Social Engineering, Soma And Sex In Aldous Huxley's Brave New World

In 1809 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe observed in his novel Elective Infinities that 'none are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe that they are free.' This idea has provided vast contemplative material for authors up until our current day. What Goethe captured in this quote maybe even more relevant in our contemporary world than ever, certainly, Aldous Huxley would have agreed. He captures his forewarnings about a type of covert enslavement he believed was imminent in his 1931 dystopian novel Brave New World. The novel is interesting because it reflects on research conducted by psychologists in the controversial field of behaviourism. The implication of discovering that we are able to condition the behaviour of animals, and therefore human beings, was controversial, to say the least. Pioneers of this scientific advancement like psychologist and behaviourist Burrhus Frederic Skinner argued that the methods of conditioning he had researched could be used positively in our societies. His belief was that we could socially engineer the best of human nature to create a utopian society. He captures this concept in his 1948 utopian novel, Walden Two. However, Huxley and many other twentieth-century authors adamantly disagreed with this notion. When Huxley first published Brave New World he did not believe the society he depicted within it would be an imminent threat. In the thirty years following its publication, he witnessed a world war, a spread of totalitarian governments and significant advancements in technology and science that had some controversial implications. His mind was changed and he expands upon his new perspective in a revisited issue of the novel published in 1961. Brave New World is a perfect example of how literary dystopias are capable of predicting rising trends in our societies as well as providing perceptive critiques of utopian idealism. The chapter will explore the possibility that we live in a world analogous to that of the society in Brave New World.

It is not difficult to recognise overt tyranny. Figures like Henry VIII of England- who is famous for viciously beheading his own wives- are popular stereotypes for our conception of tyranny. Furthermore, we are all familiar with events like the horrific holocaust of Nazi Germany and the institution of slavery that existed for several centuries. Consequently, many of us might naively expect that tyranny will always present itself in an overt nature. It might seem obvious that until we have succumbed to a dystopian hell like the one predicted in George Orwell's 1984, we have maintained our liberty. Authors like Aldous Huxley illustrate how this is not necessarily the case. Brave New World explores how tyranny might appear instead in a covert form. The novel explores how pleasurable diversions are utilised to produce a citizenry too distracted to contemplate liberty at all. Drugs, sexual promiscuity and technology are all employed to keep the citizens of this world in a constant pleasure-seeking cycle. In 1961 Huxley commented on the potential use of pharmaceuticals in social engineering in reflection of his novel,

There will be, in the next generation or so, a pharmacological method of making people love their servitude, and producing dictatorship without tears, so to speak, producing a kind of painless concentration camp for entire societies, so that people will in fact have their liberties taken away from them, but will rather enjoy it… this seems to be the final revolution.

Essentially, Huxley predicted that future ruling classes would come to understand that explicit force is not necessary to create a society of compliant slaves. Instead, a covert method of

providing the masses with a vast supply of pleasurable and interesting diversions would be enough to ensure control over the general populace. This presents the question of how pleasure can be utilised to deprive people of their liberty. The answer lies in the controversial field of cognitive science with particular reference to behavioural psychology. Steven Pinker describes cognitive science, ‘The concept of mind has been perplexing for as long as people have reflected on their thoughts and feelings. The very idea has spawned paradoxes, superstitions, and bizarre theories in every period and culture.’ Cognitive science aimed to explain human behaviour but it was met with a lot of criticism for doing so. Many philosophers created literary works refuting the idea of our consciousness being explained through mechanical terms. Rene Descartes is one of the pioneering philosophers who maintained that the human consciousness had a transcendent quality and rejected the notion of it being dissected by science,

There is a great difference between mind and body… body is by nature always divisible, and the mind is entirely indivisible...I cannot distinguish in myself any parts, but apprehend myself to be clearly one and entire; and though the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, yet if afoot, or an arm, or some other part, is separated from the body, I am aware that nothing has been taken from my mind. And the faculties of willing, feeling, conceiving, etc. cannot be properly speaking said to be its parts, for it is one and the same mind which employs itself in willing and in feeling and understanding. But it is quite otherwise with corporeal or extended objects, for there is not one of them imaginable by me which my mind cannot easily divide into parts… This would be sufficient to teach me that the mind or soul of man is entirely different from the body.

The idea that it is possible for the human mind to be taken apart and put back together like clockwork was one of the most controversial theories produced by the enlightenment. It seemed reductive to suggest that the infinitely complex workings of the human mind might be just another unconquered field of research and it was adamantly opposed, especially in literary fields. The western world was becoming increasingly more secular following the enlightenment. Many philosophers had made convincing arguments against religion but society was unwilling to let go of the idea of a human soul. The value of human beings above all other creatures on earth, for many people, lies within our minds. Pinker justifies,

Something in the mind must be innate… Something has to see a world of objects rather than a kaleidoscope of shimmering pixels. Something has to infer the content of a sentence rather than parrot back the exact wording. Something has to interpret other people’s behaviour as their attempts to achieve goals rather than as trajectories of jerking arms and legs.

There were, however, those who were very much in favour of the advancements produced by cognitive science. In the twentieth century Harvard psychologist B. F Skinner conducted his research on operant conditioning. It was a method of modifying behaviour in animals and the results he discovered had significant socio-political implications. He compared both positive and negative reinforcement in his experiments. To cultivate new behaviours via positive reinforcement he provided a rat with food every time it performed a desirable behaviour. In a separate experiment he triggered a painful stimulus everytime the rat performed a behaviour he wished to eliminate. His results revealed that although the punishment based experiment did temporarily end undesirable behaviours, the experiments using positive reinforcement resulted in long term changes in the behavioural patterns of the animal. He concluded that ‘Punished behaviour is likely to return after the punitive consequences are withdrawn.’ This left scientists

to ruminate on how positive reinforcement might now be utilised to encourage more desirable behaviours in our societies. Critical observers like Huxley could see clear issues with this discovery and he took to work illustrating these within the novel, ‘In 1984 the lust for power is satisfied by inflicting pain; in Brave New World, by inflicting a hardly less humiliating pleasure.’ Both Huxley and Skinner understood the potential socio-political ramifications of Skinner’s research. Conversely to Huxley, Skinner felt that operant conditioning was a positive advancement for social engineers. He believed that it was now possible to develop a scientifically managed utopia and he conceptualised it within his novel, Walden Two. He mused, ‘now that we know how positive reinforcement works, and why negative doesn’t, we can be more deliberate and hence more successful, in our cultural design. We can achieve a sort of control under which the controlled… nevertheless feel free.’ It was an idealistic statement, to say the least. Dystopian literature is a clear critique of utopian idealism and indeed, the idealism in Walden Two is particularly problematic. Skinner expands on his utopian society,

They are doing what they want to fo, not what they are forced to do. That’s the source of the tremendous power of positive reinforcement- there’s no restraint and no revolt. By a careful design, we control not the final behaviour, but the inclination to behave- the motives, the desires, the wishes. The curious thing is that in that case the question of freedom never arises.

It seems almost an admittance to the mental imprisonment that would be required in order for such a world to exist. Huxley described the concept of socially engineering out all bad behaviour as a ‘controlling oligarchy’, he predicted that experiments similar to those of the ones conducted by Skinner on rats would one day be performed on human beings in order to condition obedience and minimise crime and disorder. He understood that following Skinner's experiments was the potential for a covert form of tyranny to enslave the masses without their awareness.

In Brave New World the primary tool used to condition docility via positive reinforcement was a state produced pharmaceutical named ‘Soma’. It is a form of super drug that aided perfectly in conditioning users behaviour. Huxley explains, ‘the world controllers encouraged systematic drugging of their own citizens for the benefit of the state.’ Soma is taken daily by the citizens of Brave New World as it offered them what Huxley called a ‘holiday from reality’. It is used to stimulate euphoric feelings, act as a sleep aid, create pleasant hallucinations and heighten the citizens suggestibility to propaganda, thus increasing its effectiveness. To the objective reader it seems insane that an entire populace would consent to their own drugging but Huxley muses that if future social engineers wished to enact such a method ‘in all probability it will be enough to merely make the pills available.’ Likewise, in the novel the citizens are addicted to soma and committed to maintaining its positive image in their societies,

In Brave New World the soma habit was not a private vice; it was a political institution… The daily soma ration was an insurance against personal maladjustment, social unrest and the spread of subversive ideas. Religion, Karl Marx declared, is the opium of the people. In Brave New World this situation is reversed. Opium, or rather Soma, was the people’s ‘religion’.

Just like any drug epidemic, it renders users helpless and reliant on external forces. Propaganda was the only force separating public opinion on the soma epidemic from opinion on an opium or methamphetamine one. Instead of observing the soma taking as one of codependent and addictive, the rhetoric of Brave New World convinces citizens that it is an essential aid in the maintenance of their society.

The world controllers didn’t rely on Soma alone, however. There were other methods utilized to ensure citizens willing compliance to their servitude. Another form of propaganda that was regularly enforced on the citizens was the slogan ‘everyone belongs to everyone else’. It was drilled into the minds of the entire populace from youth with the aim of promoting sexual promiscuity. In the novel there is no marriage, monogamy is non-existent and there are no family structures. Without these hindrances citizens are left to indulge their sexual impulses and granted constant access to sexual gratification. The novel captures the horrifying concept of even children being encouraged into sexual activities, which captures Huxley’s concern that the most vulnerable within our societies will also be targeted if social engineering was to take on a totalitarian approach. Furthermore media and entertainment ensured that the minds of the citizens were kept constantly captured in a ‘sea of irrelevance’. Huxley described these entertainments as ‘non-stop distractions of the most fascinating nature’ and their role was essential in ensuring the creation of the ‘painless concentration camp’ of Brave New World. The citizens are kept too distracted to conceptualise the reality of their situation. Centuries prior to the publishing of Brave New World Frederick Douglass made the predictive statement,

I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one… He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man.

The novel perfectly encompasses this conception of covert slavery.

Brave New World encourages us to question to what extent we are becoming engrossed by pleasurable distractions in our contemporary world. We might come to reflect on how much of what we experience is pushed upon us by some governing force attempting to influence us and breed passivity, or alternatively to what extent the pleasure seeking cycle is enforced by consumer demand. Whichever it may be we must heed the warning that a docile populace is vulnerable to tyranny, enslavement and totalitarianism. A distracted and addicted populace might, in fact, welcome these things.