

# The Proles as an Application of Power

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The “Party” depicted in George Orwell’s novel *1984* possesses a degree of control over its members that would be the envy of any totalitarian government, because this control extends to the very thoughts of its members. It is interesting to note that despite the level of control that the Party is able to wield, it chooses to leave the proles, which is a group comprising 85 percent of the population it rules, outside of the control it exerts on its members, who are the remaining 15 percent of the population. It would certainly be an impressive display of power if the Party could monitor, if not control, the thoughts of the entire population of Oceania, which is the country it rules. Why, then, does the Party not do so? The Party’s propaganda explains this in its slogan “proles and animals are free” (Orwell 75). The implication is that since proles are no better than animals, there is no point in watching them. However, this “official line” is at odds with the fact that proles deemed to have the potential to become dangerous are eliminated periodically (74). How would the Party know to eliminate those proles if it is not in fact watching them? Furthermore, in light of the fact that the aim of the Party is “pure power,” that is “power entirely for its own sake” (275), and that power is essentially “power over human beings” (277), it is curious that the Party would not choose to demonstrate its power over the proles in a more visible fashion, namely placing them under the same surveillance as members of the Party, whose actions and facial expressions are “jealously scrutinised” (219). Drawing on Michel Foucault’s ideas about power and Michel de Certeau’s conceptualization of resistance in the form of “practices” that “elude discipline without being outside the field in which it [the discipline] is exercised” (Certeau 96), I shall attempt to show that in designating the proles as sub-human, the Party has effected a more efficient and masterful application of power than controlling the proles by subjecting them to the same surveillance as members of the Party, because it is too costly to maintain surveillance over the entire population. Furthermore, treating the proles as sub-human enables the Party to establish a firmer control over Party members as well by

cementing the beliefs of orthodox members, who submit to Party doctrine, while at the same time serving as a trap for unorthodox Party members, who harbour thoughts of resistance.

The situation in *1984* where members of the Party have to watch their thoughts constantly for fear of being detected by the “Thought Police” observing them through telescreens (Orwell 4-5) embodies Foucault’s ideas concerning “the gaze” and “interiorisation” (154). The gaze is essentially a “[technique] of power” (155) whereby a person is kept under constant observation to “[take] away [the] wish to commit wrong” (154). Interiorisation is the eventual destination of an individual placed under the gaze. Over time, the individual will become “his own overseer” (155). The formerly external gaze becomes interiorised with the result that even if nobody is watching, the individual will ensure that his or her behaviour remains within acceptable boundaries. The efficiency of such an application of power becomes apparent after one realises that “power is only exercised at a cost” (154), but that in exercising power through the gaze and interiorisation, “power is exercised continuously and for ... minimal cost” (155).

Foucault speaks of the “political cost” of exercising power, in that “violent” displays of power “[provoke] revolts” while “discontinuous [intervention]” results in “resistance and disobedience” (155). The gaze and interiorisation are thus efficient because they are the means to attain a non-violent and continuous exercise of power. However, Certeau points out that there are practices that “have insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance ... [and] are merely concealed by the frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organization” (Certeau 96). Bearing in mind that Certeau uses the word “practices” to describe activities that have been overlooked by the administration, it can be seen that he sees that there is resistance to surveillance even within the systems of observation themselves. In other words, while the gaze is efficient, Certeau would think that resistance exists even under the gaze. Returning to *1984*, an example of the existence of resistance under the gaze is the fact that despite the surveillance he is under, an Outer Party member, Winston Smith, still persists in keeping a diary (Orwell 8). The act of keeping a diary runs contrary to the notion that members of the Party ought to have no private lives. If one examines how Winston behaves in opening his diary, one cannot help but notice that he chooses an alcove outside of the range of the telescreen as the place for his writing (Orwell 7),

highlighting the fact that even under the gaze of the telescreen, there are still loopholes to be found, or so it seems.

This brings us to the first reason for the Party not employing the gaze in the form of telescreens to control the proles. While the gaze is indeed an efficient technique of power, it is not without drawbacks. A fatal flaw is “the effective resistance of people” to the “system of surveillance” (Foucault 162). If within a mere 15 percent of the population there are sufficient instances of resistance to justify the establishment of the Ministry of Love to “maintain law and order” (Orwell 6), the cost of applying such surveillance to the proles would be considerable indeed. The work of the Ministry of Love can be seen as exemplifying “monarchical power” (Foucault 155), where excessive violence is employed against a few examples to cow the population into submission. Thus, it is evident that while the gaze employed through telescreens is efficient, it cannot operate without the backing of the more costly monarchical power of the Ministry of Love to suppress resistance. If only the gaze existed, people would not be afraid to go against it because they can do so without fear of consequences. In order for the gaze to be effective, there must exist a very real threat of harsh punishment for those who violate regulations. However, carrying out these threats is a costly exercise of power where “a great expenditure of violence is made which ultimately only [has] the force of an example” (155). Basically, if sufficient resistance were present in the population, the “example” would only serve to strengthen the resolve to overthrow the ones currently in power. Therefore, if the Party attempted to apply the gaze through the use of telescreens to the proles as well, it might well be unable to sustain the effort of suppressing all the instances of resistance that arise.

A more efficient method of controlling the proles is to keep them uneducated. As noted by Foucault, “revolts against the gaze” (162) required that people be “aware of the ... unbearable character of that surveillance.” This focus on keeping the proles in a state of unawareness is summed up in the Party slogan “Ignorance is strength” (Orwell 209). Whose ignorance and whose strength is being spoken of here? Applying this slogan to the proles, one might say that their ignorance is the strength of the Party. What surer way is there for the Party to ensure that the proles will not rise up against it than to render the proles “without the power of grasping that the world could be other than it is” (Orwell 219)?

As for Certeau's idea that resistance exists through the practices of those under the gaze, if one examines the practices of the proles, it is immediately evident that these have in fact been supplied by the Party. The minds of the proles are devoid of abstract thoughts (Orwell 75) and are in fact filled with meaningless drivel produced for them by a department of the Ministry of Truth, *Pornosec* (46). The Party also uses the Lottery, managed by the Ministry of Plenty, to keep them occupied, prole involvement being evident from the fact that "there was a whole tribe of men who made a living simply by selling systems, forecasts and lucky amulets" (89). In all this, it can be seen that the activities the proles engage in are not true practices as described by Certeau, because they have been provided by the administration of the Party. The fact that proles are allowed to "follow their ancestral code" in "all questions of morals" (Orwell 75) might suggest that they do possess practices that do not originate from the Party, but this has no bearing on the power that the Party wields over them because "ordinary criminals," who are proles, still find their way into the Ministry of Love (238).

Having established that the proles are not under the gaze of the Party because it is more efficient for the Party to treat them as unaware "animals," we can move on to examine the functions behind designating the proles as animals and how the treatment of the proles as subhuman by the Party exerts control over Party members. Foucault describes a "pyramidal form of power" where the "summit and the lower elements of the hierarchy stand in a relationship of mutual support" (159). The power structure of the Party is also described as a pyramid, with the sub-human proles naturally occupying the base of the pyramid as the "Low" (Orwell 217). The obvious function of the proles is thus to serve as a power base for the Party. While "Big Brother," the individual manifestation of the Party, is placed at the apex of the pyramid and described as "all-powerful" (216), his power is in fact drawn from those occupying the lower tiers of the pyramid. The proles possess a "primitive patriotism" (75) that can be stirred up to make them accept poorer working conditions in support of decisions made by the Party.

Another function of the existence of the proles at the base of the power pyramid is to provide orthodox members of the Party with a picture of what life without the Party would be like. Deliberately equating not being under the surveillance of telescreens with an animal-like existence is a clever trick employed by the Party. If at any time doubts should arise regarding the current state of affairs, an orthodox Party member would only need to look at the state that the proles are in to decide that his or

her current lot is far better. After all, as an intellectual Outer Party member puts it, “the proles are not human beings” (Orwell 56). No matter how constrained a Party member might be, existence as a rational human being able to adhere to Party doctrine is still far superior to life as a sub-human prole without the guidance of the Party, or so Party members would be encouraged to think. While the above reasoning may seem faulty to us, it must not be forgotten that Party members are taught the technique of “doublethink” (223) from young. What doublethink entails is the ability to alter reality as required by the Party. Hence while at some level Party members might know that the proles are also human beings, by using doublethink they would be able to believe the Party slogan that “proles and animals are free,” thereby equating proles with animals. Designating the proles as sub-human therefore provides the Party with another means of ensuring that its members are faithfully employing doublethink.

A third function of the existence of the proles can be seen to be a trap for Party members who are not entirely orthodox. The deceptive appearance of the proles as being outside the influence of the Party means that the prole quarters would be the instinctive destination for Party members who seek to engage in illicit activities outside the scope of what the Party deems acceptable. An excellent example is Mr Charrington’s antique shop, of which Winston is so fond. It turns out to be run by agents of the Thought Police (Orwell 233), complete with a telescreen hidden behind a picture (230). The fact that Winston has been watched for seven years before his capture (256) is a chilling reminder of the thorough and elaborate approach of the Party to detecting all signs of rebellion. Indeed, the Thought Police probably operate numerous shops like Mr Charrington’s, which are scattered throughout the prole quarters.

Having seen how effective keeping the proles uneducated and thus unable to resist is, one might wonder why this method of control is not applied to Party members as well. However, in the case of Party members, they have specific functions to fulfill in order to ensure that the machinations of the Party can be carried out flawlessly, and the risk of resistance can thus be said to be a side effect of this necessity. In fact, even controlling the proles by keeping them unaware is in part attained through the activities of the Ministries of Truth and Plenty, as mentioned earlier. It can thus be seen that not only does the Party exercise its power over both its members and the proles directly, but also indirectly. The Party controls the proles through its members and controls its members through the proles.

While it would be very impressive for the Party to be able to control the entire population by keeping both Party members and proles under the gaze, it has been shown that the cost of exercising power in such a manner would prove to be too high, for resistance would inevitably arise as evidenced by the amount of activity at the Ministry of Love, which is involved in quelling resistance. Furthermore, keeping the proles as a group distinct from Party members serves as a reminder of the benefits of adhering to Party doctrine and as a trap for members of the Party who lean towards “thoughtcrime” (Orwell 21), which is essentially harbouring opinions not approved by the Party. In light of the fact that the exercise of power often engenders resistance, the Party has shown itself to be remarkably astute in its policy of preventing even the thought of resistance from emerging in the proles through a careful campaign of keeping them in a state of ignorance. Indeed, through closely examining the reasons behind the treatment of proles as sub-human by the Party, it becomes clear that the exercise of power is an elaborate undertaking, much more than merely employing a single method which seems to be effective, such as the gaze.

## Works Cited

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