

## KNOWLEDGE AND POWER RELATION IN CREATIVE WRITINGS BY GEORGE ORWELL: A READING OF *1984*

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**Abstract :** In George Orwell's *1984*, the act of knowing is portrayed through characters who, to a large extent, are intellectuals. Knowledge is presented as an embodiment of power as knowledgeable characters prevail over those who are not. As such, it is taken for granted that an amount of information at one's disposal is enough to make one powerful. However, this paper holds that knowledge is neither power nor a source of power unless it is purpose-oriented. It cannot effect change as it is commonly believed until an end (a purpose) of its use is clearly and convincingly set up. Out of a Marxist criticism, the paper reveals that knowledge holders like Syme and other elites from Big Brother's party wield power that helps them to achieve whatever goals they set. Yet, George Orwell designs them all to remain vulnerable as individuals when their knowledge does not, any longer, match with the main ideology of the ruling party.

**Keywords:** education, awareness, knowledge, Marxist criticism

**Résumé:** Dans *1984* de George Orwell, l'acte de savoir est dépeint à travers des personnages qui, dans une large mesure, sont des intellectuels. La connaissance est présentée comme une incarnation du pouvoir, car les personnages bien informés l'emportent sur ceux qui ne le sont pas. Ainsi, il est considéré comme acquis qu'une quantité d'informations à disposition suffit à rendre une personne puissante. Cependant, cet article soutient que la connaissance n'est ni un pouvoir ni une source de pouvoir si elle n'est pas orientée vers un but précis. Elle ne peut pas provoquer de changement, comme on le croit généralement, tant qu'une finalité (un but) de son utilisation n'est pas clairement définie et convaincante. À partir d'une critique marxiste, l'article révèle que les détenteurs du savoir comme Syme et d'autres élites du parti de Big Brother exercent un pouvoir qui les aide à atteindre les objectifs qu'ils se fixent. Pourtant, George Orwell conçoit qu'ils restent tous vulnérables en tant qu'individus lorsque leurs connaissances ne correspondent plus à l'idéologie principale du parti au pouvoir.

**Mots clés :** éducation, éveil de conscience, connaissance, critique marxiste

## Introduction

As a novel of anticipation, *1984* describes a totalitarian regime in a context whereby the world is divided into three blocs or States namely Eastasia, Eurasia and Oceania. Oceania, which is described in the novel, is under the dictatorship of Big Brother. In that imagined State, ignorance, violence, manipulation and lies prevail. To get access to knowledge about true realities of things is a challenging enterprise for the few curious Oceanians like Winston, who becomes aware of the importance of knowledge thanks to which power can be garnered. In the novel, knowledgeable characters like Syme and other elites are brought to assume direct responsibility in Big Brother's management of Oceania.

Human education is built on knowledge acquisition (Kiyosaki, 2010). Knowledge leads to awareness which is paramount in the taking of decisions and actions that can affect, influence or modify the course of things (Ziglar, 1982). It is generally associated with intelligence, and for Norman Vincent Peale (1998: 36), "human intelligence is a powerful factor when it studies and analyses every facet of a problem until it is laid out in orderly fashion for scrutiny and decision." He then concludes that the human mind is a great tool in that with it, "you have power over all conditions and circumstances and over any problem however difficult" (Peale, 1998: 36). Briefly put, the brain is dominant and thanks to it, intellectuals, whose activity is based on the exercise of the mind, succeed exercising power in order to get things done as R. Eyben (2004: 17) puts: "Power is the energy that causes change - or prevents change from happening".

The wielding of power is said to have developed alongside human intelligence as "the concept of power is as ancient and ubiquitous as any that social theory can boast" (Dahl, 1957: 201). Its exercise determines, most of the time, the fate of any other relation and action in society. W. Rodney (1972: 271-272) observes, in this respect, that "Power is the ultimate determinant in human society, being basic to the relations within any group and between groups. It implies the ability to defend one's interests and, if necessary, to impose one's will

by any means available". It also "implies possession of ability to wield force, permissive authority, or substantial influence" (Morse, 2003: 973).

Power, therefore, involves a commanding impulse, the existence of a dominator and a dominated, a leader and a led, and the imposition of law (Spector, 1997). In a capitalistic view, V. Belaya and J. H. Hanf (2009: 7) show that "power in economics is associated with payoffs, possession of valuables, minimizing costs and maximizing gains and with the aim to gain as much profit as possible even if this requires aggressive acts and coercion". Thus, the propension to dominate, defeat or subjugate excludes collaboration and dialogue in power relation. Yet, for M. Stoppino (2007: 181), "to exercise power is to obtain collaboration. It is to obtain behaviour on the part of others that is in conformity with one's will or interest".

In power relation, knowledge can guide and monitor actions. Intentions and goals are achieved thanks to it (Gettier, 1963; Goldman, 1967). Power cannot then be exercised without the extraction, appropriation, distribution or retention of knowledge (Craig, 1986). Thus, for Chinua Achebe, two kinds of knowledge are important for effective resistance: "in the first place, self-knowledge by the victim, which means awareness that oppression exists, an awareness that the victim has fallen from a great height of glory or promise into the present depths; secondly, the victim must know who the enemy is. He must know his oppressor's real name, not an alias, a pseudonym, or a nom de plume!" (Anagwonye, 2012: 153). In a sense, gaining power is synonymous with acquiring appropriate knowledge.

In George Orwell's *1984*, the act of knowing is portrayed through characters who, to a large extent, are intellectuals. Knowledge is presented as an embodiment of power as knowledgeable characters prevail over those who are not. As such, it is taken for granted that an amount of information at one's disposal is enough to make one powerful. However, this paper holds that knowledge is neither power nor a source of power unless it is purpose-oriented (Stone, 1962; Warren, 2006; Maxwell, 2009). It cannot effect change as it is commonly believed until an end (purpose) of its use is clearly and convincingly set up (Ziglar, 1982; Canfield et al., 2000).

In the light of Marxist criticism, the use of knowledge by the dominant class to get things done in *1984* will be explored in order to show the extent to which other classes are negatively affected (Bressler, 1994; Eagleton, 1976). The paper shows that intellectuals in Big Brother's party know the ultimate goal they pursue, and this motivates them to use their knowledge to achieve it. However, the masses remain ignorant not only that they feed on inadequate knowledge but also that they do not have any goal that can guide the acquisition of knowledge. They then dwell in a false consciousness created by the ruling party (Djagri T., 2016; 2020). The paper explores sources of knowledge acquisition on the one hand, and the power of both ignorance and knowledge in *1984* on the other.

### **1. Purpose and Knowledge Acquisition in 1984**

As a product of mental exercise, knowledge is considered to be more important than physical strength due to the fact that visible actions proceed out of thoughts (Allen & Marden, 1971). It can come under the shape of information in mind, specific information or all that can be known. It is, according to A.S. Hornby (2015: 866), "the information, understanding and skills that you gain through education or experience". As such, knowledgeable people are informed about facts and principles. Some of them have explicit information as they learned throughout time. This helps them to have general awareness so as to make informed choices. Knowledge, in the context of formal education, is most of the time acquired through learning and reading in schools whereas traditional communities rely on orality thanks to which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation (Dortier, 2014; Ki-Zerbo, 2013).

Though knowledge is very often associated with power, and is even taken for granted as equal to power; it is crucial to note that acquiring knowledge for knowledge's sake does not make the knower powerful (Maxwell, 2009). In a sense, in order to be effective, knowledge needs to design a purpose, reason or goal.

In 1984, Winston turns to books and old people to get knowledge about true realities of things in Oceania because he is suspicious of bad governance. He is purpose-oriented in his quest of knowledge. His objective is to discover accurate information about Big Brother's leadership. Associated with such a purpose, knowledge gives power to effect change (Warren, 2006). In a sense, the goal pursued by Winston becomes a channel that connects knowledge he seeks and the potential power to be produced. That is why W. Denis (1979: 2) finds power to be "the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others". In the same perspective, Wilson, as quoted by F. Csaszar (2004: 137), notes that power "consists in one's capacity to link his will with the purpose of others, to lead by reason and gift of cooperation". It means that Winston can gain power as he knows the reason why he is seeking knowledge.

Being aware of the power of knowledge, Big Brother and his party recruit intellectuals and elites in Oceania in order to strengthen the established dictatorship. It is, for instance, said of Syme, one key member of the ruling party, that he "was a philologist, a specialist in New-speak. Indeed, he was one of the enormous team of experts now engaged in compiling the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary" (1984, p. 52). As such, Syme uses his expertise to help produce Newspeak Dictionary which is intended to prevent thoughts and heresies in Oceania. The work of Syme is crucial in that it reduces people's capacity to express and promote undesired thoughts.

Moreover, words that are found in Newspeak Dictionary are chosen to promote Big Brother's ideology which, to a large extent, "represents a set of false assumptions or illusions used by elites to dominate the working classes and to maintain social stability" (Bressler, 1994: 119). In Oceania, these false assumptions intend to manipulate and control the working class which is mainly composed of the middle-class people. It can be observed that the lower class does not count in that fictitious country since, under the weight of ignorance, they are

far from being a threat to the ruling party. In a sense, a successful creation of a powerful ideology greatly depends on how knowledgeable those involved are. Knowledge is, therefore, paramount for whoever wants to overthrow Big Brother's dictatorship. However, books available in Oceania are written to produce a kind of knowledge that does not generate power to resist the dictatorship.

In addition, the leading party in *1984* discovers that knowledge of how to solve a problem never exists in concentrated form as it is commonly believed. It rather exists in the shape of "power everywhere", that is, in a dispersed form. It is found in the hands of every individual who happens to be an expert in one aspect connected to the management of the whole problem. In order to prevent its acquisition and the awareness of its power, "the hunting-down and destruction of books had been done with the same thoroughness in the prole quarters as everywhere else" (1984, p. 101). In a sense, the burning of books and the destruction of any other source of information which threaten the dominant ideology become strategies that Big Brother and his party use to exercise total control over the country and its citizens.

Apart from books which constitute valuable sources of knowledge acquisition, human interactions help people to get adequate information that can make them knowledgeable (Ki-Zerbo, 2013). In the novel, when Winston realises that he needs knowledge about the past in order to make certain analysis of Big Brother's leadership, he goes to see an old man he suspects to be a carrier of knowledge of the past. For him, the old man is a relic of the past and a good specimen for his investigation. Winston Smith wants to understand why the population is so poor whereas statistics show the soundness of the economy in Oceania in order to be able to make informed decisions and choices. He then inquires:

What I'm trying to say is this. You have been alive a very long time; you lived half your life before the Revolution. In 1925, for instance, you were already grown up. Would you say, from what

you can remember, that life in 1925 was better than it is now, or worse? If you choose, would you prefer to live then or now?  
(1984, p. 96)

Through Winston's actions, it can be understood that social interactions participate in raising people's awareness. Old men and women become sources of valuable information that can give knowledge and, subsequently, power. Exchanging with them as Winston does with the old man is as important as reading a book. However, the ruling class in 1984 have seen to it that any human relic of the past professes nothing but what the party of Big Brother dictates. In the case of the old man, Winston is disappointed to realise that the past is almost erased from the old man's memory either through torture or coercion from the ruling party or the weight of age which can be said to have altered his knowledge of the past.

People's ignorance in 1984 can then be used as a source of manipulation. That is why the motto of Big Brother's party states that "War is peace/ Freedom is slavery/ Ignorance is strength" (1984, p. 8). In a sense, the proletariat cannot be free in 1984 without the acquisition of adequate and appropriate knowledge about their living conditions (Peel, 2010). Only to this end can they get power to effect change they crave for.

## **2. The Power of Ignorance and Knowledge in 1984**

In the fictitious society in 1984, the lower class is easily manipulated because of the lack of self-knowledge and knowledge about the oppressor. Since they cannot grapple with strategies devised by Big Brother and his party, the lower class become a threat and barrier to their own freedom and liberty. Their state of ignorance is created and watched over by the ruling elites in Oceania, the imagined country. As such, ignorance which is one of the weaknesses of the oppressed, becomes a source of strength at the service of the oppressor.

In *1984*, ignorance is represented through proletarians who constitute the great majority of the population. Yet, they cannot bring change that they crave for because, “left to themselves, they will continue from generation to generation and from century to century, working, breeding and dying, not only without any impulse to rebel, but without the power of grasping that the world could be other than it is” (1984, p. 216). The proletariat’s ignorance becomes, in this respect, a great source of power for the ruling elite as long as “this social elite forces its ideas upon the working classes” (Bressler, 1994: 120). Knowledge acquisition can help conceive that the world could be different but since books are burnt out and old people are terrified by the secret police, it becomes obvious that the lower class cannot have access to valuable sources of knowledge or information.

However, the quality of life of people greatly depends on the quality of decisions they take daily. N. Mandela (1965: 29) observed, for instance, that Bantu Education Bill aims to teach children that Africans are inferior to Europeans. However, being fully aware of the quality of knowledge given to children, he urged his fellow Africans to “teach the children that the Africans are not one iota inferior to Europeans”. Having such kind of information from their education, Bantu children can be able to modify their perception of the world around them and more importantly question the dominant discrediting discourse promoted by apartheid regime. Knowledge, in this respect, gives power and that is why, “African youth with distinguished scholastic careers are not a credit to the country, but a serious threat to the governing circles” (Ibid, 1965: 29) since many of those scholars are not ready to live in subjugation.

Power management as seen in *1984* puts limits to information access. This does not allow the powerless to locate those people who are undergoing the same situation in order to form alliances for empowerment. Since “the level of popular education is actually declining” (1984, p. 216) in Oceania, it is obvious that the proletarians will remain powerless and Big Brother and his party powerful. That is the reason why “they can be granted intellectual liberty because they have no



intellect" (1984, p. 216). Their intellect is destroyed by people like Syme and O'Brien who are from the Inner Party and are brilliant intellectuals. Syme works on the "Newspeak Dictionary" whereas O'Brien is carrying out the questioning and brainwashing of the heretics. Qualifying proletarians as brainless human beings denotes the extent to which knowledge acquisition has been suppressed in Oceania. Big Brother can then advocate that ignorance is strength to mean that whoever is not aware of forces in play in his individual life as well as that of their society, is a slave to those who are enlightened.

Winston is always frustrated and embarrassed when he enters into a debate with O'Brien. On one occasion, he wonders: "what can you do, thought Winston, against a lunatic who is more intelligent than yourself, who gives your arguments a fair hearing and then simply persists in his lunacy?" (1984, pp. 268-269) Winston shows that O'Brien is unchallengeable because of his being intelligent and, more paramount, being capable of argumentation. O'Brien understands fully Winston's standpoints and even helps him have sound expression of what he (Winston) really intends to say. However, he chooses to "simply persist in his lunacy" (1984, p. 269). As such, O'Brien uses his knowledge to prevail over Winston. He knows HOW Big Brother's party functions and also knows WHY it functions the way it does. Unlike O'Brien, Winston knows HOW Big Brother and his party proceeds to totally control Oceanian citizens but admits that he does not know WHY they do that. It means that as long as Winston remains ignorant about WHY Big Brother and his party manage Oceania the way they do, there is no hope that he can succeed in his resistance and rebellion against them. He lacks knowledge that can help him become efficient in his battle. Winston becomes a mirror through which the mindset of the masses in many dictatorships can be read.

The narrator in *1984* allows readers to understand that Winston is already defeated because of his not being as intelligent as O'Brien. It is said that "the

peculiar reverence for O'Brien, which nothing seemed able to destroy, flooded Winston's heart again. How intelligent, he thought, how intelligent! Never did O'Brien fail to understand what was said to him" (1984, p. 279-280). From the dialogue between O'Brien and Winston, it can be understood that knowledge is indispensable in order to operate in human society.

Like Syme, O'Brien has mental abilities and intelligence in a highly developed degree which help him to think and understand things clearly and logically. Thus, whoever comes to O'Brien without a strong mental capacity will surrender to his power. That is why it is said of Winston that he "had grasped the frivolity, the shallowness of his attempt to set himself up against the power of the Party" (1984, pp. 282-283). Winston realises that he lacks the capacity to get his ideas across. That is why M. Weber (1978: 926) argues that power is "the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action".

Any resistance to Big Brother's leadership is brought to nought by two main bodies: the Thought Police, and the Elites. The latter is more effective in causing mental surrender whereby intelligent party officials, like O'Brien, carry out questionnaires on whoever is caught: "Yes, even...he [Winston] could not fight against the Party any longer. Besides, the Party was in the right. It must be so: how could the immortal, collective brain be mistaken? By what external standard could you check its judgment? (1984, p. 283) Knowledge allows committed elites to bring awareness among the people who are ready to believe any nonsense from their leaders as Winston puts: "In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it" (1984, p. 84). Unfortunately, power generated by knowledge in 1984 is put at the service of manipulation and coercion (Orwell, 1946).

Knowledge generates power, and its use affects many domains of life in society. For instance, Party intellectuals in Big Brother's Oceania fill literature, films, science and history with ideologies which contribute to have total control

over the masses. Thus, Winston's "heart sank as he thought of the enormous power arrayed against him, the ease with which any Party intellectual would overthrow him in debate, the subtle arguments which he would not be able to understand, much less answer" (1984, p. 84). Elites can even choose to go against common belief and convince anyone who is frustrated of the consistence of the new definition of realities. They have power to name and define things their own way: "The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth's centre" (1984, p. 85).

Since purpose-oriented knowledge constitutes a source of power, it happens that intelligent people become, sometimes, threats to the interests of political leaders like Big Brother. In the case of Syme in 1984, Winston notes that "Syme will be vapourized. He is too intelligent. He sees too clearly and speaks too plainly. The party does not like such people" (1984, p. 57). Even though Syme works for Big Brother, his intelligence, according to Winston, will inevitably leads him to a tragic end because he is likely to be coveted by Big Brother's potential opponents. Thus, after using an expert like Syme, Big Brother and his party can decide to put an end to his life when they realise that he can no longer be totally trusted or watched over as Winston observes: "There was something subtly wrong with Syme. There was something that he lacked: discretion, aloofness, a sort of saving stupidity" (1984, p. 58). In addition, Syme "said things that would have been better unsaid, *he had read too many books*" [My italics] (1984, p. 59). Not all intellectuals can know and behave at the same time as if they do not know anything. But this is what Big Brother expects from his party elites. Unfortunately, "Syme's fate was not difficult to foresee" (1984, p. 59).

In short, the lack of appropriate knowledge in a given context renders people powerless as portrayed through proletarians in 1984. That same ignorance can become a source of power to those who know how and why to use it. But

those who acquire knowledge for a specific purpose are well placed to garner and wield power as illustrated through Syme and O'Brien in the novel.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has shown that knowledge is not power unless it is purpose-oriented. It has also been underscored that knowledge can be acquired through many ways and means; and the most common of them is education. Whether to achieve a common goal or personal interest, most leaders recognise the necessity to get educated or trained. Thus, preventing knowledge acquisition has been a source of power to Big Brother and his party.

From Orwell's narrative, it has been posited that, if it had been possible to foresee the tragic fate of Syme (the intellectual who has put his knowledge at the service of a dictatorship), it would have been proper to say that whoever misuses their power will not go unaffected by its bad consequences. In a sense, knowledge must be acquired through available means as shown in *1984*. Yet, noble purposes ought to be designed so that the power it gives might be useful to the majority.

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