HERTOGFOUNDATION

GEORGE ORWELL'S

1984



Charles Lane

American Enterprise Institute

Mondays, 6–8 PM ET
Jan. 4, 11, 25; Feb. 1
Tuesday, Jan. 19, 7–9 PM ET

Humanities at Hertog
Syllabus | Winter 2027

HERTOG WINTER 2027 HUMANITIES SEMINAR

George Orwell's *1984*

Charles Lane, American Enterprise Institute

Students engage in a close reading of the classic dystopian novel, in search of both its historical origins and its contemporary relevance. We will treat the book as a product of Orwell's time — the mid-20th Century — and as the culmination of his thinking about liberalism, socialism, war, and totalitarianism. We will debate whether *1984*'s message is inseparable from the milieu that spawned it or applicable universally — to today and, indeed, the remote past. A crucial issue will be the role of truth in politics — and the role of politics in generating truth. Does reality exist independently of power relationships? Or is some degree of force and coercion necessary to establish the "narrative" that organizes any society? And does that lead inevitably to the dystopia Orwell imagined, or is a liberal order nevertheless sustainable? Is it possible to preserve a modicum of privacy and freedom even in the most repressive states?

Students will be challenged to determine whether *1984* is best considered a cautionary tale about modern politics — or a meditation on human nature's inherent flaws.

Meeting Schedule: January 4, 11, and 25 and February 1, 6–8 p.m. ET; Tuesday, January 19, 7–9 p.m. ET. Online.

Course Materials

- George Orwell, *1984*, Berkley 2023 / 75th Anniversary printing, with afterwords by Sandra Newman and Erich Fromm. ISBN 9780452262935.

Additional Readings

- George Orwell, "In Front of Your Nose"
- Louis Menand, "*1984* at 70," The New Yorker, June 8, 2019
- G. Patrick Armstrong, "Generously Angry: George Orwell Reconsidered," Conflict Quarterly IV.1 (Winter 1984), pp. 17–27.
- Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," The New Yorker, February 25, 1967
- Arthur Koestler, selections from The God That Failed, ed. Richard Crossman (Harper Colophon, 1963), pp. 41–50 and 62–75.
- George Orwell, "Letter to Noel Willmett," May 18, 1944.
- Louis Menand, "Honest, Decent, Wrong," The New Yorker, January 27, 2003
- Leon Wieseltier, "Aspidistra," The New Republic, February 17, 2003
- Norman Podhoretz, "If Orwell Were Alive Today," Harper's, January 1983

Discussion Papers: Each fellow will be responsible for completing one brief discussion paper (1–2 pages, single-spaced) during the course. Papers are due the day before your assigned session by 5 PM ET. Please provide page numbers for textual citations. Your paper should be posted on the course Slack channel and will be part of the assigned readings for the session. Paper-writers should be ready to present their ideas during the seminar.

Historical Background

Orwell's political beliefs and literary vision emerged from the major events of his time, which, he believed, repeatedly forced people to confront contradictions: between truth and propaganda; political ideals and political expediency; loyalty to party and adherence to principle.

It would be impossible to review all of the relevant 20th Century history. A partial list of those aspects which made the greatest impact on Orwell would include: his experience as a British imperial police officer in Burma; the "Popular Front" of European left-wing parties in the mid-1930s; the Moscow Show Trials of 1936-1938; the Civil War in Spain of 1936-1939; the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939; the debate in Britain over entering the war against Hitler; and, of course, World War II itself.

I won't assign material on this history, but class participants are strongly encouraged to read independently so as to familiarize — or re-familiarize — themselves with the basic narratives. In addition, these Orwell essays, available online, are particularly relevant: "My Country Right or Left," 1940; "Looking Back on the Spanish War," 1943; "You and the Atom Bomb," 1945; "The Prevention of Literature," 1946.

Monday, January 4, 2027

6:00–8:00 p.m. ET **Session I**

Readings

- *1984* Part 1, pp. 1-92
- Orwell, “In Front of Your Nose.”
- Menand, "*1984* at 70.”
- G. Patrick Armstrong, “Generously Angry: George Orwell Reconsidered,” Conflict Quarterly IV.1 (Winter 1984), pp. 17–27.

Discussion Questions

1. Winston Smith knows that the Party exercises total power over thought and word in Oceania. Yet he starts writing a diary. Why?
2. Family and childhood are key themes of this section. Think about Winston’s dreams of his mother and his attempts to remember his own early life before the rise of Ingsoc. Consider, too, the portrait of the Parsons children and their vicious “play.” What is Orwell telling us about the relationship between family and freedom?
3. Why is “chastity” so important to the Party?
4. Another theme is the role of body language and facial expression, and how important it is under Ingsoc to maintain an “inscrutable” face. And yet a single glance from O’Brien is enough to make Winston believe he has found a fellow opponent of Big Brother. Is this plausible? What is Orwell implying about the relative trustworthiness of verbal and non-verbal communication?
5. To explain the Party’s constant revision of history, Orwell introduces its slogan: “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” Is this true generally? Can you think of contemporary examples — from democracies or authoritarian regimes — that either illustrate or refute this claim?
6. “If there is hope it lies in the proles,” Winston writes. Yet his own foray into a prole neighborhood reveals them to be frustratingly impervious to wider conceptual thinking. Do you agree with what Orwell is implying about the political potential of the working class?

Monday, January 11, 2027

6:00–8:00 p.m. ET **Session II**

Readings

- *1984* Part 2, pp. 93-148
- Arendt, “Truth and Politics.”

Discussion Questions

1. Julia slips Winston a note that says “I love you.” In what sense is she being sincere? Does Winston love Julia?
2. Orwell writes that Winston and Julia’s first tryst “was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act.” Was it? And if so, does that enhance or diminish its value to them?
3. Music and poetry — the washer woman’s song and the nursery rhyme about church bells — pervade this section of the book. What is Orwell suggesting about the relationship between language, memory, and individual freedom?
4. “The world view of the Party imposed itself most successfully on people incapable of understanding it,” Orwell writes. Does this apply uniquely to totalitarian movements or to partisanship of all kinds? How might Hannah Arendt answer the question?

Tuesday, January 19, 2027

7:00–9:00 p.m. ET **Session III**

Readings

- *1984* Part 2, pp. 148-200
- Arthur Koestler, selections from The God That Failed, ed. Richard Crossman (Harper Colophon, 1963), pp. 41–50 and 62–75.
- George Orwell, "Letter to Noel Willmett," May 18, 1944.

Discussion Questions

1. At O'Brien's prompting, Winston and Julia promise to perform a litany of evil deeds to help the Brotherhood overthrow Ingsoc. What point is Orwell making about revolutionary politics? About politics in general?
2. Why do Julia and Winston trust O'Brien so readily?
3. Goldstein's tract is a crucial turning point in the story. It is also something of a summary of the lessons Orwell learned from the struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. "The mutability of the past is the central tenet of Ingsoc," the book says. Why must this be so for the system to perpetuate itself, and what is this precept's relationship to "doublethink?"
4. Goldstein posits a seemingly simple division of all societies into "the High, the Middle, and the Low," only the first two of which are really relevant to political power. To what extent can history actually be understood in those terms?
5. Orwell wrote most of *1984* between 1946 and 1948. Does it surprise you that Orwell would look upon the results of World War II and forecast, even fictionally, a world divided into morally indistinguishable totalitarian superstates?
6. How plausible is Goldstein's vision of endless warfare as a tool of social control? Is it relevant to our time?
7. "A party member lives from birth to death under the eye of the Thought Police." What do you make of the fact that surveillance is most intense over Party members and least intense over the proles?
8. Goldstein wrote: "There are only four ways in which a ruling group can fall from power. Either it is conquered from without, or it governs so inefficiently that the masses are stirred to revolt, or it allows a strong and discontented Middle Group to come into being, or it loses its own self-confidence and willingness to govern. . . . Ultimately the determining factor is the mental attitude of the ruling class itself." How does the recent history of China, Russia, Cuba, North Korea, the United States, and the European Union fit this schema?

Monday, January 25, 2027

6:00–8:00 p.m. ET **Session IV**

Readings

- *1984* Part 3, pp. 200-266

Discussion Questions

1. Winston finds himself first detained with ordinary criminals who seem much less afraid of the guards than Party-member detainees — and behave accordingly. Why do you think Orwell includes this detail?
2. What do you make of the moment, during a break in his interrogation/torture, in which Winston feels deep love for O'Brien, and considers him an "intimate?"
3. O'Brien explains that the party is different from the Nazis and Soviets because, in contrast to them, it self-consciously seeks power for its own sake. "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever." Could such a system actually be sustained indefinitely?
4. "Men are infinitely malleable," O'Brien declares. Is this the Party doctrine's chief error?
5. Why does Winston's mind wander back to a happy memory from his childhood while he is sitting at The Chestnut Tree Cafe, after he has emerged from the Ministry of Love? Why does he instantly repress it?
6. Does Winston love Big Brother?

Monday, February 1, 2027

6:00–8:00 p.m. ET **Session V**

Readings

- *1984*, Appendix: "The Principles of Newspeak," and afterwords by Sandra Newman and Erich Fromm
- Menand, "Honest, Decent, Wrong."
- Wieseltier, "Aspidistra."
- Podhoretz, "If Orwell Were Alive Today."

Discussion Questions

1. Orwell says that the purpose of Newspeak is not just to express Ingsoc but "to make all other modes of thought impossible." He presents this as a feasible plan by the party (albeit one that would take another 66 years after 1984 to accomplish). But could this actually be done? Is Orwell right that form can actually be made to dictate substance? Is language to some extent a manifestation of political power? Or is the human capacity for, and impulse to, make meaning through language unconquerable?
2. Compare the perspectives of Newman and Fromm, Menand and Wieseltier. Do interpretations of Orwell's work necessarily shift as history and politics develop? If so, does that confirm or refute *1984*'s essential contentions?
3. What present-day technologies remind you most of Orwell's telescreen or memory hole?