

The Reflection of Totalitarianism in Orwell's *1984* compared with Polpot's Cambodian Regime

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose: This paper attempts to discuss the totalitarian regime as discussed in the dystopian novel *1984* by Orwell and compare it with the totalitarian regime during Polpot's rule in Cambodia known as Khmer Rouge.

Study Method: This paper involves an intertextual reading of the two texts.

Findings: Theoretically speaking totalitarianism is a form of government that does not allow freedom to individuals and pursues to subjugate almost all aspects of a person's specific life to the authority of the state. A perfect totalitarian society is portrayed in Orwell's *1984* where he discusses a society of government with absolute power. The story depicted in this novel indicated to the readers in 1949 an actual possibility in the future where if totalitarianism were not opposed then some variation of the world described in the novel could become a reality in only thirty-five years. The totalitarianism represented in *1984* by Orwell can be widely compared with the totalitarianism represented in Polpot's regime in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge. During the Polpot regime, the Cambodian genocide took place from 1975-1979, it was one of the worst human tragedies that the world saw in the last century. The Khmer Rouge regime headed by Pol Pot combined extremist ideology with ethnic repression and an infernal disdain for human life to produce subjugation, desolation, and killing on a gigantic scale.

Originality: In this paper, the totalitarianism presented by Orwell in the novel *1984* will be compared with the totalitarianism practiced by Pol Pot during Khmer Rouge.

Paper Type: Theoretical Research Paper.

Keywords: Totalitarianism, Khmer Rouge, Genocide, Extremist Ideology, Repression.

Introduction

In Orwell's *1984* the novel portrays the social settings that took place when the novel was written. The novel represented the features of a totalitarian government which are substituting the previous government at times by force, having an apparently captivating leader, having

wide-ranging media control, various instances of violence in public, elimination of innocent adults and children by killing them, the complete abolition of opposition, and employing secret police to name a few. The totalitarian government impacts in various ways by having the freedom to kill and slaughter innocent human beings, complete rejection of freedom of expression, breach of privacy, and intolerance to ethnicity, race, or religion. Hence, the type of government and political system which forbids all opposition parties to cause individual criminalization and executes a massive level of complete control and restriction on both public and private life is known as totalitarianism. Italian dictator Benito Mussolini coined the term *totalitario* in the early 1920s to characterize the new fascist state of Italy, which he further described as “all within the state, none outside the state, none against the state.” By the beginning of World War II, totalitarianism had become synonymous with absolute and oppressive single-party government. (Encyclopaedia Britannica). It is regarded as the starkest and most wide-ranging type of authoritarianism. The autocrats, such as dictators and absolute monarchs use the state-run media to propagate and hold political power in totalitarian nations recurrently. (Guilhot, 2005, p. 30).

Totalitarianism is a predominantly modernist phenomenon and a political ideology with deeply nuanced historical roots. Even though Popper's explanation of totalitarianism has been interrogated in academia and is still very antagonistic, its origins have been traced back to Plato, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's theory of the state, and Karl Marx's political philosophy. (Popper, 2013). According to other philosophers and historians like Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the Age of Enlightenment, particularly the anthropocentric notion that “Man has become the master of the world, a master unbound by any links to nature, society, and history”, witnessed the emergence of the totalitarian doctrines. The concept of absolute state power was first developed by the Italian fascists in the 20th century, and concurrently in Germany by a jurist and Nazi academic named Carl Schmitt during the Weimar Republic in the 1920s. (Guilhot, 2005, p. 30).

Vladimir Lenin is considered by academics and historians as one of the pioneers who made an effort to create a totalitarian state. The father of Italian fascism, Benito Mussolini, referred to his government as the “Totalitarian State”, where “everything in the State, nothing outside the State, and nothing against the State.” In his landmark 1927 book *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt adopted the term *Totalstaat* (lit “Total state”) to characterize the legal foundation of an all-powerful state (George, 2005; Abeche et al., 2021; Akcay & Akcay, 2020)

There is a difference between Totalitarian regimes and authoritarian regimes. The authoritarian regime represents a state in which the single power holder, usually an individual autocrat, a committee, a military junta, or an otherwise small group of political elites, completely monopolizes political power and does not entertain any opposition. However, a totalitarian regime indicates a setup to control virtually almost all aspects of social life, which includes the economy, the education system, the fields of arts, the spectrum of science, and the personal lives and morals of citizens through the use of an elaborate ideology. It can influence the whole population in quest of its goals (George, 2005; Abeche et al., 2021; Akcay & Akcay, 2020).

In George Orwell's *1984* a dystopian novel he depicts a totalitarian state. The novel portrays a fictional dystopia, a term for a society that denotes the miserable lives of people who are under totalitarian control. The setting of the novel is a fictionalized version of England in 1984, where society is under the control of an all-powerful political party. A utopia represents a state which is an imaginary place where the government, laws, and social conditions are perfect. A dystopia is an exact opposite of what a utopia is. It is a society characterized by oppression, misery, and often a totalitarian form of government that attempts to deprive individual freedom in favour of the state's absolute power. At times the leaders of a dystopian society convince their citizens that their government cares for them and they are well off. Orwell's *1984* reflects this kind of society.

Oceania is the fictional totalitarian state that Orwell has created, in this particular state the citizens are aware that they could be watched at any time. There were telescreens everywhere, through which higher-ranking Party members can watch and record their activities. The Party felt that this kind of surveillance is essential for the betterment of Oceania as a whole, and the citizens who resist this surveillance or disobey the orders will be labelled as traitors and soon disappear. The leader of the Party is known as Big Brother. Big Brother's poster is spread everywhere on streets, telecasted on their telescreens, and also stamped onto the coins that they use. His face is described as handsome, with dark eyes, a mustache, and in his mid-forties. He's described here in this quote from the book: "The black mustachioed face gazed down from every commanding corner... BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own." This image and the slogan are a constant reminder that the people of Oceania are continuously being watched and all their actions are possibly subject to disciplinary action. (*Big Brother Is Watching You Concept in George Orwell's 1984, n.d*)

On the other hand, The Khmer Rouge which is also known as The Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), took command of Cambodia on April 17, 1975, under the leader Polpot. The CPK created the state of Democratic Kampuchea in 1976 and ruled the country until January 1979. That the party existed was kept a secret until 1977, and only the CPK members knew who its leaders were (the leaders were known as “Angkar Padevat”). (*Khmer Rouge History, n.d*). While the Khmer Rouge was in power, the policies that they set up were used to disregard human life and produced suppression and massacres on an enormous scale. The entire country was turned into a huge detention center, which later became a graveyard for nearly two million people, it included their own members and even some senior leaders.

The society depicted in Oceania can be compared with one of the most inhuman totalitarian governments in modern history which is PolPot's Khmer Rouge regime He directed the Khmer Rouge into a reign of violence, terror, fighting, famine, fear, and brutality in Cambodia and turned the whole country into one vast labour camp because they intended to create a model agrarian collective. He had an agenda of killing all educated people in the land and established a system where city life was abandoned, and death became a daily event. During this regime, any form of art, literature, and music that did not praise Angkar (organization) and its leader Pol Pot was banned. Most performing artists, painters, doctors, monks, lawyers, and teachers were killed. This episode in Cambodia is considered one of the worst crimes against humanity in this century. The Khmer Rouge is ranked with the Nazis for their atrocities. The human costs of the revolution were horrific.

In Oceania, the Party is controlled by a mysterious figure known only as Big Brother. Since *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was first published in 1949, Big Brother is George Orwell's most long-lasting impact, The phrase “Big Brother is watching you”, which appears several times in the novel, has become a common shorthand for government surveillance of its people. It evokes the idea of being observed by a powerful but mysterious force over which one has no control. Interestingly, the characters in the novel know little more about Big Brother: he is as mysterious and elusive to them as the general concept of “Big Brother” is in society today.

Big Brother is a propaganda concept that never appears in person in the novel, but his face does appear on posters and telescreens ensuring his omnipresence. He is said to be the head of the all-powerful Party, but there is no clear indication whether he exists or not. He seems to be around forty-five years old. What is important to remember and understand about Big Brother as a figure in the novel is that it does not actually matter whether or not he is real: the

Party's most effective tool of control is Big Brother, which indicates that his actual identity is not important. According to Party propaganda, he acts as a fatherly or brotherly figure for the people of Oceania, showing them the path of life and making them feel safe. Winston quietly hates Big Brother, but despite this hatred at times, even he is sometimes caught up in feelings of love for him, especially when he takes part in large-scale brainwashing activities with crowds of people. (*Big Brother is Watching You Concept in George Orwell's 1984, n.d*)

Just like the surveillance of Big Brother the Khmer Rouge ruled in the form of a totalitarian state in which citizens were deprived of all essential rights the civil and political rights were abolished, including private property, money, religious practices, minority languages, and foreign clothing. The Communist Party declared Cambodia's entry into 'Year Zero'. Pol Pot the leader of the Khmer Rouge was inspired by the tribes of the northeast, whose communities relied on subsistence farming for their living. His sole aim was to construct a classless society of rice farmers, he wanted to achieve national self-sufficiency and the expurgation of Western cultural influences. He wanted to establish an agro-based economy. The result was a totalitarian regime that dehumanized its population and crushed the existing social order.

Similarly, Big Brother, was the Party's central figure, who was adorned and celebrated all across the country on posters and he serves as a constant reminder to the general public that all of them are under constant observation. Oceania had a terribly poor quality of life and meagre level of living, and hence the citizens were deprived of basic services and supplies from the government. From the poor living conditions indicated it is vividly clear how little they have and they must be wanting more. The way of life in Oceania is similar to that of both the current and previous totalitarian regimes, and this hampers the well-being of every citizen there.

The Khmer Rouge lasted for four years (between 1975 and 1979), the Cambodian Genocide was an explosion of mass violence that saw between 1.5 and 3 million people killed at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, a communist political group. (Paterniti, 2009). Soon after the Cambodian civil war, the Khmer Rouge had taken power in the country. The Khmer Rouge ruled for four brutal years and was responsible for the deaths of nearly a quarter of Cambodians. The Cambodian Genocide was the result of a social engineering project by the Khmer Rouge, attempting to create a classless agrarian society. The regime would ultimately

collapse when neighbouring Vietnam invaded, establishing an occupation that would last more than a decade.

Once the Khmer Rouge took to power a radical reorganization of Cambodian Society was founded. This indicated the compulsory elimination of city dwellers into the countryside, where they would be forced to work as farmers, and do activities like digging canals and tending to corps. (*Cambodia, n.d*). There was gross maladministration and mismanagement of the country's economy which led to shortages of food and medicine, and huge numbers of people died due to disease and starvation. Families were also split up due to the shift of the people from cities to villages. Labour forces were created and groups were assigned on the basis of age and gender. Hundreds and thousands of Cambodians died due to starvation because of this particular policy. (*Cambodia, n.d*)

Religious and ethnic minorities of the country faced specific persecution. Christian and Buddhist groups were targeted for domination but it was the Cham Muslim group that was most affected by the genocide. As many as 500,000 people, or 70% of the total Cham population, were executed. The Khmer Rouge highlighted the rural peasant population hence anyone considered intellectual or learned was targeted for special treatment. This included the teachers, lawyers, doctors, and clergy were the targets of the regime. The Khmer Rouge executed totalitarianism on such a huge scale that even people wearing glasses were the target of Pol Pot's reign of terror. (*Cambodia, n.d*)

People were forced to leave the city and migrate to the villages for agriculture and they were allocated impossible production quotas with devastating consequences: over four years more than 1.7 million people were killed through gruelling work, starvation, or torture in 're-education' camps. Tuol Sleng jail in Phnom Penh was the most famous of many torture centres, having imprisoned nearly 17,000 people. (Yapi, 2005) The brutality of the regime reflected an ethnic component: the Khmer Rouge targeted Cham Muslims, Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai, and Laotian individuals. Cham Muslims in particular suffered a terrible fate; 70% of the group perished in five years. Pak Savorn's evidence depicts a dreadful scene of the ferocious treatment experienced by many Cambodian people. (Woolrough, 2023)

The Khmer Rouge ruled with an iron fist and executed anyone associated with the previous regime. The families were separated and almost never to be reunited again. The leaders wanted everybody to look alike and hence to re-enforce sameness they forced people to have the same haircuts and clothing. The leaders of the Khmer Rouge were brutal and they killed

the men first and then the older women and then the children. They didn't spare the children despite the fact that they were innocent. They believed in the theory that they should eradicate the enemies from the roots and spare no one. (Leakhena, 2003).

Hence, the reflection of totalitarianism in Orwell's *1984* is understood through the fictional character Big Brother who signifies total control and surveillance over the state of Oceania. Similarly, PolPot during the Khmer Rouge also acted in a parallel fashion where he reached the pinnacle of totalitarianism by executing the Cambodians whom the Khmer Rouge leaders identified as 'enemy' resulting in the worst form of a massacre in the history of mankind.

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