Ereignis Center for Philosophy and the Arts
ereignis.no/ | ereignis@tankebanen.no

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On Geopolitical States of Power, Surveillance, Freedom of Speech, with Reference to George Orwell's *1984*

by Jørgen Veisland[1]

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Socrates on the edge

In his essay "Pintxos 2" (*Inscriptions 6,2,*2023) Gray Kochhar-Lindgren comments on Plato's *Crito*, calling attention to the question Crito asks Socrates in order to elicit a final answer to what Socrates intends to do after having received the death sentence issued by the Athenian powers representing the Laws. Socrates is free to leave but does not leave, which is cause for Crito's concern and puzzlement. Crito's bewilderment increases when Socrates remains silent. Kochhar-Lindgren offers an explanation, stating that "[….] silence, somehow, is built into a vast machine of writing and reading" (111), and continues:

> Each and every one of us, in absolute solitude and in absolute togetherness, comes to this inescapable edge, have always been, at each instance of appearing at this precipitous edge of disappearance. This is a radically different edge than all other edges. An "edge", after all, divides one region from another; we have absolutely no idea of the regionality of death, for this remains not a region – although it has of course often been imagined as just that with its own underworld or overworld geography – but a blankness. (loc. cit)

At the moment of death "Socrates comes to the edge where he has always stood with a magnanimous equanimity, an incessant reflective curiosity, and even a kind of liberatory joy" (loc. cit), Kochhar-Lindgren writes. Addressing the baffling question why Socrates chooses not to flee but instead drains the cup of hemlock, Kochhar-Lindgren refers to Deleuze's concept of philosophy as theatre, the putting of metaphysics in motion. "The voice of Plato is split as Socrates divides himself into new roles" (112). Thus the "laws are ventriloquised", speaking for themselves as characters in a drama, the theatre of Dionysos. The Laws ask Socrates "[...] does it seem possible to you that any city where the verdicts reached have no force but are made powerless and corrupted by private citizens could continue to exist and not be in ruins"? (112 – 1113). We may easily come to the conclusion that the trumped up charges against Socrates manifest a "revengeful

[1] Ereignis Center for Philosophy and the Arts.

autocratic use of democracy", and that "the empirical Laws are not congruent with the supersensible idea of justice"; hence Socrates is free to escape. However, Socrates chooses not to disobey the judgment passed by the Laws for they are acting out of "an ignorance that believes it knows that what it does is best" (loc. cit.) This ignorance in knowledge and knowledge in ignorance involves an epistemological problem that is also a political problem, in the Athenian republic and in today's democratic state. The ambivalence of knowledge causes Socrates to be silent; his silence is not an acquiescense. It is an act of transcendence into a sphere where he is free to engage in an ecstatic listening. He hears "the pipes of the Korybantes, which resonate in his inner ear, drowning out all other sounds" (114).

Ambivalence of knowledge in Kuzuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

In Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989), which is set in Great Britain in the 1930's, '40's and '50's, the butler Stevens stays loyal to his employer, the lord of Darlington Hall, even though the lord lets himself be persuaded to support Nazi Germany. His support is motivated by an honorable sense of compassion for the state of Germany after World War I which left the country impoverished due to what the lord judges to be a blatantly unfair Versailles Treaty. The treaty was, of course, not only unfair in its insistance that Germany pay enormous war debts to the victors but also incredibly stupid since the enforced impoverishment of the German state gave rise to the nationalist socialist ideology and released barbarian forces on all of Europe. The lack of perspicacity on part of the ruling powers reveal a disastrous absence of insight into the mechanisms of political repression and social class relations.

The narrator moves into Stevens' consciousness, assuming the moral and intellectual voice of the butler. The social and cultural dialectic of Great Britain occurs, now, in Stevens' mind where it becomes a question of knowledge, of knowing and not knowing, and where it involves democratic versus undemocratic dissemination of information. In a pivotal scene taking place at Darlington Hall in the year 1935 an aristocratic guest of Lord Darlington calls on Stevens and says:

> 'My good man, I have a question for you. We need your help on a certain matter we've been debating. Tell me, do you suppose the debt situatuation regarding America is a significant factor in the present low levels of trade? Or do you suppose this is a red herring and that the abandonment of the gold standard is at the root of the matter?' (195)

Stevens ponders the question, reflecting in his first-person narrative voice:

> I was naturally a little surprised by this, but then quickly saw the situation for what it was; that is to say, it was clearly expected that I be baffled by the question. Indeed, in the moment or so that it took for me to perceive this and compose a suitable response, I may even have given the outward impression of struggling with the question, for I saw all the gentlemen in the room exchange mirthful smiles.
>
> 'I'm very sorry, sir,' I said, 'but I am unable to be of assistance on this matter'. (loc. cit.)

Stevens is asked yet a couple of equally 'baffling' questions designed to embarrass him and to evoke the mirth of the aristocratic audience. Lord Darlington duly apologizes to the butler later in the evening and concedes that he is indeed shocked by the uncultivated behavior of his guests. The general point of view of his guests boils down to the fact that there is, as one of them says, "a real limit to how much ordinary people can learn and know" (194) – a disgraceful statement indeed and one that is contradicted by Stevens' thought process that occurs in a 'moment or so' as he quickly sees the situation for what it is. The subtle narrative voice of Stevens, recalled and reported in retrospect, clearly manifests a knowledge superior to that of his interlocutors. He knows their design on him and his knowledge is testimony to the fact that there is no limit to what 'ordinary people can learn and know'. Like Socrates, Stevens remains silent confronted with the superior powers that need to buoy themselves up by demonstrating an exclusive insight into world af-

fairs. An attitude contributing very much to the rise of Nazi Germany.

Stevens' silence is a manifestation of his overall reserved, even repressed character. This silence and reserve prevents him from admitting and expressing his feelings for the housekeeper at Darlington Hall, Miss Kenton, thus failing to reciprocate her strong feelings for him until it is too late. However, there are instances when Stevens' own personal opinion is openly vented, one of them being a case involving the firing of two maids who were let go because they were Jewish. Stevens and Miss Kenton are both opposed to the firing and Lord Darlington later admits that it was wrong of him to fire them.

J. M. Coetzee's *Giving Offense* (1996) – on censorship

Commenting on the South African novelist André Brink who was in the forefront of opposition to censorship, the author J. M. Coetzee outlines Brink's writings on censorship which fall into two groups, the first one consisting of naked confrontation between dissident writers and official censors, and the second one which was written in the 1980's when censorship began to relax. In the first model Brink describes the contest between the state and the writer as morally clearcut; confrontation is absolute and inescapable, exemplified by the characters Antigone versus Creon and Winston Smith versus Big Brother. Truth is on the side of the hero whereas the state embodies the Lie. - In the second model the metaphoric opposition shifts from truth and lie to sickness and health. The artist is a physician moving "unharmed in the midst of contagion" (209). The question is why the state finds it so hard to coexist with the intellectual, the artist, and the dissident who actually are the best members of the state. Brink quotes Orwell: "The object of power is power" (LS, 158); and: "Power [….] is narcissist by nature, striving constantly to perpetuate itself through cloning, approaching more and more a state of utter homogeneity by casting out what seems foreign or deviant" (M, 173).

In an essay published in 1984 Brink writes:

> The totalitarian order depends for its very existence on a precarious equilibrium. Without the heretic, the rebel, the writer, the state crumbles: yet by tolerating him, the ruler equally well seals his fate. At least by implication, [in George Orwell's *1984*] Big Brother's mighty system disappears because he wanted to eradicate the dissident – but could not do without him. (LS 165)

Brink realizes that the relationship between truth, writer and state is complex and equivocal. He comments that the writer no longer has a monopoly on truth. The exploration of truth results in a statement which is encoded in writing and then has to be published. Brink states: "[*Truth*] *has* to be private and individual to start with; but to become valid it must transcend the life of the individual". (M 210)

Brink's analysis of the relation between truth, writer and state supplements the ambivalence of knowledge dramatized so vividly in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day.* The writer and the common man are on the edge of the epistemological and ethical gap between individual conscience and the public. *Brink* is on the brink. Shouldn't the writer choose to be silent like Socrates and reserved like Stevens?

George Orwell's *1984* – Big Brother and Emmanuel Goldstein

The division of the world of *1984* into three superpowers, Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia, provokes the stirring question: Is today's world a replica of Orwell's world, in the sense that in spite of the fact that Western democracy, Europe and North America, are poised in a political and cultural battle against the totalitarian triad of powers, China, Russia and Iran, is it, perhaps, feasible, indeed realistic, to detect a manner of clandestine co-operation between these apparently antagonistic superpowers? The answer to that question depends on our willingness and ability to analyze the economic complexity of the contemporary international order referred to as 'the global order', or globalism. Do we detect a level of co-operation and, along with it, public complicity in the communication forum we depend on for information, i.e., the media?

I believe the answer to those questions is *yes.* And I venture to state this, well knowing that I risk being accused of engaging in conspiracy theory. Orwell's Big Brother exists – he or IT is alive and well. The slogan's of the Party in the novel – WAR IS PEACE FREEDOM IS SLAVERY IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH – reverberate with a renewed force. These Orwellian inversions disclose in their oblique formulation the facts about today's global order. Big Brother rules four ministries:

> The Ministry of Truth, which concerned itself with news, entertainment, education and the fine arts. The Ministry of Peace, which concerned itself with war. The Ministry of Love, which maintained law and order. And the Ministry of Plenty, which was responsible for economic affairs. Their names, in Newspeak: Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv and Miniplenty. (6)

Control and censorship, effectuated by the Thought Police, prevent Winston Smith, the main character of the novel, from expressing himself; however, his room has an alcove where he can hide from the telescreen which is designed to transmit and receive, thus working as an extension of Big Brother whose anonymous moustaced face maintains a ubiquitous presence on posters throughout the city of London. Winston is composing a diary in which he declares that he hates Big Brother: DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER. He is employed in the Ministry of Truth where he is obliged to participate in the Two Minutes Hate every afternoon. The Two Minutes Hate broadcast consists of a video presentation of the arch enemy Emmanuel Goldstein whose face on the screen gradually tranforms into a bearded sheep or goat. Orwell's hint is obvious: Goldstein is the perennial, universal scapegoat, the Jew, a figure that is absolutely necessary for the survival of the powers, in Orwell's lifetime as well as in ours.

Children are essential characters in this system, for they act as yet another extension of Big Brother's surveillance, ready to pounce on their parents and denounce them as traitors at any moment. Winston is denounced eventually and tortured into compliance by O'Brien, an executive in the Ministry of Truth. At the end of the novel which is the culmination of Winston's conversion, the one-time dissident comes to love Big Brother.

Orwell's major metaphor, the telescreen which transmits and receives at the same time, is emblematic of today's self-enclosed communication channels, radio, TV, internet etc. The essence of the metaphor rests on Orwell's insight into the information process. The power of Big Brother depends upon a one-dimensional information process functioning as the closure of knowledge. The only people oblivious to the knowledge and information propagated by the Ministry of Truth are the proles, the members of a lower class made up of supposedly ignorant, illiterate individuals. Their supposed ignorance is, however, counterbalanced by an intuitive awareness of what is going on. The working-class person, the common man, Socrates, Stevens, Brink and Winston rolled into one, represents that awareness in ignorance that consists in remaining silent in the face of repression. The knowledge and information metaphorized by Orwell in the telescreen leads to the conclusion that surveillance is not insight. Surveillance is blindness. Perhaps Brink is right in his optimistic assumption: Big Brother's mighty system will disappear in the end.

The age of doublethink

But did it disappear? *Has* it disappeared? If the lie becomes a truth then we are living in the age of Big Brother: the age of doublethink. Winston Smith's reflections will give us a clue:

> [….] if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed – if all records told the same tale – then the lie passed into history and became truth. 'Who conntrols the past,' ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.' And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered. Whatever was true now was true from everlasting to everlasting. It was quite simple. All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory. 'Reality control', they called it: in Newspeak, 'doublethink'. (37)

Are we thinking, or are we 'doublethinking'? Whether the answer to that question is a 'yes' or 'no' depends on how we interpret the subtle Orwellian double narrative, manifestly present in the account Winston is handed by O'Brien about the structural make-up of Oceania. O'Brien's double role as member of the obscure Brotherhood, a secret resistance movement, and as Inner Party member and executive of the Ministry of Truth, provides us with a clue. The account, purportedly written by Emmanuel Goldstein, is an exposé of Big Brother's hierarchical, authoritarian government; the method used to maintain the system is an intricate form of split intelligence:

> The splitting of the intelligence which the Party requires of its members, and which is more easily achieved in an atmosphere of war, is now almost universal, but the higher up the ranks one goes, the more marked it becomes. It is precisely in the Inner Party that war hysteria and hatred of the enemy is strongest. In his capacity as an adminstrator, it is often necessary for a member of the Inner Party to know that this or that item of war news is untruthful, and he may often be aware that the entire war is spurious and is either not happening or is being waged for purposes other than the declared ones: but such knowledge is easily neutralised by the technique of *doublethink.* Meanwhile no Inner Party member wavers for an instant in his mystical belief that the war *is* real, and that it is bound to end victoriously, with Oceania the undisputed master of the entire world. (200-201)

Goldstein's manuscript goes on to describe how "by the fourth decade of the twentieth century all the main currents of political thought were authoritarian". (212) The exposure of the workings of authoritarianism turns out to have been written by Big Brother, as Winston later finds out, and the text is thus an example of the doublethink it set out to dismantle. Big Brother's text absorbs Goldstein's narrative, thus neutralizing dissidence and opposition by inserting it into the discourse. The discourse works precisely like the telescreen, transmitting and receiving at one and the same time. Doublethink is a closed-circuit communication process from which there is no escape.

Looking at what is unfolding in the world today we may detect multiple examples indeed of the doublethink so brillaintly disclosed by George Orwell. The totalitarian triad of China, Russia and Iran, and the democracies in the West, Europe and North America, may indeed be ruled by a political and financial oligarchy, operating in complex, clandestine ways that leave us on the edge.

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Correspondence: Jørgen Veisland, e: ereignis@tankebanen.no.

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