

The Permanent Emergency: the State of Exception in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses George Orwell's seminal dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* through Giorgio Agamben's theoretical framework of the "state of exception" (Agamben, *State* 40). By applying this concept the study explores the novel's political landscape wherein a totalitarian regime permanently suspends the legal order under the pretext of Preserving collective security. It examines how individual sunder this regime are dispossessed of political rights, legal protections and civic status effectively relegating their existence to what Agamben defines as "bare life" (Agamben, *Homosacer* 8)- a purely biological entity vulnerable to sovereign violence. Ultimately, this reading illuminates how Orwell's narrative serves as a profound critique of modern biopolitics and exceptional measures.

KEY WORDS: George Orwell, Giorgio Agamben, State of Exception, Bare life

INTRODUCTION

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* serves as a profound literary premonition of the "state of exception"- a political paradigm where the government permanently suspends its constitution or normal laws under the guise of an existential crisis (Agamben *State*, 40). While Giorgio Agamben, an Italian political theorist, note that modern state deploy emergency powers as temporary measures. *Nineteen Eighty Four*'s Oceania demonstrates a total institutionalisation of this legal vacuum. This study examines how Orwell depicts the mutation of crisis management into a permanent mechanism of totalitarian control. It ultimately demonstrates how the sovereign utilises a continuous state of emergency to obliterate the human psyche and secure total dominion.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to raise awareness of global upheaval, examining how sovereign powers suspend democratic rule through a "state of exception" (Agamben, *State* 40) and reduce individuals to "bare life" (Agamben, *Homosacer* 8).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology involves a critical analysis of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, utilising Giorgio Agamben's framework of "state of exception" (Agamben, *State* 40).

DISCUSSION

George Orwell, the pen name of Eric Arthur Blair was born in Bengal, British India. He was a renowned British novelist who created classic dystopias and grim political satires such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Animal Farm* and *Burmese Days*. Non-fiction and Memoirs were also part of his important oeuvre but he is best known for his bleak political critiques *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*.

Nineteen Eighty Four was published on 8 June 1949. The novel is a dark political commentary. It exposes the absurdities, cruelty and absolute control of totalitarian governments such as -Nazi Germany- over the life of an individual. By suspending the normal laws and rights of citizens under the guise of ceaseless war and crisis, the ruling regime in the novel creates a terrifying "state of exception".

“State of exception” is a philosophical and political concept. Influenced by the ideas of Carl Schmitt and Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben wrote his foundational book, *State Of Exception*. The book describes how modern governments suspend regular laws during a crisis ultimately turning temporary emergency powers into a permanent method of ruling:

--- The state of exception is the opening of a space in which application and norm reveal their separation and a pure force-of-law realizes (that is, applies by ceasing to apply [disapplicando] a norm whose application has been suspended. In this way, the impossible task welding norm and reality together, and thereby constituting the normal sphere, is carried out in the form of the exception, that is to say, by presupposing their nexus. This means that in order to apply a norm it is ultimately necessary to suspend its application, to produce an exception. In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference. (Agamben, *State*40)

State of exception is the suspension of law. A state of exception is not a new law. It is a temporary pause or suspension of the entire legal order. The complete suspension of law in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Oceania is famously captured when Winston Smith notes that writing in his diary was "...not illegal (nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws), but if detected it was reasonably certain that it would be punished by death, or at least by twenty-five years in a forced-labor camp" (Orwell 6). Because the Inner Party maintains no formal legal code, no action is truly protected, and any behaviour or thought can become a capital offence at the state's discretion. Orwell depicts how Oceania operates without formal law and without a capital. The nation is ruled by Big Brother, an image everywhere in Oceania that reads, "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" (Orwell 2). This fake ruler only exists on large posters and screens as the Inner Party seeks power, and paralyses the thoughts of individuals. The four governing ministries of Oceania control the lives of Outer Party members and the proles. Their names are completely contradictory to their functions, serving as a prime example of "doublethink":

The Ministry of peace concerns itself with war, the Ministry of Truth with lies, the Ministry of Love with torture, and the Ministry of plenty with starvation. These contradictions are not accidental, nor do they result from ordinary hypocrisy: they are deliberate exercises in doublethink. For it is only by reconciling contradictions that power can be retained indefinitely. In no other way could the ancient cycle be broken. If human equality is to be forever averted-if the High, as we have called them, are to keep their places permanently then the prevailing mental condition must be controlled insanity (Orwell 216).

The concept of grey zone is a central feature of state of exception. A grey zone exists within Oceania. It creates a legal limbo where the difference between enforcing the law and breaking the law disappears. In his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben states, "The Paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same, outside and inside the juridical order" (15). Oceania operates in a permanent state of legal limbo. Because it has completely eliminated all formal legislation. This creates a terrifying grey zone where individuals are not protected by any law yet, they can be executed or sent to forced-labour camps for any action or thought deemed disloyal by the Thought Police. The individuals are included in the legal system only by being excluded from its protections. They are diminished to "bare life" as they inhabit this space of lawlessness.

Anomie is another central feature of the state of exception, particularly as theorised by Agamben. Oceania's actions happen outside normal legal rules while still claiming to protect the law. It exists in an anomic state where traditional statutory laws are absent, yet absolute obedience is enforced through arbitrary terror. Winston Smith's narrative bridges a fragmented recollection of pre-revolutionary past with his grim adulthood as a party worker. His hunger-stricken childhood, his loss of family in Great Purge, his loveless marriage with a party worker, his secret relationship with Julia imply an individual's slavery. The Inner Party converts temporary emergency measures into a permanent system of psychological and physical oppression designed to endure indefinitely. The Party pretends to follow an ideology called English Socialism, "INGSOC" but in reality it has

no law, it legalises lawlessness. The Ministry of Love in Oceania is a physical space outside the law. When O'Brien, the representative of the party, tortures Winston Smith in the Ministry of Love, he discloses the anomic state of Oceania :

The party seeks power totally for its own sake. We are not interested in the goods of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently. We are different from all the oligarchies of the past in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites. The German Nazis and the Russian communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had to courage to recognize their motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just round the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power, not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power (Orwell 263).

Thus, lawlessness permanently rules Oceania. Nothing is illegal in Oceania, since there are no longer any laws. The narrator of the novel also says, "In Oceania, there is no law" (Orwell 214). The ruling party twists the idea of a temporary emergency into a permanent state of perpetual war to control the outer party members and proles thereby maintaining absolute power.

The "state of exception" turns into the new normal when emergency powers, designed as short-term fixes for sudden dangers like wars or natural disasters become the sovereign's permanent rule. Oceania's Inner party government established the new normal. The government normalised continuous warfare to maintain absolute psychological and social control effectively making a state of emergency the permanent rule rather than the exception.

During the twentieth century world wars the democratic governments of the United States and the United Kingdom implemented sweeping wartime acts to control, industries, ration food and the censor media. While intended to end with the wars, many administrative apparatuses remained permanent. In Weimer Germany, Article 48 of the constitution allowed the president to take emergency measures without parliamentary consent. The Nazi regime used this 'exception' to permanently suspend constitutional rights through the Reichstag Fire Decree, turning a democracy into a dictatorship. In the twenty-first century the United States of America shifted from fighting defined, time-bound wars on terror to combating abstract endless threats. The government introduced laws such as the USA PATRIOT ACT. Consequently, the Surveillance of citizens, indefinite detentions (for example Guantanamo Bay) and secretive drone strikes became standardised legal practices rather than temporary wartime anomalies. In *State of Exception*, Agamben argues:

Faced with the unstoppable progression of what has been called a "global civil war", the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics. This transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government threatens radically to alter-in fact, has already palpably altered-the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms. Indeed, from this perspective, the state of exception appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism (2-3).

In political theory "endless crisis" is a defining feature of the "state of exception". The government of the Inner Party keeps the people of Oceania in a constant state of perceived threat characterised by endless war- either with Euresia or with Eastasia – and O'Brien's normalisation of extreme executive powers. The nations in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are always fighting. War is no longer a short-term response to a sudden danger. It is a permanent way of life.

The party uses various slogans to strip away the rights of the people, one of which is “WAR IS PEACE”. They employ this particular slogan because a constant external threat prevents people from rebelling against the internal corruption of the government. Fear unites the population behind Big Brother. Furthermore, the Inner Party portrays a fake enemy of the people, Emmanuel Goldstein, using hate speech, war posters to successfully erode genuine patriotic emotions and divert internal public anger towards an external adversary.

A constant crisis gives the Party an excuse to control people, a reason to erode personal freedom, increase surveillance, promote false propaganda, provide pornography for the proles and enforce strict rationing to keep the masses ignorant and weak. As Winston Smith reflects on the crisis of basic needs:

In any time that he could accurately remember, there had never been quite enough to eat, one had never had socks or underclothes that were not full of holes, furniture had always been battered and rickety, rooms bread dark-colored, tea a rarity, coffee filthy tasting, cigarettes insufficient-nothing cheap and plentiful except synthetic gin (Orwell 59).

Wars burn up extra goods and materials, which keeps people poor and busy just trying to survive. They never have time to grow intellectually, question the Inner Party's rule or demand a better life. The Inner Party's survival will be threatened if every individual in the country attains equality in all aspects of life:

But it was also clear that an all-round increase in wealth threatened the destruction-indeed, in some sense was the destruction- of a hierarchical society. In a world in which everyone worked short hours, had enough to eat, lived in a house with a bathroom and a refrigerator, and possessed a motorcar or even an airplane, the most obvious and perhaps the most important form of inequality would already have disappeared.... For if leisure and security were enjoyed by all alike, the great mass of human beings who are normally stupefied by poverty would become literate and would learn to think for themselves; and when once done this, they would sooner or later realize that the privileged minority had no function, and they would sweep it away. In the long run, a hierarchical society was only possible on a basis of poverty and ignorance (Orwell 190).

Hence, the ruling party uses contradictory slogans, “FREEDOM IS SLAVERY” and “IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH” (Orwell 4) to break down logical thinking of the people. The Inner Party divides life through economic deprivation and exploitation of the right to education. They convince the Outer Party members and the proles to believe that being a slave to the state provides protection. By depending fully on the Inner Party, they remain obedient but exist without any rights and hence cannot be called citizens.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary blurring of democracy and totalitarianism reveals that the “state of exception” has become our permanent political paradigm. By governing through a perpetual cycle of crises-whether manufactured or real-modern states systematically dismantle the legal protections, civil liberties and structured social routines that elevate human life from mere survival to meaningful citizenship. In the name of public safety and national security, the sovereign Power strips individuals of their “bios” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*1)-their politically qualified, dignified lives-and relegates them to “zoe” (Agamben1), a state of raw unprotected “bare life” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*8) existing at the absolute mercy of executive authority.

REFERENCES

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