

1984 and all that

Recent re-organisation of the Editorial Collective's working practices, aimed at a more equitable distribution of the work-load, has given rise to the new position of 'issue editor'. Although basically administrative in character (the Collective as a whole still takes editorial decisions), this position is enlivened by carrying with it the opportunity to editorialise. The views expressed in these editorials (of which this is the first) will be those of the issue editor of the day, and will thus not necessarily be shared unanimously by the rest of the Collective.

1984 has arrived, and with it has come the inevitable deluge of Orwellspeak. Television programmes, newspaper and magazine articles and editorials, books, cards, badges even ... rarely can a new year have been so marketable a phenomenon, or have presented such an opportunity for the misrepresentation of the present by abstract speculation upon its future.

Amongst the plethora of Orwellian appreciations currently inundating the media, it is hard to find a single voice prepared to question the political perspective underlying 1984. Criticism elaborated in the 1950s (by, for example, Isaac Deutscher and E.P. Thompson) and recently reaffirmed by Raymond Williams, is either ignored, dismissed more or less out of hand as absurdly misplaced, or taken to have been rendered obsolete by the course of events over the last thirty years. Orwell's political peculiarities remain less an object of analysis and reflection, than a perceived symptom of the individuality (and by fallacious implication, the truth) of his vision. In short, Orwell's own perspective continues to dominate his interpreters. (Julian Symons, for example, while suggesting that some of Orwell's views may well be explicable in terms of repressed totalitarian tendencies within his personality (Arena documentary, BBC2, 4/1/84), is still able to write admiringly of his 'persistent raw unorthodoxy' (Sunday Times Magazine, 15/1/84), as if difference is in itself a value!).

This is perhaps no real cause for surprise; although it does illustrate the left's failure to make an impact on cultural life in Britain at the level of national institutions of cultural reproduction. The depreciation, repression and dissolution of politics by 'culture' remains an abiding feature of the discourse these institutions produce. But while it may not be that surprising, the popularity of the 'positive' evaluation of 1984 involved in its liberal interpretation (it is once again one of the five bestselling paperbacks in the country) is disturbing; especially insofar as this popularity seems to extend to large numbers of people on the left.

The difference between the conjunctures of the old and the new Cold Wars appears to have brought about a change in the way in which 1984's political significance is perceived. Today, it seems, 1984's libertarian pretensions can be more fully appreciated. Decline in the domestic

political significance of the British Communist Party, in conjunction with the growth of criticism of the USSR from the left, has meant that perceptions of 1984 are no longer so dominated, or at least, so adversely effected, by its ferocious anti-communism as they were in the 1950s. Big Brother now evokes the image of a certain 'Big Sister' as much as that of Stalin.

There is, of course, a certain amount of justification for this. After all, both the increased role of the state in the day-to-day reproduction and development of monopoly capitalism, and the return of prolonged economic depression, as well as the second revolution in communications and information technology, strengthen the applicability of Orwell's picture of a future society to present-day Western capitalism. But does the analogy here hold good? Does it help us understand the society in which we are living? Or does it, on the contrary, impede such an understanding? What, in other words, is the ideological structure of 1984? Is it really the manifestation of libertarian humanism in terms of which 1984 has, for decades, been so successfully packaged? Is 1984 really simply 'the human story of Winston Smith's revolt against the Party's rule', which the back cover of the Penguin Modern Classics edition declares it to be? Is its fierce anti-communism really just the product of a humanistic critique of the alienating effects of reified political structures? Or does 1984 essentially represent something quite different?

The Marxist left has always maintained that the 'humanist' reading of 1984 rests upon a misrecognition of the book's basic ideological structure. In view of the renewed popularity of the humanistic interpretation, a brief review of the argument against 1984 seems an appropriate way for Radical Philosophy to welcome the new year; not just as an antidote to the prevailing 1984-mania, but for reasons of a more general political and theoretical significance, which will hopefully shortly become apparent.

'Leftist Credentials, Rightist Views'

1984 tempts us to view the present through its fictional lens probably as strongly as any work of modern fiction. Orwell's transposed depiction of the drabness of life in Britain in the late 1940s has numerous, oft-noted, contemporary parallels. Big Brother and the Ministries of Truth, Love, Peace and Plenty play upon our fantasies of oppression, and upon a political cynicism nurtured by a period in which the power of the state has increased without a corresponding growth in democratic participation in its activities. Orwell's images of the 'Party' and the 'inner Party' work similarly, although with added political dimensions too obvious to mention. A multitude of imaginative identifications between Orwell's world and our own spring quickly to mind, suppressing the obvious real

differences between the two worlds. The very 'otherness' of Orwell's world in fact seems to be a source of its power. It simultaneously and selectively both invites and forbids comparison.

Criticism of 1984 from the left has maintained that Orwell uses the power of fiction in the service of a profoundly reactionary view of the world. Despite the multiplicity of resonances it produces at the level of everyday experience, it has been argued, few works of fiction offer as restricted and restrictive a picture of human history as 1984. Is it not only profoundly offensive, but politically irresponsible and fundamentally misleading to suggest, as Orwell does, that the future might be represented by the image of a boot stamping on a human face, forever? For Raymond Williams, for example, 1984 introduces 'a period of really decadent bourgeois writing in which the whole status of human beings is reduced' (Politics and Letters, Verso, 1981, p. 392). From the point of view of the left critique in general, 1984 is a work of political nihilism.

Response to this criticism has generally involved a recourse to literary argument. 1984's restrictedness, it is often said, is its very point. It is a satire, we are reminded, and a warning. It exaggerates and distorts systematically, in the interests of a liberal humanism. The enlargement of its descriptions to mythic proportions draws attention to aspects and tendencies within 'modern' societies (a favourite word this one, 'modern', dehistoricising through abstract historical location) which, unless controlled, threaten to become very real social dangers. The severe restriction of perspective is a feature of its literary form; it works through restriction. Condemnation on the grounds that it is reductive, it is thus argued, is to miss the point - philistine leftism. From this viewpoint, political attacks on 1984 either reveal the intellectual narrowness of their proponents, or involve the covert defense of 'totalitarian' regimes.

The problem with this defence is that, although effective, to a limited extent, against very crude political attacks on 1984, it is itself launched from such a narrow (not to mention at times patronising) viewpoint that it fails to engage the criticism against which it is directed. It simply restates the liberal interpretation in terms of the literary assumptions on which it is based, assuming that its opponents have failed to understand the workings of the satirical form. Quite apart from its silence on the question of the general political effects of 1984's anti-communism - something undoubtedly of the greatest significance - it ignores the possibility that there could be anything reactionary about Orwell's particular use of the satirical form, whatever his intentions. This is, of course, precisely what is claimed.

The substance of the left critique of 1984 is that there is a reactionary rationale to the selectivity of Orwell's picture of a future society beyond, or rather beneath and within, that dictated by its function as a warning about certain impending social dangers; and that it is through the presentation of this rationale in terms of liberal humanistic concern that 1984 acquires its extraordinary ideological power - its status as a superweapon, not only of the Cold War, but of the class war as well. 'Leftish credentials, rightish views', as Malcolm Muggeridge, of all people, put it in the Arena television documentary: this is the secret or Orwell's ideological power.

But what is the precise mechanism at work here? How is it that Orwell's libertarian intentions could give rise to, and disguise, the decadent conception of human nature which sustains the credibility of 1984 as a picture of a possible society, and thereby maintains its plausibility and effectiveness as a warning against the organised left? This question requires a dual response. Firstly, at the level of the content of 1984's depiction of a future society. Secondly, at the level of the social experience reflected in, and underlying, this depiction.

An 'Underlying Boundless Despair'

At the level of 1984's content, the first thing to be established is what conception of human nature is actually at work there. The short answer to this point (space prohibits a textually-based demonstration) is that we are presented with a reductive naturalism grounded upon a quasi-behaviouristic, and radically individualistic, psychology. In Oceania, people will, ultimately, always betray one another should it be in their interests to do so. Furthermore, political power is presented as essentially the result of a psychological phenomenon: 'hunger' for power, for domination. The political critique at work in 1984 operates through the speculative attribution of motive.

Such a picture emerges not because Smith's particular revolt is seen to fail, but because it fails necessarily. Orwell's depiction of Oceania is such that the possibility of success is denied to any 'revolt' - revolutionary change is ruled out as a structural impossibility. Oceania is an incarnation of absolute social stasis. In this regard Orwell's widow was quite right to remark, with reference to the film version of 1984, that: to give it a happy ending may be an admirable sentiment, but it misses the point. This is precisely the problem. Orwell believed that there is an absolute danger associated with certain technological and bureaucratic social tendencies. To establish this, he portrayed a world in which the possibility of such a danger has been realised. But the very credibility of his depiction, upon which his point depends, undermines its function as a warning; for it involves a portrayal of human beings which, if accepted, suggests that there is no hope of countering the tendencies in question. We are presented with a tragic individualism. It is in this sense that (as Deutscher was the first to point out) Orwell's warning is not just self-contradictory, it defeats itself and turns into its opposite: a portrayal of the inevitability of oppression. 1984 is characterised by a distinctive self-negation.

There is thus a reactionary political significance to 1984 beyond, but at work in, its anti-communism. It not only implicitly denies the possibility of hope to any pattern of social change in which communist influence is detectable, but, through a psychological diagnosis of the cause of political oppression, it implicitly denies the possibility of hope to any organised collective project aiming at a general increase in people's control over their own lives. In Deutscher's famous phrase, it promulgates a 'mysticism of cruelty', a deadening, absolute, political cynicism.

The self-negating extremism of Orwell's distrust of institutional structures per se reflects a deep, seemingly absolute, social pessimism: an 'underlying boundless despair' (Deutscher, again). This pessimism was born of a disillusionment with the politics and possibilities of the 1930s and 1940s. Because he failed to locate his experience of political disillusionment within any kind of historical



perspective, Orwell was led to perceive the promise of the socialist project as essentially fraudulent in itself. Like so many of his generation he turned from utopianism to despair. In this sense, 1984 is a pièce de resistance of depressed radical liberalism. It is primarily as such, rather than as a picture of a total surveillance, that it has a continuing real relevance; for the abstractness of its depiction of the state vitiates its criticism.

Disillusioned Radicalism, Modern Conservatism

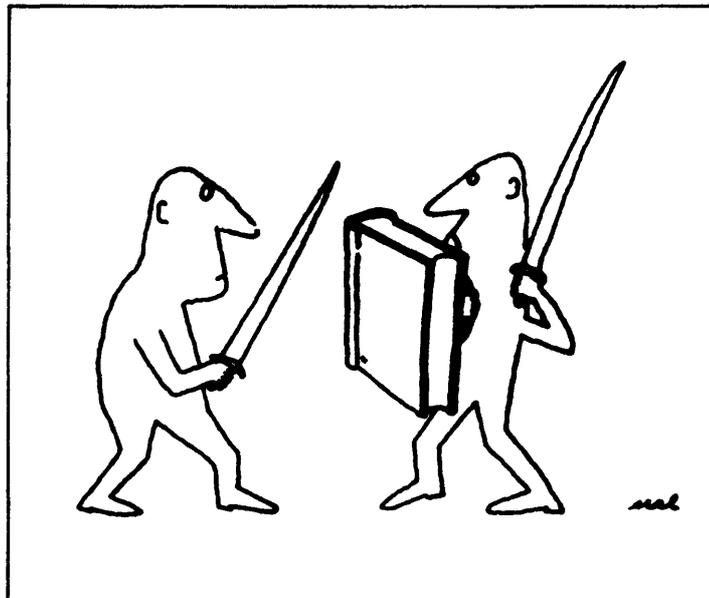
Acknowledgement of the fundamentally reactionary character of 1984's ideological make-up need not, of course, involve a denial that it contains any libertarian impulses. The above analysis suggests that these impulses exist, but within, and in basic contradiction with, a more general structural tendency of a politically debilitating kind, which is simultaneously disguised by them, and rendered effective through its relation to them. However, insofar as it is suggested that this debilitating tendency is actually the product of the self-negation of the libertarian impulses which both mask and contradict it, our analysis does involve the attribution of a distinctive ideological character to these impulses in terms of which they are seen to be essentially self-defeating. It is the dialectic of depressed libertarianism at work here which, it seems to me, forms the basis on which 1984's renewed popularity is grounded.

In the 1950s, 1984 contributed a great deal to the formation of what E.P. Thompson has called 'Natopolitan' ideology. The spectacular resurgence of this ideology in the form of the authoritarian populism of the new right has conveniently coincided with 1984's coming of age. It is not unreasonable to suppose that an awareness of 1984's distinctive ideological structure may have something to tell us both about the way in which the right has been able to achieve a hegemony for its repressive solution to the current crisis, and, consequently, about the kind of strategy necessary to combat it. In particular, 1984's renewed popularity serves as a timely reminder of the intrinsic connection between disillusioned radicalism and the success of modern conservatism.

Is the current crisis not characterised, ideologically, by something of an Orwellian despondency about the prospects of democratic political control over social and economic processes? And have the right not exploited this despondency by employing an ideological strategy similar in structure to that at work (unconsciously) in 1984? Monetarism presents itself as if it is in the interests of libertarianism - the ideal act of propaganda always consists in identifying your cause with unquestioned values. Like 1984, it usurps the mantle of liberal humanism; humanism being the central essentially contested philosophical concept of Western political discourse. It champions 'the individual' against 'the institution' in such a way as to strengthen the power of existing institutions. At every available opportunity, it pours scorn upon the idea that there is motivation beyond self-interest. It abstracts spurious universals from all historical determinacies in its analyses. It preaches freedom but offers only masochism.

Orwell's despondency had its roots in a different political conjuncture from the present one, but the lessons to be learned from it retain their significance. Among other things, it confirms that if the left is to forge an effective ideological hegemony, it must propagate a definition of the current crisis, and of political struggle in general, that is both historical in its broad perspective and materialistic in its grasp of the economic roots of the contradictory dynamics of social development, the limitations they impose and the possibilities they create. For only then will its strategy be truly 'realistic'; and only then will it be in a position to fully comprehend its defeats.

Theoretically, the central problem here is to establish



a conception of the contradictory nature of social processes which is determinate without being formalistic; the age-old problem of a materialist conception of dialectical relations. This is not, note, the problem of 'the materialist dialectic' or of 'dialectical materialism', but of a dialectical materialism; a materialism which utilises the cognitive tool of dialectics to reproduce in thought the determinate multiplicity of different, often opposed, determinations which constitute the world in which we live and act.

Radical Philosophy has, intermittently but fairly consistently, carried work on the question of the nature and coherence of the idea of materialist dialectics, and hopefully will continue to do so. In this issue, Sean Sayers criticises the analytical assumptions behind G.A. Cohen's presentation of Marx's theory of history by contrasting them with those of a dialectical theory of internal relations, as developed by Hegel and, he argues, adopted by Marx. In response to Alison Assiter's criticisms of Dale Spender's Man Made Language, and to the exchange of letters on sexism and language, in RP34, Deborah Cameron and Anne Beezer both question the traditional linguistic assumptions behind our coverage of the debate on sexist language. Again, it is hoped that this debate will be developed further in future issues. Andrew Collier reopens the neglected question of the possibility of Marxist ethics through a consideration of Milton Fisk's recent book on the topic. Finally, Richard Osborne speculates upon the semiotic implications of the videotape revolution.

Peter Osborne

(Isaac Deutscher's and E.P. Thompson's criticisms of 1984, 'The Mysticism of Cruelty' and 'Inside Which Whale?', can be found, along with a number of other pieces, in Raymond Williams (ed.), George Orwell, Prentice Hall, 1974. They originally appeared in Heretics and Renegades and Out of Apathy, respectively: collections of essays by Deutscher and Thompson. Williams' views on Orwell are contained in his Orwell, Fontana, 1975, and enlarged upon in pages 384-392 of Politics and Letters. Recent media coverage of Orwell has been too extensive to keep up with. The articles by Conor Cruise O'Brien (Observer, 18/12/83) and Anthony Burgess (Sunday Times Magazine, 1/1/84), despite their differences, are both examples of what remains the orthodox perspective.)

Marxism and the Dialectical Method: A Critique of G.A. Cohen

Sean Sayers

The dialectical method, Marx insisted, was at the basis of his account of society. In 1858, in a letter to Engels, he wrote,

In the method of treatment the fact that by mere accident I again glanced through Hegel's Logic has been of great service to me.... If there should ever be the time for such work again, I would greatly like to make accessible to the ordinary human intelligence, in two or three printer's sheets, what is rational in the method which Hegel discovered ... (1)

But he never did find the time for this work. As a result, Marx's dialectical method and the ways in which it draws on Hegel's philosophy remain among the most controversial and least well understood aspects of Marx's work. My purpose in this paper is to explain some of the basic presuppositions of this method and to bring out their significance for Marx's theories. I shall do so by focussing critically on G.A. Cohen's account of Marxism in Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence (2). In this important and influential work, Cohen contrives to give an account of Marxism in entirely non-dialectical - indeed, in anti-dialectical - terms. By criticising Cohen's views I will seek to show that the dialectical method is the necessary basis for an adequate theory of history and an indispensable part of Marx's thought.

The major purpose of Cohen's book is to develop and defend a particular interpretation of historical materialism, the Marxist theory of historical development. Cohen claims that his account is an 'old-fashioned' and a 'traditional' one (p.x); and, indeed, in certain respects it is. For, in contrast to the tendency of much recent Marxist writing, Cohen strongly emphasises the materialistic and deterministic character of Marx's theory of history. He insists that the development of the productive forces is the primary motive force for historical change, and portrays Marxism as a form of technological determinism. However, there are various different forms of materialism, not all of them Marx's. In particular, it has been a standard part of 'traditional' Marxist philosophy to criticise mechanical forms of materialism and to insist that a dialectical form of materialism is needed in order to comprehend the complexity and richness of concrete historical processes. Cohen manages to ignore this aspect of the traditional picture almost entirely, and what little discussion he devotes to dialectics is hostile and dismissive.

The basis of this hostility is not far to seek. It is revealed by another major purpose of Cohen's book. For, as well as presenting an interpretation of historical materialism, he is attempting to vindicate the analytical method in philosophy; and although he does not say it in so many words, it is apparent that he regards this as irreconcilable with the dialectical aspects of Marx's work. Cohen is right about this, I shall argue: dialectical philosophy does, indeed, involve methods and assumptions which are ulti-

mately incompatible with those of the analytic approach. However, against Cohen I will argue that dialectics is the necessary basis for a satisfactory theory of history and an indispensable part of Marx's thought. Cohen's use of the analytic method and his rejection of dialectics leads him to give a systematically distorted account of Marx's theory of history, which is neither faithful to Marx's own thought, nor adequate for an understanding of the concrete reality of history. This is what I shall try to show.

1 The Analytic vs. the Dialectical Method

What, then, is Cohen's analytical method? Unfortunately, Cohen himself never spells this out, although it is an important part of his purpose to defend and vindicate it. First, it should be noted that a philosophy can be described as 'analytical' in two distinct senses. One may mean by this term simply that the philosophy is part of the twentieth century tradition of analytical philosophy. Cohen's work is certainly 'analytical' in this sense, and this is immediately apparent from its outward style: the use of formal logical notation, abstract symbols, numbered sentences, and so forth. Cohen himself talks of 'the standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth-century analytical philosophy' (p.ix). However, these virtues are not peculiar to twentieth-century analytical philosophy; indeed, they are not even particularly characteristic of it. Anyone who has read a representative selection of work in this tradition will be well aware that, all too often, it is needlessly obscure in style, cloudy in thought and not noticeably more rigorous in argument than the work of any other major school of philosophy. Clarity and rigour are the virtues of good philosophy, of good thought in all fields; they are no monopoly of analytical philosophy. Cohen's work has these virtues to a high degree; but that is because it is good philosophy, not because it is in the analytical tradition.

Twentieth-century analytical philosophy has been a diverse tradition and it is not easy to make generalisations about it. However, that is not my purpose here, since Cohen's philosophy is also 'analytical' in a further and deeper sense. It is analytical not merely in its style and form, but in its very presuppositions and content. And it is analytical in a very traditional sense. For, like the philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Cohen relies on the method of analysis. He insists upon analysing the whole that he is considering into its component parts. He insists upon separating and isolating the different elements and aspects of the given concrete totality, and considering and defining these in isolation. The effect of this method is to produce a fragmented and atomised picture of reality.

Underlying this method, as Cohen makes clear, is what could be called a logic of external relations (3). For, according to Cohen, things are what they are, and have their essential nature in themselves, quite independently of