Revolutionary from the waist down – the politics of sex in George Orwell’s 1984

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Revolutionary from the waist down: The Politics of Sex in 1984

Stefan Storrie and Diana Adela Martin

Ships that pass in the night

At the heart of 1984 lies an erotic love story between Winston and Julia. Love and the enjoyment of sex is forbidden by the Party. According to it, sex should be an act of procreation not to be enjoyed (certainly not by the woman), but to be barely endured as a ‘duty to the Party’. The liaison is therefore a political act in opposition to the powers that be. But our two heroes have quite different views of how their relationship challenges the Party.

Winston sees their relationship as a rebellion, ultimately aimed to overthrow the oppressive society in which he lives. When Julia take her clothes off, first in his dream, later in reality, it seemed to Winston “to annihilate a whole culture, a whole system of thought as Big Brother and the Party and the Thought Police could all be swept into nothingness by a single splendid movement of the arm.” (31, 125) He thinks that sex is by its nature subversive and that it cannot fail to attack the regime, ultimately tearing it to pieces. According to Winston, “the sexual act, successfully performed, was rebellion”. (65) Therefore, for Winston sex is a positive political force for societal change.

For Julia, on the other hand, the political function of sex is to put up resistance within the established political framework. “Life as she saw it was quite simple. You wanted a good time; “they” meaning the Party, wanted to stop you having it; you broke the rules as best you could.” A bit later we find the thought that “Any kind of organized revolt against the Party, which was bound to be a failure, struck her as stupid. The clever thing was to break the rules and stay alive all the same.” (131) The political aspect of their relationship is for Julia a limited revolt where she seeks to carve out a space for personal freedom and enjoyment within an oppressive system. This is why, when Julia and Winston go to O’Brien to join the resistance, she point blank refuses to never see Winston again for the sake of the cause. For her, the relationship with Winston trumps the political martyrdom of the Brotherhood.
Winston thinks Julia is naive by not acknowledging the power that erotic relations can have in a society and admonishes her half-hearted rebellion by saying, much to Julia’s amusement, that she is merely “a revolutionary from the waist down.” Julia, on the other hand, thinks organized revolution against the party is an impossible dream, moreso, that it is “stupid”. Who is right?

We “Other Oceanians”

In The History of Sexuality, French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault examined the relation between sexuality and power. He presented and rejected the repressive hypothesis, the widespread belief that sexuality was socially repressed from the late 17th to early 20th century, which he calls the Victorian Era, before the partial sexual liberation began in the 1960s. According to this hypothesis, rise of the middle class and the emergence of the capitalist industrial society resulted in the social organisation that centred on the family unit. The couple became the model of sexuality, and the privacy of the parents’ bedroom became its “utilitarian and fertile” locus (p. 3). With sexuality becoming a private matter, it also became something secret and not talked about. All of this suited the emerging economical order because by repressing sexuality, the waste of labour energy was diminished.

However, Foucault argues that the repression hypothesis is simplistic and inaccurate. It is simplistic because it sees the relation between power and sexuality merely as prohibition. In doing so, it sees the relation in strictly negative terms and fails to acknowledge the many different active ways that sexuality is used to gain control and power. As Foucault puts it in Power and Sex, “the interdiction, the refusal, the prohibition, far from being essential forms of power, are only its limits, power in its frustrated or extreme forms. The relations of power are, above all, productive.” (118) For example, Foucault argues, while religious confession became less sexually direct in the Victorian Era, at the same time it demanded that the confessors gave progressively more (albeit veiled) detailed accounts about sexual sins. Similarly, the sexuality of children became considered abnormal, and as a consequence it became heavily regulated, but at the same time it became something that was copiously examined, studied and taught. Speaking generally, while greater efforts were made during the Victorian era to control sexuality and sex became something to be ashamed of, it is not accurate to see this merely in terms of repression and silencing. Rather, the process leads to a new way of speaking, thinking and acting in relation to sex, and doing so profusely. It has
become more complex and scientific, more an object of knowledge than a source of pleasure. This means that those who control this knowledge, such as social scientists, educationalists, and those involved in certain forms of government policy, become more important and powerful.

As the repressive hypothesis is wrong according to Foucault, an important question to consider is why modern western society was so ready to believe in the repressive hypothesis in the first place. His answer is that by portraying the Victorian era as sexually repressed, it allowed us “Other Victorians” to

“speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervour of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights.” (P. 7)

Does it sound familiar? Winston believes in a version of the repressive hypothesis - his model of how sexuality is understood in Oceania is simply that the Party represses sexuality, and if it is let free it will destroy the current order. For this reasons he thinks that sex, because it can affect society, must do so in a revolutionary way.

The question is then: Is Winston right? In the reminder of this paper we want to suggest that the answer to this is no. His belief about repression does not map on to the facts of the situation, but is more likely based on the desire to see himself, this “Other Oceanian”, as utterly different from his fellow citizens, and to allow himself to imagine a straightforward solution to the nightmare of existence in 1984.

You might not be convinced that we can find the relevant similarities between western culture in Victorian times and the Ingsoc regime. After all, bourgeois culture at, say, the turn of the 20th century, was rather pastoral compared to the totalitarian nightmare of 1984. It might therefore be instructive to consider the political use of sexuality in a society more like that of the Orwellian nightmare. Orwell took his dystopian inspiration from a number of sources, such as his experience of British colonialism in Asia and the British socialist party post World War 2. But a central inspiration was always the Soviet Union. The political left in Britain was in Orwell’s view accepting and forgiving the vast transgressions there because they were mistakenly seen as political allies. For this reason shining a light on the atrocities perpetuated
by Communism was urgent. It is the central theme of *Animal Farm* and it also permeates 1984.

**Springtime of the Soviet Libido**

In 1917, Lenin promulgated the Decree about the Dissolution of Marriage. Man and woman were now allowed to form or dissolve a family without registering themselves with the authorities as married. It was sufficient for one of the partners to request the end of the relationship, and no party had obligations towards the other after separation. Other measures led to the decriminalization of group sex and public exhibitionism. This was an unprecedented thawing of restrictions related to sexuality. It was in Soviet Russia that the term “sexual revolution” was coined in a brochure promoting the policy of non-interference into sexual matters written by Dr Grigorii Batkis. He was the director of the Moscow Institute for Sexual Hygiene and also led the Soviet delegation to the World League for Sexual Freedom conference in Berlin in 1923, where the initiatives presented were seen at the forefront of a liberalized sexuality.

But the socialist sexual revolution, praised in many quarters at its time by the western world as liberal and enlightened, was Janus-faced. Under the call for free sexual practices lay acts of subjugation. At the heart of the Stalinist sensual revolution’s motto of “sexual happiness for all”, there is a political strategy of insuring the continual power of the state. US newspapers of the time, as well as a Senate Committee testimony of an American traveller in Soviet Russia, drew attention to sexual practices which resembled more a ‘collectivization of women’ than liberalization. In writing 1984, Orwell took as model the 1921 novel *We* by the Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, even writing a review of it in 1946, two years before the publication of 1984. In the dystopian society of *We*, people are referred to as number, and the ruler promulgated a sexual law that states that “each cipher has the right to any other cipher as sexual product.” This is done by registering ones preference at a special office where one receives a pink voucher showing the partners’ number.

In his travel journal across the Soviet Russia of 1916-18, Constantin Constante takes note of a conversation he had with a firm believer in the erotic liberation promised by the sensual revolution. Asking him how he sees the application of this ideal, the revolutionary proceeds by explaining that
“a commissariat of public love will be created, such that every citizen will be entitled to a love making voucher per day. Upon presentation of this voucher, the socialist woman will be obliged to put her body at his disposal, without opposition or expecting financial benefits. The children born from this second long marriages will become property of the Soviet State, who will raise them and take care of them. These children, bearing no affection for their families, will be the most ardent and honest supporters of the Soviet family, which is represented by the Soviet state.”

While a wide range of sexual activity was permissible, it was controlled and sanctioned by the state. The Soviet Sexual Revolution, as Orwell knew, was not a liberation but a subjugation. Sex was a means of power. However, this exercise of power was rather “creative” and productive, certainly not reducible to probation and repression.

**Big Brother is father to all the children**

Other communist regimes were less creative and more draconian, perhaps the repressive hypothesis can find its confirmation here? Under the rule of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1965-1989, Romania was under a dictatorship that showed many similarities with Orwell’s dystopia. Extreme surveillance, food rations, censorship and propaganda transformed communist Romania into an Orwellian state – one in which Orwell’s 1984 was banned.

As a measure of boosting natality, the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu issued in 1966 the 770 Decree, and with it an entire generation came into being. A generation subsumed under the derisory name of “The Decree Generation - Decretelei”. The sexuality of the Romanian woman of that period was depicted as being put to the service of building socialism. Banned abortion and lack of any contraceptive methods on the market made women relate differently to their body, by circumventing it to a very specific function: making children. Ceausescu’s political body clock was ticking. Every woman was expected to conceive, four or five children, and all Romanian women together were “the Mothers of the Nation”.

Children born in the years of 1972 up to late 1980s were used to hearing as early as kindergarten or in the overpopulated orphanages spread across the country that Ceausescu is their father. “In many cases, this is in a macabre sense true” concludes Herta Muller in her powerful essay *Death or Prison or Children* written in 1998 for the German journal Taz. What better way for the state of big brother to strengthen its hold than to take on the father figure?
Muller goes on to ask what could drive such an insane policy in regards to sexuality, which can only lead to a rapid growth in population who are already subsisting on inadequate resources. “The knowledge that precarious standards of living are a precondition for creating a large population of ‘subjects’—as opposed to a small population of citizens”, she answers.

The state put in place a framework of policy and support structures that encouraged procreation and child raising by creating crèches and child care facilities. It also punished those who were unmarried after the age of 25, or were married but did not have a child in their first two years of marriage, with 10% salary cuts. Gail Kligman notes that the concept of “family planning” acquired an ironic connotation, given that the state took upon this role, which became “a prerequisite for achieving the right number of children suited to the family and to society”.¹ Ceausescu and the Communist Party “appealed to the entire population, to urban and village workers, to understand that to ensure normal demographic growth is a great honor and patriotic obligation for every family and for all our people.”² In the case of Socialist Romania, the family lost the capacity for self-determination in order to serve as an object of government.

This in turn diminished considerably the parents’ private influence over their own children. The aim was to recreate the family structure ultimately making Ceausescu every child’s father and therefore, surely, every mother’s husband. While this exercise of power over human sexuality was draconian, its primary function was not the suppression of sexuality but a redirection of sexuality that would be funnelled into the service of a state gone insane. Again, as with the Soviet case, it was not simply a case of repression, but largely an active and productive change in state institutions, law and propaganda. Foucault’s position holds up again – power does not fear sex, it uses it for its own ends.

It takes three to tango

Before considering the repressive hypothesis in Oceania, it is worth asking what Orwell meant to convey in the novel regarding the subversive nature of sexuality. It might be thought that we are overthinking things. After all, isn’t Winston Orwell’s mouthpiece? Therefore, as Winston believes in the repression hypothesis, so does Orwell, and therefore the ‘meaning of

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² Kligman 1998: 9
the book’ is to convey that hypothesis. But identifying Orwell with Winston is a mistake. Orwell likes to cast his main character as a naïve but principled male in his late 30s, and the hero’s delusions are part of the unfolding tragedy. In Orwell’s first novel, *Burmese Days*, the main character John Flory is a British teak merchant in colonial Myanmar. He attempts to escape his lonely and guilt ridden existence by means of falling in love with an idealist version of Mrs Lackersteen, the only young colonial woman in town. He projects in her, wholly without justification, a shared egalitarian understanding of the world, which in reality she does not hold in the slightest. The disillusion and betrayal he suffers as a consequence of this leads to his death. Though Orwell’s portrayal of Flory is largely sympathetic, he clearly sees him as flawed, and as lacking understanding of many things. Similarly, while we feel for Winston, he is not imbued with Orwell’s intelligence and awareness. Winston gets closest to formulating a more sophisticated view on the relation between sexuality and power when he says: “The party was trying to kill the sex instinct, or, if it could not be killed, then to distort it and dirty it. He did not know why this was so, but it seemed natural that it should be so.” (p. 66) Here Orwell expresses Winston’s merely vague understanding of the complexity of the Party’s wielding of sexuality.

What Julia, and of course the members of the inner party, and therefore surely Orwell, understands, is that sex can also be used actively to keep the status quo. Julia is well equipped to understand these complexities given her job at the ‘Pornosec’ subsection of the Ministry of Truth. At Pornosec, they produce “the lowest kind of pornography” (P. 43), booklets with dubious titles such as *Spanking Stories* and *One Night in a Girls’ School*, which is used to entertain and pacify the proles. True, the outer party members are more rigidly controlled by Big Brother in their sexuality. They are not supposed to have sex for enjoyment but only to have children. Chastity is highly valued. The outer party member’s sexual energy is instead channelled towards hatred for the enemy – external and internal. At the same time prostitution is tacitly encouraged by the Party “as an outlet for instincts which could not be altogether suppressed.” (65) This is quite a different strategy from the strict demands of chastity that it publicly endorsed. Nevertheless, also the acceptance of prostitution is a method that Big Brother uses to control the population. While the Party controls sex, they do not control it absolutely, and the control they do wield is not reducible to repression.

While Winston’s and Julia’s relationship is seen as central for a large part of the book, it turns out that it is really a love triangle, also including O’Brian. It is through this third wheel,
to put it mildly, that the reactionary channelling of sexuality that was so prevalent in Ceausescu’s regime, crystallises itself in Orwell’s novel. He first charms Winston, and seduces him with the promise of the Brotherhood. At the beginning of the novel, Winston confesses that he is “deeply drawn to him” (p. 11), in part because of the contrast between his “urbane manners” and “prizefighter’s physique”, as well as in the hope that O’Brien is not perfectly orthodox.

In the third part of the book, this relation takes a horrific turn as O’Brien tortures Winston. As Cass Sunstein has shown, this is a “sustained scene of rape and castration” (236).\(^3\) In an intensely jarring sequence at the beginning of the torture, O’Brien momentarily halts the pain leading Winston to look up gratefully at O’Brien. Winston is depicted as a grateful rape victim. Orwell writes that Winston “had never loved him so deeply as at this moment”. A bit later he continues: “In some sense that went deeper than friendship, they were intimates” (p. 252). As the next sequence of torture, which is an allegorical rape scene, is about to begin, O’Brien explains: “We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves.” (p. 256) Winston is then connected to a torturing device that leaves him “not hurt, only prostrated.” (p. 257) Towards the end of the next torture scene, which represents castration, O’Brien orders Winston to take off his clothes and look at his broken emaciated body in a three-sided mirror. O’Brien grabs one of Winston’s remaining front teeth: “A twinge of pain shot through Winston’s jaw. O’Brien had wrenched the loose tooth out by the roots. He tossed it across the cell.” He then tells Winston “Now put your cloths on again.” (p. 272). Only when he is sexually broken is he ready for the rat torture during which he ultimately betrays Julia. Winston is now finally broken and O’Brien can easily redirect Winston’s erotic attention to Big Brother. O’Brien has not merely repressed Winston’s sexuality but directed eroticism and desire away from the human experience to a love for the empty abstraction of Ingsoc. Here sex is used to destroy, but then also to create something new.

Winston’s simplistic understanding of what and how to revolt shows that Orwell’s point is really this. Only if the productive purpose of the vast, complex and often horrible machinery of domination and exertion of power is properly understood will effective resistance be possible. Winston’s mistaken understanding of the relation between power and sexuality simply in terms of repression is a common one but also a dangerous one. By

\(^3\) Sexual Freedom and Political Freedom, 235-7.
believing that power is exerted merely by repression one will believe that liberation only requires that certain prohibitions are lifted. However, this underestimates the complex productive relation between power and sexuality and will most likely lead to a breakdown in genuine resistance. Ironically, it is Winston who proves to be revolutionary only from the waist down.