

Brave New World: Foreword

by Christopher Hitchens

Aldous Huxley absolutely detested mass culture and popular entertainment, and many of his toughest critical essays, as well as several intense passages in his fiction, consist of sneers and jeers at the cheapness of the cinematic ethic and the vulgarity of commercial music. He chanced to die on the same day as the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963 (being cheated of a proper obituary notice as a result, and sharing the date of decease with C.S. Lewis, chronicler of Narnia), so he missed the televisual event which once and for all confirmed the “global village.” But if he were able to return to us, and cast his scornful and lofty gaze on our hedonistic society, he would probably be relatively unsurprised at the way things are going. Sex has been divorced from procreation to a degree hard to imagine even in 1963, and the current great debates in the moral sciences concern the implications of reproductive cloning and of the employment of fetal stem-cells in medicine. The study of history is everywhere, but especially in the United States, in steep decline. Public life in the richer societies is routinely compared to the rhythms of spectacle and entertainment. A flickering hunger for authenticity pushes many people to explore the peripheral and shrinking worlds of the “indigenous.” This was all prefigured in *Brave New World*. So, in a way, was the “one child” policy now followed in Communist China, where to the extent that the program is successful we will not only see a formerly clannish society where everyone is an only child but a formerly Marxist one that has no real cognate word for “brotherhood.” Intercontinental rocket travel has not become the commonplace Huxley anticipated, but its equivalents have become a cliché: jumbo jets do the same work of abolishing distance for the masses even though, in a strange moment of refusal, the developed world has stepped back from the supersonic Concorde and reverted to the days of voyaging comfortably below the speed of sound.

No, what would astonish laconic old Aldous would be the discovery that his photograph is among those on the album cover of The Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* – perhaps the least cacophonous of the signature records of pop and rock – and that Jim Morrison of The Doors named his group after Huxley’s later and proto-psychedelic book *The Doors of Perception*. In America, as Joan Didion once wrote, people who say “No man is an island” think that they are quoting Ernest Hemingway: the fans who still make a shrine of Morrison’s grave in Paris probably don’t appreciate that Huxley was himself borrowing from William Blake. Nonetheless, literary immortality often depends on such vague but durable misunderstandings, and the three words “Brave New World” (themselves annexed from Miranda’s speech in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*) are as well known as “Catch-22” or “Nineteen Eighty-Four” – virtual hieroglyphics which almost automatically summon a universe of images and associations.

English literary society in the twentieth century was a fairly small pond, and the English class system tended to mean in any case that a limited number of people kept running into each other. (This is one of the bonding yet realistic elements in Anthony Powell’s splendid novel sequence *A Dance to the Music of Time*.) However, that Aldous Huxley should have taught George Orwell at Eton, which was also Anthony Powell’s old school, seems to strain the natural serendipity of coincidence. Having originally hoped to become a physician, Huxley contracted a serious eye infection as an adolescent, lost a good deal of his sight, and until he could launch himself as a writer was compelled to be a rather diffident and reluctant teacher of French. In his class were Stephen

Runciman, later to become the grand historian of Byzantium and the Crusades, and Eric Blair, later to metamorphose into George Orwell. Runciman remembers that Blair admired Huxley's command of French culture and that he detested those boys who took advantage of the schoolmaster's myopia.

Orwell never referred to this personal connection in print, as far as I know, when *Brave New World* was published in 1931 and when its dystopic metaphors entered the conversational and social bloodstream. He suggested at one point that Huxley had "plagiarized" from an earlier anti-Utopian novel, Evgeny Zamyatin's *We*. But since he acknowledges that work as an inspiration of his own, the allegation may have been no insult. He didn't get around to reviewing *Brave New World* until July 1940, when Britain seemed to have more urgent problems than the supposed nightmare of too much free sex and narcosis:

Here the hedonistic principle is pushed to its utmost; the whole world has turned into a Riviera hotel. But though *Brave New World* was a brilliant caricature of the present (the present of 1930), it probably casts no light on the future. No society of that kind would last more than a couple of generations, because a ruling class that thought principally of a "good time" would soon lose its vitality. A ruling class has got to have a strict morality, a quasi-religious belief in itself, a *mystique*.

For some decades after this review was written, many people might have been inclined to say that Orwell was right, and that the "true" threat was one of jackboots, tanks, bombs, and bullies. Nonetheless, Huxley never went out of style. Something about his work seemed to tug at our consciousness.

One could also point out that, in the picture of Mustapha Mond with which Huxley opens the work, we are in fact introduced to a self-conscious ruling class with ideas of its own. Mond is not represented as wanting a "good time" for himself, after all. He is the chilly, objective theorist of the idea that social engineering and the wide distribution of easy pleasure will keep the masses in line. And two further things are made plain at once, both of which may have influenced Orwell more than he knew. We are told quite early on, in the flashbacks that occur during Mond's address to the awestruck students, that the brave new epoch began after the "Nine Years' War" in which weapons of mass destruction (including "anthrax bombs": a superbly modern detail) had been employed. And we are also reminded of the crucial role played by amnesia in the maintenance of power. Mond takes the great capitalist Henry Ford at his word.

"History," he repeated slowly, "is bunk."

He waved his hand; and it was as though, with an invisible feather whisk, he had brushed away a little dust, and the dust was Harappa, was Ur of the Chaldees; some spiderwebs, and they were Thebes and Babylon and Snossos and Mycenae. Whisk. Whisk – and where was Odysseus, where was Job, where were Jupiter and Gotama and Jesus? Whisk – and those specks of antique dirt called Athens and Rome, Jerusalem and the Middle Kingdom – all were gone. Whisk – the place where Italy had been was empty. Whisk, the cathedrals; whisk, whisk, King Lear and the Thoughts of Pascal. Whisk, Passion; whisk, Requiem; whisk, Symphony; whisk...

This combination, of annihilating war and the subsequent obliteration and erasure of cultural and historical memory, is almost exactly what Orwell later relied upon to set the scene for his *1984*. But

he was writing about the forbidding, part-alien experience of Nazism and Stalinism, whereas Huxley was locating disgust and menace in the very things – the new toys of materialism, from cars to contraceptives – that were becoming everyday pursuits. Perhaps that is why his book still operates on our subconscious.

There must indeed be an explanation for this, because I have to say that the fine passage quoted above is not completely typical. Huxley was thought rather snobbish even in his own generation, and often tended to condescend to the reader, as much of the dialogue in *Brave New World* also tends to do. It is didactic and pedagogic and faintly superior: indeed you might say it was the tone of voice of an Etonian schoolmaster. It is also somewhat contradictory and even self-defeating. Clearly, Huxley disdained socialism and the idea of equality: why then give the name of Bernard Marx to the only dissident in his awful system? And why call one of the few natural and spontaneous girls Lenina? This is stodgy and heavy rather than ironic, and it becomes absurd when we meet an oversexed little child named Polly Trotsky in the opening chapters. (It's elsewhere stated that all citizens must be named from a pool of officially authorized surnames: the hedonistic regime either wants to abolish interest in history or it does not, and in neither case will it tempt fate by naming millions of its subjects after revolutionaries.)

Huxley came from revolutionary stock, but of a different kind. His grandfather was T. H. Huxley, a celebrated naturalist, who was a partisan and friend of Charles Darwin. It was the elder Huxley who first coined the term “agnostic” and who vanquished the Victorian Bishop Wilberforce in the famous debate between evolution and creationism at Oxford University. On his mother's side, Aldous could claim Matthew Arnold, author of *Culture and Anarchy*, as a maternal uncle. His own views were to fluctuate between the affirmative importance of high culture and the necessity of skepticism. His favorite philosopher was the ancient Hellenic thinker Pyrrho, who argued that judgment be suspended on any matter concerning the truth: Every position may be held to be equally right as well as equally wrong.

It's worth knowing this about Huxley, who often held and expressed diametrically opposite opinions, and who described himself as an “amused Pyrrhonic aesthete” in the introduction he wrote to the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Brave New World*. In the novel itself, one can often detect strong hints of a vicarious approval of what is ostensibly satirized. For example, when Mustapha Mond invites the medical student to “try to imagine what ‘living with one's family’ meant,” he goes on:

Home, home – a few small rooms, stiflingly over-inhabited by a man, by a periodically teeming woman, by a rabble of boys and girls of all ages. No air, no space; an understerilized prison; darkness, disease and smells.

Huxley was never at all impoverished as a boy (and in any case we can recognize the denunciation above from any study of Victorian or now “Third World” domestic conditions), but his mother died of cancer when he was fourteen and his brother committed suicide two years later, so he knew that even upper-class family life could be distraught. The above passage combines this insight with a fastidious disdain for the masses.

The study of eugenics was popular among the governing and intellectual classes of Britain in the Victorian epoch and subsequently (indeed it was an aspect of what has been termed “Social

Darwinism”), and we learn from his biographer Nicholas Murray that Aldous Huxley was highly interested in “breeding,” in both the aristocratic and the scientific sense of the term. I know from Huxley’s own essays that he fell straight for the early theorists of IQ, who believed in its distributing by heredity. To this he added that it was important to encourage “the normal and supernormal members of the population to have large families,” while preventing the subnormal “from having any children at all.” So it was very clever of him – as well as quite Pyrrhonic – both to mobilize his own feelings on this subject, and then to harness them for a satire on the planned economy. One needed not object to his having things both ways, as long as one notices the trick being performed.

In rather the same way, Huxley thought that free love and infidelity were all very well for people like himself (he and his first wife had an open marriage and even shared the bed of the same female lover, Mary Hutchinson). But still, when he came to describe the mindless and amoral sex lives of the men and women in *Brave New World*, he wrote with a curled lip. In an article describing the “jazz age” in California in the late 1920s, he had relished the profusion of nubile young girls and wrote that: “Plumply ravishing, they give, as T.S. Eliot has phrased it, ‘a promise of pneumatic bliss.’” Eliot spent his critical and poetic energy in the attempt to revive, in a more specifically Christian and conservative form, the values of Matthew Arnold. So it is again amusing to note that the coarse word “pneumatic,” used throughout *Brave New World* by both its male and female characters as a cheap synonym for good sex, derives from this rather disapproving source, as well as expressing Huxley’s own divided view of the subject.

The influence of T.S. Eliot can also be felt in the depiction of “World Controller” Mustapha Mond, described as possessing “a hooked nose, full red lips, and eyes very piercing and dark.” Martin Green has drawn attention to the resemblance to Mustapha Kemal, better known as Atatürk, who was a commanding figure when Huxley was writing. Sir Alfred Mond, the founder of the giant chemical multinational known as ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries), was also a power-celebrity of the period, and Eliot often alluded to him as the prototypical cosmopolitan Jew. (Huxley’s few references to Jews were also often disobliging: he blamed them for the mercantile sleaziness of Hollywood, among other things. As if to rub this in, there’s also a somewhat repellent character in *Brave New World* named Morgana Rothschild.) And we catch another pre-configuration of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, when the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning finds himself nervous in Mond’s presence, because “there were those strange rumors of old forbidden books hidden in a safe in the Controller’s study. Bibles, poetry – Ford knew what.” Did Orwell half-remember this when he created the looming figure of O’Brien and the Inner Party’s secret book? If so, his review of *Brave New World* was again unfair to Huxley.

I find the tracing of these contemporary influences to be valuable, because Huxley was composing *Brave New World* at a time when modernity as we know it was just coming into full view. He later reproached himself for not mentioning nuclear fission, about which he was quite well-informed, but this element of the literal hardly matters. Readers then and since have filled in many gaps for themselves: they knew and they know what Huxley was driving at. Can the human being be designed and controlled, from uterus to grave, “for its own good”? And would this version of super-utilitarianism bring real happiness?

Huxley himself conceded that his fictional characters were no more than puppets to illustrate his points, and this lack of characterization (truly a drawback in his earlier and later novels, most

especially in *Island*, his last and most self-consciously Utopian effort) is paradoxically rather a help in *Brave New World*. The marionettes do their stuff, giving us a very rapid and complete picture of mindless bliss and its usefulness to power. Then they begin, or some of them are authorized by their carpenter to begin, to experience vague but definite feelings of discontent. They find themselves asking: *Is this all there is?* The three deficiencies they feel, often without knowing how to name them, are Nature, Religion, and Literature. With only chemical, mechanical, and sexual comforts provided to them, they sense the absence of challenge and drama and they fall prey to *ennui*. With no concept of a cosmos beyond the immediately human, they are deprived of the chance to feel awed or alienated. And with nothing but sensory entertainment (Huxley might not have been the best of movie critics, given his near-blindness, but he used this disadvantage to imagine “the feelies” as the culmination of “talkies” and “movies”), they have no appreciation for words.

Huxley’s expression of this dilemma, and of its resolution, is again very didactic. He allows some of his prefabricated figures to feel the stirrings of sexual jealousy and its two accompaniments: the yearning for monogamy and the desire to bear one’s own child. He permits them the aspiration to experience the wilderness, even if it is only a reservation, and to take the requisite risks. And he leaves a tattered copy of Shakespeare lying around. (I’m sorry to keep doing this, but when Winston Smith awakes from a haunting dream of a lost pastoral England, he does so to his own surprise “with the word Shakespeare on his lips.”)

The possessor of the Shakespeare edition is The Savage, and it is he who wreaks revenge on the overprotected and superinsulated creatures who stumble upon his existence. This revenge is partly accidental, in that his own need for authentic emotion is enough in itself to cause convulsions in the society that adopts him as a fearful curiosity or freak. Huxley later said that if he could rewrite the novel he would have given The Savage more warning of what to expect. This shows that fiction writers do well to leave their creations alone and spare them from second thoughts: it is the effect of The Savage upon others that makes the dramatic difference, and it is his very naïveté and simplicity that make a quasi-Cavalry out of the final chapter. Huxley was fairly indifferent to Christianity as a religion (and his satire on the Church of England and the “Arch-Community-Songster of Canterbury” has since been easily surpassed by the fatuous degeneration of that Church itself), but he was not immune to its metaphors, and the seeker for reality in the wilderness is only one of these. We can always be sure of one thing – that the messengers of discomfort and sacrifice will be stoned and pelted by those who wish to preserve at all costs their own contentment. This is not a lesson that is confined to the Testaments.

In a way, I have been arguing that *Brave New World* was both ahead of, and behind, its time. And Huxley was – shall we say? – a reactionary modernist. He had this quality in common with Evelyn Waugh, who also took his tone from Eliot’s *Waste Land* and who dilated about eugenics and euthanasia while carrying a burden of unpurged religious guilt. The disguised presence of original sin is reimaged in *Brave New World* when Huxley, in the most absurd of his scenarios, shows us little children being sleep-conditioned to consume, and to use up material goods and opportunities with as much abandon as possible. Here one must ask, who but a member of the comfortable or agnostic classes imagines that people need to be brainwashed into being greedy? The acquisitive instinct, perhaps initially supplied by Satan himself in one interpretation, is, after all, fairly easily engaged. It was Karl Marx and not Bernard Marx who wrote that, in relation to his victims, the capitalist “therefore searches for all possible ways of stimulating them to consume, by making his

commodities more attractive and by filling their ears with babble about new needs.” Marx also thought, as is usually forgotten or overlooked, that this impulse led to innovation and experiment and to the liberating process of what has sometimes been called “creative destruction.” In other words, it is a means of arousing discontent with the *status quo*, not a mere means of stupefying the masses. Our own contemporary world suggests that the energy of capital is not easily compatible with *stasis*.

Having never wanted for much himself, Huxley was quicker to miss this point than he might have been. And, in his Pyrrhonic way, he was also quicker to surrender to the blandishments of Nirvana, in its consumer-capitalist form, than most. This is what makes *Brave New World Revisited* into a disappointment. Once again, the clue is to be found in an exchange with Orwell, who sent Huxley an advance copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In late 1949, Huxley wrote back to say “how fine and profoundly important” the book was. However, he was convinced that future rulers would discover that

infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs and prisons, and that the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging and kicking them into obedience...the nightmare of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is destined to modulate into the nightmare of a world having more resemblance to that which I imagined in *Brave New World*. The change will be brought on as a result of a felt need for increased efficiency.

Perhaps it is partly Orwell’s fault, since his descriptions of the Thought Police and Room 101 are so annihilatingly and memorably ghastly, but it does deserve to be said that his own fictionalization of absolutism does not depend exclusively upon the power of fear and violence. The masses are not handed *soma* to tranquilize them, but they are given plentiful cheap gin. Lotteries are staged for their amusement and excitement, and cheap pornographic literature is freely available to all proles. The cinema is depicted as an orgy of distraction and propaganda, on Colosseum lines admittedly, rather than of exquisite sensation. The *Nineteen Eighty-Four* regime is one of scarcity rather than abundance, but the traditional bribes of materialism and, indeed, of conditioning cannot be said to have been overlooked.

When he came to publish *Brave New World Revisited* almost a decade later, in 1958, Huxley nonetheless opened with a long contrast between his own vision and the Orwellian one; a contrast very similar to the one he had sketched in his letter of 1949. He rightly pointed out that in the Soviet Union the need for rationalization of the economy had produced some alleviation of the totalitarian system. However, his general obsession with eugenics once again caused him to replace the emphasis elsewhere:

The United States is not at present an overpopulated country. If, however, the population continues to increase at the present rate (which is higher than that of India’s increase, though happily a good deal lower than the rate now current in Mexico or Guatemala), the problem of numbers in relation to available resources might well become troublesome by the beginning of the twenty-first century. For the moment

overpopulation is not a direct threat to the personal freedom of Americans. It remains, however, an indirect threat, a menace at one remove. If overpopulation should drive the underdeveloped countries into totalitarianism, and if these new dictatorships should ally themselves with Russia, then the military position of the United States would become less secure and the preparations for defense and retaliation would have to be intensified. But liberty, as we all know, cannot flourish in a country that is permanently on a war-footing, or even a near-war footing. Permanent crisis justifies permanent control of everybody and everything by the agencies of the central government. And permanent crisis is what we have to expect in a world in which overpopulation is producing a state of things, in which dictatorship under Communist auspices becomes almost inevitable.

In no respect is this a paragraph of prescience. The geopolitical sentences are both too detailed and too vague. One might note, also, that the chief demographic problem of the United States in 2003 is its aging population, with the “graying” process somewhat delayed or postponed by legal and illegal immigration. Scholars, such as Amartya Sen in particular, have come up with multiple refutations of Malthus. “Population bomb” theorists, most notably Paul Ehrlich, have seen their extrapolated predictions repeatedly fail to come true – at least partly because they are extrapolations. Finally, it would appear from his remarks about Mexico and Guatemala that Huxley suddenly isn’t all that much in love with the primitive adobe and cactus natives, or not as much in love as he affected to be in *Brave New World*.

One element of that ancestral culture had, however, quite bewitched him in the years that separate the writing of *Brave New World* and *Brave New World Revisited*. His Lawrentian sojourns in California, New Mexico, and elsewhere – he was the editor of D.H. Lawrence’s letters – had exposed him to the psychedelic properties of peyote and mescaline and their derivatives, such as LSD (the “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” of the Sergeant Pepper smash hit). I don’t mean to be too judgmental about this: Huxley was almost blind and was entitled to any colorful voyage of the imagination that he could get his hands on. But there is something almost promiscuously uncritical in his *Brave New World Revisited* recommendation:

In LSD-25 (lysergic acid diethylamide) the pharmacologists have recently created another aspect of soma – a perception improver and vision producer that is, physiologically speaking, almost costless. This extraordinary drug, which is effective in as small doses as fifty or even twenty-five millionth of a gram, has power (like peyote) to transport people into the other world. In the majority of cases, the other world to which LSD-25 gives access is heavenly; alternatively it may be purgatorial or even infernal. But, positive or negative, the lysergic acid experience is felt by almost everyone who under goes it to be profoundly significant and enlightening. In any event, the fact that minds can be changed so radically at so little cost to the body is altogether astonishing.

Huxley became a friend of Dr. Timothy Leary, a man of great charm and wit (as I can testify from experience) and a truant Harvard scientist whose advocacy of LSD trips made him an emblem of the “Sixties”. It was this comradeship that attracted the attention of the Beatles and Jim Morrison.

But again one must pause and notice a contradiction. Leary believed that the use of mind-altering drugs was essentially subversive, and would help individuals both evade and erode “the system.” The authorities appear to have agreed with him on this, pursuing and imprisoning him (at one point in a cell adjacent to Charles Manson) and making it highly illegal to follow his advice, not just concerning LSD but also cocaine and marijuana. What becomes, then, of Huxley’s belief that such hallucinogens, analgesics, and stimulants are the ideal instrument of state control? The “war on drugs” is now being extended to a state sponsored campaign against tobacco and alcohol and painkillers: if the ruling class wants people to be blessed out it has a strange way of pursuing this elementary goal. In our time, the symbol of state intrusion into the private life is the mandatory urine test.

A map of the world that does not show Utopia, said Oscar Wilde, is not worth glancing at. In *Brave New World*, and in his closing novel *Island*, Huxley tried to fix Utopian cartography in our minds. In the first setting, sex and drugs and the conditioning of the youth are the symptoms of unfreedom and the roots of alienation and anomie, while in the second they are tools of emancipation and the keys to happiness. The inhabitants of *Brave New World* have no external enemies to keep them afraid and in line; the *Island*-people of Pala have to contend with an aggressive neighboring dictatorship led by Colonel Dipa, a Saddam/Milosevic type who seems to think, and with good reason, that the traditional methods of club and boot and guns are still pretty serviceable.

We should, I think be grateful that Aldous Huxley was such a mass of internal contradictions. These enabled him to register the splendors and miseries, not just of modernity, but of the human conditions. In his essay “Ravens and Writing Desks,” written for *Vanity Fair* in 1928, he said:

God is, but at the same time God also is not. The Universe is governed by blind chance and at the same time by a providence with ethical preoccupations. Suffering is gratuitous and pointless, but also valuable and necessary. The universe is an imbecile sadist, but also, simultaneously, the most benevolent of parents. Everything is rigidly predetermined, but the will is perfectly free. This list of contradictions could be lengthened so as to include all problems that have ever vexed the philosopher and the theologian.

Aware perhaps that this teetered on the edge of tautology, the old Pyrrhonist wrote elsewhere in his essay on the great Spinoza:

“Homer was wrong,” wrote Heraclitus of Ephesus, “Homer was wrong in saying: ‘Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!’ He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for if his prayer was heard, all things would pass away.”

The search for Nirvana, like the search for Utopia or the end of history or the classless society, is ultimately a futile and dangerous one. It involves, if it does not necessitate, the sleep of reason. There is no escape from anxiety and struggle, and Huxley assists us in attaining this valuable glimpse of the obvious, precisely because it was a conclusion that was in many ways unwelcome to him.