

## Brave New World's Critique of the Present

by Dario Fernandez-Morera

As in the case of Nineteen Eighty-Four, criticism of Huxley's great novel has reflected the views of its critics. And since most critics have been academicians, and since most academicians are not political libertarians or even conservatives, they have emphasized the seeming anti-capitalist themes in the novel, while downplaying or outright ignoring its sometimes libertarian, sometimes outright conservative messages.

The book's attack on what today we call consumerism is a case in point, although there are others, such as the dangers of technology, genetic engineering, and so on. Consumerism as a feature and often as a lamentable feature of our modern capitalism is undeniable. It is a byproduct of the abundance of goods and services that we should thank capitalism for. But we are still free simply not to consume. I do not consume much. I bet there are many here who do not consume much. And presumably the numerous and vociferous critics of consumerism in our society do not consume much either. Why is it then that we, in today's society, can not consume, whereas practically all the people in the novel cannot avoid consuming? The answer is that the society of Brave New World is not a free market society any more than it is a free political society. It is not quite clear if production is publicly controlled or not, but it is certainly clear that a central authority controls both the media and production well enough so that no alternative to the doctrine of consumption and no alternative to the government-sanctioned production can reach the public. Surely this situation is not even close to that of a very moderately free market society like ours, where anti-

consumerist voices can make a living attacking consumerism and having their anti-consumerist product consumed by other anti-consumerists. More important, we know that businesses and their means of production do not have to be owned by the government for production not to be free. Government directives and regulations suffice. Government authority simply directs private industry to produce certain items in such and such quantities and to advertise certain items with such and such frequency and such and such intensity. National Socialism did it. The American war economy during the Second World War did it. And a mild form of such directional control can be seen in today's United States, when government pushes industry through regulations or monetary incentives to do many things presumably for the good of the society, such as hiring people that if left to its own devices industry would not hire, or modifying products in certain ways that if left to its own devices industry would not modify, or advertising against or in favor of things that if left to its own devices industry would not advertise for or against. Brave New World, then, is not a capitalist world: as the book makes clear, people are compelled to consume (33); whereas in a free market society, people are not compelled to do much, including consuming. That is the whole point of a free market. You buy one thing instead of another if you want. Or you do not buy, period, if you do not want. One way or the other, then, whether its businesses are privately or publicly owned, Brave New World is not a free market society, but a benevolently socialist world, a corporate state, a case of Fascism with a human face.

But to me, even more interesting than what critics choose to emphasize in

Huxley's novel is what they choose to ignore or even honestly fail to see. Some of these issues are apparently too hot to handle. One of them is the question of forced communitarianism. Another is the question of a New World Order that leads to a benevolent World State. Other questions too hot to handle are sex and religion. Critics tend to ignore the individualist message in the novel because they are usually socialists of either the left or the right to whom individualism is a bad word. Yet the message is clear, strong, and ubiquitous. There are constant Community Sings. There are constant Solidarity Services (35). Critics ignore also the localist message of the book because they are usually internationalists who dream of a one-world that will bring final peace and abundance to all. Yet the anti-one world themes in the book are clear, strong, and ubiquitous. The cultural vacuum of Brave New World's society stems in part from the lack of alternative societies, and there are no alternative societies because nations, with their unique ways, have disappeared. A gray uniformity prevails. The local has been pushed away and confined to the Reservations. Only there do we find remnants of a long gone multiform culture that includes Christianity, paganism, and even a copy of Shakespeare's complete works. "We have a World State now," voices in the novel say. (35) I would like to examine this question at length, but lack of time compels me to move on to the questions of sex and religion. These questions, however, have implications for the anti-statist and cultural themes of the book, so that here and there I will go back to these issues as I move along.

Brave New World is a society where techne is supreme and the transcendent has been defeated. That is one reason Shakespeare is not around (other reasons are

of course that he is OLD, not healthy and not politically correct, often sad, or too complicatedly merry, and so forth). Shakespeare is not techne. That is also one reason why Christianity is not around (other reasons are of course that Christianity is OLD, not healthy and not politically correct, often sad, or too complicatedly merry, and so forth). Christianity is not techne. But what does the transcendent have to do with sex and Shakespeare and Christianity? Of course we know about that sonnet where Shakespeare recommends procreation as a means to immortality. And we know that passage in the Old Testament where Abraham is about to kill Isaac, the means God promised him to achieve family continuity, the same kind of immortality that Shakespeare talks about. And we also know of that passage in the New Testament, where Jesus promises immortality, a passage often read in Christianity in conjunction with the previous passage in the Old Testament. We are closer here to the matter of transcendence. But what does all this have to do with sex?

Well, it seems that a great deal, at least in the mind of the social thinkers of Brave New World, since their fight against transcendence includes the question of sex. By turning sex into yet another form of entertainment, the social engineers of Brave New World have removed transcendence from sex. Now sex is no different from sports, traveling, skiing, movies, TV, partying, buying, sailing, and all the other sometimes frenetic activities and forms of entertainment that keep a person's mind from thinking, really thinking, concentrating on his reason for existing, the conditions of that existence, and so forth, the sort of thinking that may lead to unhappiness and therefore to unhappiness with one's existence and therefore to alienation from authority and even

to rebellion. That is why, too, the novel makes clear that in the brave new world people do not read much and certainly do not read anything that may tax their intellect too much: such reading creates problems because it may lead to thinking, and especially to thinking in isolation, for oneself, which is potentially very subversive.

Moreover, sex separate from the transcendent function called procreation and therefore family-building facilitates the weakening and eventual elimination in Brave New World of the family as a social unity and therefore the elimination of one of the strongest obstacles to allegiance to larger social units like the state. In Brave New World the family has ceased to exist as a rival to the state. Thus turning sex into just another pleasant activity is fundamental to the political agenda of the social engineers.

In the novel we have a vast, amorphous state where there is no local differentiation of customs, cultures, political organization, or even languages. It would certainly be the ideal of the U.S. State Department's Deputy Secretary of State and New Worldist Strobe Talbott, who in a New York Times profile piece (September 1999) declared that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the U.S. "In its current form" will not exist because the very concept of nationhood will have ceased to exist. Some years earlier (Time, July 20, 1992), Talbott had confessed that he looked forward to a universal government run by "one global authority." "Within the next hundred years," Talbott wrote, "nationhood as we know it will be obsolete, all states will recognize a single, global authority." Talbott went on to explain the theoretical foundation for his optimistic view of the future: "All countries are basically social arrangements....No matter how permanent and even sacred they may seem at any one time, in fact they are all artificial and temporary." We

can see in Talbot's words the explicit and implicit contrast and hierarchy of the Artificial as positive against the Sacred as negative, the Temporary and therefore the New as positive against the Permanent as negative, the Now as positive against the Old as negative, and the Present and the Ahistorical as positive against the Historical as negative.

Another professor, Joh Huer, might be talking about Huxley's new worlders and the Savage when he wrote recently, comparing the United States and the Serbs, that the latter are an "atavistic holdover from a bygone era," while the Americans are probably the "future prototype humans." For professor Huer the United States represents a world of "ultimate sophistication, so logical and so rational, with little human involvement," in contrast to the "total disregard of logic and rationality" of the Serbs. Americans believe in the power of technology and all that that implies—reason, logic, solution-finding," whereas the Serbs believe in the power of their destiny, "powerful and so human." The professor concludes that the Serbs have "to recognize this inevitable development of history and join up with what will be, not what was or should be." Indeed, join or die, as the fate of the Savage illustrates.

Here there are of course Orwellian notes. In Brave New World life has been arranged by the wise and benevolent rulers independently of existing traditions and ancestral memories, which can only contribute to conflict and blood shedding. The social engineers of Brave New World share the views of the NATO politicians who in our own time have told the Serbs that, unlike you, we are not interested in History. History is the past, and the past is undesirable because bloody and intolerant and

messy and unhealthy and politically incorrect. It is better to construct a society anew, ex-nihilo, in a reasonable fashion, more geometrico, without worrying too much about traditions and religions and languages and customs, or at most let us create some new ersatz traditions intended as plausible and accommodating substitutes for the OLD practices.

These ersatz traditions include religion. Today in the U.S. we hear many actual and potential social engineers speak of the need to develop and encourage a secular religion (never mind the oxymoron) that will enshrine the statist communitarian ethos dear to the engineers, and that will teach that service and allegiance and obeissance to the government is a high, praiseworthy goal. In an article called "Civil Religion, Cultural Diversity, and American Civilization," professor Leroy S. Rouner cites, approvingly, a letter by a Yankee Civil War veteran made famous by Ken Burns's Civil War TV series, not coincidentally an icon of the Public Broadcasting Corporation, in which the Yankee soldier wrote to his sweetheart a letter shortly before the battle where he lost his life. The soldier fervorously and favorably compares his love for the Lincoln government to his love for her and even to religion. As he writes, "I know how the triumph of American civilization now leans upon the triumph of the government...and I am willing, pefectly willing, to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this government...."

Professor Rouner, excstatic over this letter, uses it as the springboard for his defense of a strange something which he and others call "Civil Religion." In Orwellian fashion, these professors give to the word religion whatever meaning they want.

Religion now does not necessarily have to do with God. We are also told that this “American Civil Religion” is shared by all Americans, “whether they are formally religious or not.” It is true that, as professor Rouner himself admits, this Civil Religion is, I quote, “so vague and general that it almost isn’t anything at all.” But a good professor is not deterred by such obstacles as vagueness and generality. Besides, the question is not whether there is such a thing as Civil Religion. He assumes there is. The question is how do we use it for our benevolent purposes? One possible answer is that, as other communitarians have argued, we should start re-emphasizing this non-religious religion’s rituals, such as celebrating even more vocally and intensely the more politically correct National Holidays, using uniforms in schools, or attending parades, or holding services in praise of cultural diversity as long as the diverse culture is not too diverse from ours (such as that of the Christian or Islamic fundamentalists, or the Serbs) and engaging in other such soul-lifting civic or civil practices.

Professor Rouner is not alone. As the importance of spiritual beliefs and the human craving for transcendence and ritual become widely recognized, alarmed statisticians, and even some libertarian atheists and agnostics endeavor to develop practices that may function as substitutes for religion. Even people who until recently viewed themselves as superior to the unwashed masses partly because the masses could not seemingly function without religious practices, are now searching for some kind of ritual that will satisfy their own cravings and their unwillingness to leave that area of human life in the dreadful hands of religion. These people remind me of the elite of classical antiquity, who having lost their faith in the gods, retreated into

mathematical cults like those of the Pythagoreans, or, later on, into variously abstract Neoplatonic sects. They were unable to give up their cravings for transcendence, or live without a spiritual dimension, yet could not stoop to sharing the masses' allegedly naive versions of what the elite wanted. Modern examples of this search include something called "centering," which its advocates hope will work as a substitute for the dreaded old-fashioned thing once called "prayer." Even many followers of my admired Ayn Rand have joined the effort to, as they put it, "reclaim spirituality from religion." In the catalog of publications of The Objectivist Center in Poughkeepsie, New York, one finds such titles as "Rational Rituals, or Pay no Attention to That Man Behind the Curtain," where the author, Dr. Madigan, I quote from the blurb, "discusses the experience of the humanist movement in creating secular alternatives to religious practices—especially when they're based on reason rather than faith." In another work titled "Green Cathedrals: Modern Spiritual Poverty and the Rise of Environmentalism," the author, Robert James Bidinotto, I quote, "shows how the modern secular worldview can incorporate a sense of the sacred" without falling into the religious pitfalls of some environmentalists. Even Nathaniel Branden, Rand's one-time favorite disciple and lover, who has over the years moved over to some kind of vague, hip, California spirituality has contributed a piece called "What Are Our Spiritual Needs," where he, I quote, "explores the meaning and misconceptions of spirituality. Based on his many years of practice and reflection, Dr. Branden presents his own understanding of our spiritual needs and their role in our development."

As usual, Huxley foresaw the future by looking at his present. The social

engineers of Brave New World have long confronted and solved the problem now consuming the attention of the non-religious religionists. Like them, they have understood human needs and have tried to satisfy them without making any concessions to religion and certainly without making any concessions to dreaded Christianity. Their solution is a secular religion indeed, of which the Orgy Porgy is a culmination. In Huxley's novel, the grotesque rituals of the Orgy Porgy are a caricature, not of old religion, as other critical readings of the book have opined, but of the non-religious religionists' attempt, so necessary if the state is to have absolute control, to offer some kind of substitute that modern man can use and trust in place of the potentially anti-statist power (compare ancient Rome; compare late twentieth-century Poland, and so on) of old-fashioned religion and even more so, of local religious practices and communities. All these local and traditional forms of spiritual expression, including Christian ones, Brave New World has confined to the badlands, subhuman world of the Reservations, from which John, the Savage, comes, like a failed John the Baptist, to announce a hard, self-denying, self-punishing faith that probably no one in Brave New World will follow (a possible future exception is Helmholtz).

Most criticism of Huxley's work has been written by literature professors. Since literature professors by and large are a rather irreligious group, these critics have been willfully or perhaps unknowingly oblivious to the religious angles in Huxley's thought and writing and therefore in his greatest novel. And yet Huxley makes rather clear how the social engineers in Brave New World in fact provide a complete and systematic alternative to the social theory of traditional religion. Here I am coming back to the

question or sex. In place of the old religious injunctions against abortion and even against contraception (“grow and multiply” says the Bible), the brave new world of the novel offers women total protection against pregnancy by means of the regular supply and consumption of contraceptives carried in the very accurately named Malthusian belts.

In fact, in the novel reproductive freedom, as we call it today, has been taken to its logical conclusion. The world government offers not just reproductive freedom, but actual freedom from reproduction. Women are no longer burdened by pregnancy. Like men, they no longer have to connect sex with future discomforts. They have achieved perfect sexual equality through technology, sexual equality being only one aspect of the pervasive equality aimed at by the social engineers, an equality which critics have overlooked, misled by the existence of different classes of people. The critics have overlooked that, within each class, perfect equality is the norm (this is one reason Helmholtz does not fit and is looked upon with suspicion: he is too good for the other Alphas). Now babies are made in laboratories, without the messiness and the painful and rather unhygienic quality of old-fashioned reproduction. Against the sacrosanct fetishization of the family, of which the old religion was guilty, brave new world society has dissolved the family altogether, replacing it with allegiance to the much larger community, the colossal village (for it takes a village, not a family) of brave new world, with its community rituals and solidarity practices. Allegiance is now social, not familial.

Freedom from motherhood has also been accompanied by a transformation of

the concept of mother into something not just undesirable but actually repulsive, the mere mention of which makes women blush in embarrassment, much as in a long, long gone era the mention of sex in polite company made them blush. Sex, of course, no longer makes women blush in the brave new world. Again Huxley knew what he was talking about. He extrapolated, with amazing lucidity, from his own observations of the behavior of British elite intellectual society during the 1920's to what the future might hold in store.

A noticeable shift in the word “mother,” in the same direction, has taken place in the U.S. today. In a recent article titled “I Want to Be a Mom,” Bethany Patchin writes that when her 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher asked the females in the class, “How many of you want to be at-home moms?” Patchin raised her hand. At once the room got awfully quiet and everyone stared at her. Patchin recounts a discussion with her college adviser four years later. When she told him she wanted to marry and have children after graduation from college, he said, “I wouldn’t have expected you to be that type.” The expression “that type” by the professor counseling the woman was telling. A recent article by Kathleen Parker makes the same point, namely that the idea of a woman being a mother and nothing else, is already OLD, quaint, and generally looked down upon, the more so the more educated and elite the one doing the looking is.

Moreover, instead of the sexual prohibitions, taboos, and caveats of the old religion, brave new world society offers unlimited sexual freedom. Sex as mere recreation, a la Playboy. Sexual experimentation among little children, encouraged as a healthy way to, as we say today, explore one’s sexuality, is part of the exceedingly

desacralizing, matter-of-fact approach to life in the brave new world of Huxley's novel. Like religion, sex has been thoroughly de-mythologized, to use the expression of famous so-called Christian theologian Rudolf Bultmann.

But like our more advanced social thinkers, the enlightened social engineers of the brave new world have realized the need to do something about the stubborn, undesirable, embarrassing, but nonetheless factual importance of religion. Like physicist Freeman Dyson, who recently won the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion (another oxymoron here?), they may think that (I quote Dyson) "religion has a much more important role in human destiny than science." (By the way, Dyson has declared he is both a Christian and an agnostic, and that to him religion is a way of life, not a belief; go figure; his daughter has recently being ordained a Presbyterian minister). And so they have come up with something that today's social thinkers are still trying to come up with, namely a religious ersatz, an undisputably man-made, plastic religion. It is a religion that mimics the rituals of the older religion, but steers clear of spiritual transcendence, and that instead of the OLD God with whom individuals could come into personal contact, offers a sort of impersonal collective deity who stands for the shared communality in which the inhabitants of the brave new world participate. The parody reaches obscene proportions toward the end of the ritual, where the ubiquitous sexuality of the new society surfaces, during the ceremony that celebrates communitarianism, in the form of the Orgy Porgy, where everyone is for and does everyone else, in a proper collectiveclimax to the social ethos of the brave new world.

There are many differences and similarities between the creative visions of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. What Orwell saw he may have seen more sharply and distinctly. Huxley often saw more dimly, but he saw more than Orwell did. Like Nineteen Eighty-Four, but in a more spiritual, perhaps even more profound way, Huxley's Brave New World is a deeply conservative book.