant characteristics of Orwellian socialism: the real revolutionary is not a Puritan driven by what Spinoza called the "sad passions", behind the mask of ideological rhetoric. His innate decency, his natural generosity and, undoubtedly, his sense of humor, situate him at the opposite pole to that "hate-world, slogan-world"⁷ that, from

⁶ In any event, it is a virtue "that [does] not really belong to the twentieth century" (*Homage to Catalonia*, Chapter 12). In this book, Orwell describes on various occasions the Spanish form of common decency: "Spaniards, who, with their innate decency and their ever-present Anarchist tinge, would make even the opening stages of Socialism tolerable" (Chapter 7).

⁷ An expression used in *Coming Up for Air*, one of Orwell's most interesting and least known novels.

Nechaev to Che Guevara, has been the natural element of totalitarian minds.⁸

This latter idea brings us to the third political aspect of 1984: the relation between the world of hatred and the world of slogans is structural. The intuitive understanding of the connection that exists between “totalitarian habits of thought and the corruption of language” (*The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 4, In Front of Your Nose: 1945-1950*, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., New York, 1968, p. 156) perfectly explains the profound revulsion that Orwell felt for the stereotyped uses of language. Nonetheless, despite the fact that political jargon may be the best example of a way of thought that bypasses the brain, Orwell also perceived that this decomposition of critical intelligence was now completely functional in liberal societies. Judging by the prevailing jargon in the media, business or government, this diagnosis remains totally valid. In this manner, and in conformance with the Orwellian view, if the “cool” journalist, the “dynamic” executive, or the “visionary” manager is only capable of expressing himself in the terms of his respective Newspeak, this is not just an innocent trend. In reality, this tendency represents the imperial domination of those powers over the organization of our lives.

Similarly, Orwell’s repeated critiques of and warnings against the dizzying decline of modern language, his appeals to preserve a living and popular English language, his concept of literature as a privileged form of political writing, must not

⁸ Nechaev: “Tyrannical toward himself, he must be tyrannical toward others. All the gentle and enervating sentiments of kinship, love, friendship, gratitude, and even honor, must be suppressed in him and give place to the cold and single-minded passion for revolution” (“Catechism of a Revolutionist”, Paragraph 6). Che Guevara: “Hate as a factor in the struggle, intransigent hatred for the enemy that takes one beyond the natural limitations of a human being and converts one into an effective, violent, selective, cold, killing machine. Our soldiers must be like that...” (“Create Two, Three, Many Vietnams”).

be considered as symptoms of a maniacal and elitist purism. To the contrary, if contemporary language, especially that of the young people, the main target of commercial society, is disturbingly impoverished and if the poetic sensibilities and popular genius of language⁹ are gradually disappearing, this is due to the fact that modern elites are capable of creating a world in their image and semblance.

There can be no doubt that Orwell’s need to legitimate a certain degree of “conservatism” is derived from the imperative to protect traditional civility and language. For no desirable society could exist, or even be conceived, if, in accordance with the apocalyptic tradition that arose with Saint John and Saint Augustine, the advent of the “new man” depends on our ability to make a “tabula rasa” of the past. Therefore, if we cannot rely on the necessary foundations based on an anthropological, moral and linguistic patrimony, it will be impossible to change life. The forgetting and rejection of these premises have always led “revolutionary” intellectuals to construct the most suffocating political systems that could be imagined. In other words, no society worthy of the modern possibilities of the human species has the least chance of existing if the radical movement is not capable of assuming its conservative tasks. This is therefore the last and most essential lesson of 1984: the sense of the past and therefore the ability to remember and experience nostalgic yearning, constitute utterly indispensable preconditions for any revolutionary enterprise that is not resigned in advance to being a new version of past mistakes.

‘What shall it be this time?’ he said, still with the same faint suggestion of irony. ‘To the confusion of the Thought Police? To the death of Big Brother? To humanity? To the future?’

⁹ Concerning Newspeak, one may refer to the indispensable essay by Jacques Dewitte, “Le pouvoir du langage et la liberté de l’esprit. Réflexion sur l’utopie linguistique de Georges Orwell”, *Les Temps modernes*, May 1991.