2011: A BRAVE NEW DYSTOPIA

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Chris Hedges,truthdig, 27 December 2010

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We have been gradually disempowered by a corporate state that, as Huxley foresaw, seduced and manipulated us through sensual gratification, cheap mass-produced goods, boundless credit, political theater and amusement. While we were entertained, the regulations that once kept predatory corporate power in check were dismantled, the laws that once protected us were rewritten and we were impoverished. Now that credit is drying up, good jobs for the working class are gone forever and mass-produced goods are unaffordable, we find ourselves transported from "Brave New World" to "1984." The state, crippled by massive deficits, endless war and corporate malfeasance, is sliding toward bankruptcy. It is time for Big Brother to take over from Huxley's feelies, the orgy-porgy and the centrifugal bumble-puppy. We are moving from a society where we are skillfully manipulated by lies and illusions to one where we are overtly controlled.
Orwell warned of a world where books were banned. Huxley warned of a world where no one wanted to read books. Orwell warned of a state of permanent war and fear. Huxley warned of a culture diverted by mindless pleasure. Orwell warned of a state where every conversation and thought was monitored and dissent was brutally punished. Huxley warned of a state where a population, preoccupied by trivia and gossip, no longer cared about truth or information. Orwell saw us frightened into submission. Huxley saw us seduced into submission. But Huxley, we are discovering, was merely the prelude to Orwell. Huxley understood the process by which we would be complicit in our own enslavement. Orwell understood the enslavement. Now that the corporate coup is over, we stand naked and defenseless. We are beginning to understand, as Karl Marx knew, that unfettered and unregulated capitalism is a brutal and revolutionary force that exploits human

beings and the natural world until exhaustion or collapse.

"The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake," Orwell wrote in "1984." "We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently. We are different from all the oligarchies of the past, in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites. The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just round the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means; it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power."

The political philosopher Sheldon Wolin uses the term "inverted totalitarianism" in his book "Democracy Incorporated" to describe our political system. It is a term that would make sense to Huxley. In inverted totalitarianism, the sophisticated technologies of corporate control, intimidation and mass manipulation, which far surpass those employed by previous totalitarian states, are effectively masked by the glitter, noise and abundance of a consumer society. Political participation and civil liberties are gradually surrendered. The corporation state, hiding behind the smokescreen of the public relations industry, the entertainment industry and the tawdry materialism of a consumer society, devours us from the inside out. It owes no allegiance to us or the nation. It feasts upon our carcass.

The corporate state does not find its expression in a demagogue or charismatic leader. It is defined by the anonymity and facelessness of the corporation. Corporations, who hire attractive spokespeople like Barack Obama, control the uses of science, technology, education and mass communication. They control the messages in movies and television. And, as in "Brave New World," they use these tools of communication to bolster tyranny. Our systems of mass communication, as Wolin writes, "block out, eliminate whatever might introduce qualification, ambiguity, or dialogue, anything that might weaken or complicate the holistic force of their creation, to its total impression."

The result is a monochromatic system of information. Celebrity courtiers, masquerading as journalists, experts and specialists, identify our problems and patiently explain the parameters. All those who argue outside the imposed parameters are dismissed as irrelevant cranks, extremists or members of a radical left. Prescient social critics, from Ralph Nader to Noam Chomsky, are banished. Acceptable opinions have a range of A to B. The culture, under the tutelage of these corporate courtiers, becomes, as Huxley noted, a world of cheerful conformity, as well as an endless and finally fatal optimism. We busy ourselves buying products that promise to change our lives, make us

more beautiful, confident or successful as we are steadily stripped of rights, money and influence. All messages we receive through these systems of communication, whether on the nightly news or talk shows like "Oprah," promise a brighter, happier tomorrow. And this, as Wolin points out, is "the same ideology that invites corporate executives to exaggerate profits and conceal losses, but always with a sunny face." We have been entranced, as Wolin writes, by "continuous technological advances" that "encourage elaborate fantasies of individual prowess, eternal youthfulness, beauty through surgery, actions measured in nanoseconds: a dream-laden culture of ever-expanding control and possibility, whose denizens are prone to fantasies because the vast majority have imagination but little scientific knowledge."

Our manufacturing base has been dismantled. Speculators and swindlers have looted the U.S. Treasury and stolen billions from small shareholders who had set aside money for retirement or college. Civil liberties, including habeas corpus and protection from warrantless wiretapping, have been taken away. Basic services, including public education and health care, have been handed over to the corporations to exploit for profit. The few who raise voices of dissent, who refuse to engage in the corporate happy talk, are derided by the corporate establishment as freaks.

Attitudes and temperament have been cleverly engineered by the corporate state, as with Huxley's pliant characters in "Brave New World." The book's protagonist, Bernard Marx, turns in frustration to his girlfriend Lenina:

"Don't you wish you were free, Lenina?" he asks.

"I don't know what you mean. I am free, free to have the most wonderful time. Everybody's happy nowadays."

He laughed, "Yes, 'Everybody's happy nowadays.' We have been giving the children that at five. But wouldn't you like to be free to be happy in some other way, Lenina? In your own way, for example; not in everybody else's way."

"I don't know what you mean," she repeated.

The façade is crumbling. And as more and more people realize that they have been used and robbed, we will move swiftly from Huxley's "Brave New World" to Orwell's "1984." The public, at some point, will have to face some very unpleasant truths. The good-paying jobs are not coming back. The largest deficits in human history mean that we are trapped in a debt peonage system that will be used by the corporate state to eradicate the last vestiges of social protection for citizens, including Social Security. The state has devolved from a capitalist democracy to neo-feudalism. And when these truths become apparent, anger will replace the corporate-imposed cheerful conformity. The bleakness of our post-industrial pockets, where some 40 million Americans live in a state of poverty and tens of millions in a category called "near poverty," coupled with the lack of credit to save families from foreclosures, bank repossessions and bankruptcy from medical bills, means that inverted totalitarianism will no longer work.

We increasingly live in Orwell's Oceania, not Huxley's The World State. Osama bin Laden plays the role assumed by Emmanuel Goldstein in "1984." Goldstein, in the novel, is the public face of terror. His evil machinations and clandestine acts of violence dominate the nightly news. Goldstein's image appears each day on Oceania's television screens as part of the nation's "Two Minutes of Hate" daily ritual. And without the intervention of the state, Goldstein, like bin Laden, will kill you. All excesses are justified in the titanic fight against evil personified.

The psychological torture of Pvt. Bradley Manning—who has now been imprisoned for seven months without being convicted of any crime—mirrors the breaking of the dissident Winston Smith at the end of "1984." Manning is being held as a "maximum custody detainee" in the brig at Marine Corps Base Quantico, in Virginia. He spends 23 of every 24 hours alone. He is denied exercise. He cannot have a pillow or sheets for his bed. Army doctors have been plying him with antidepressants. The cruder forms of torture of the Gestapo have been replaced with refined Orwellian techniques, largely developed by government psychologists, to turn dissidents like Manning into vegetables. We break souls as well as bodies. It is more effective. Now we can all be taken to Orwell's dreaded Room 101 to become compliant and harmless. These "special administrative measures" are regularly imposed on our dissidents, including Syed Fahad Hashmi, who was imprisoned under similar conditions for three years before going to trial. The techniques have psychologically maimed thousands of detainees in our black sites around the globe. They are the staple form of control in our maximum security prisons where the corporate state makes war on our most politically astute underclass—African-Americans. It all presages the shift from Huxley to Orwell.

"Never again will you be capable of ordinary human feeling," Winston Smith's torturer tells him in "1984." "Everything will be dead inside you. Never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity. You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty and then we shall fill you with ourselves."

The noose is tightening. The era of amusement is being replaced by the era of repression. Tens of millions of citizens have had their e-mails and phone records turned over to the government. We are the most monitored and spied-on citizenry in human history. Many of us have our daily routine caught on dozens of security cameras. Our proclivities and habits are recorded on the Internet. Our profiles are electronically generated. Our bodies are patted down at airports and filmed by scanners. And public service announcements, car inspection stickers, and public transportation posters constantly urge us to report suspicious activity. The enemy is everywhere.

Those who do not comply with the dictates of the war on terror, a war which, as Orwell noted, is endless, are brutally silenced. The draconian security measures used to cripple protests at the G-20 gatherings in Pittsburgh and Toronto were wildly disproportionate for the level of street activity. But they sent a clear message—DO NOT TRY THIS. The FBI's targeting of antiwar and Palestinian activists, which in late September saw agents raid homes in Minneapolis and Chicago, is a harbinger of what is to come for all who dare defy the state's official Newspeak. The agents—our Thought

Police—seized phones, computers, documents and other personal belongings. Subpoenas to appear before a grand jury have since been served on 26 people. The subpoenas cite federal law prohibiting "providing material support or resources to designated foreign terrorist organizations." Terror, even for those who have nothing to do with terror, becomes the blunt instrument used by Big Brother to protect us from ourselves.

"Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating?" Orwell wrote. "It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself."

Chris Hedges writes a regular column for Truthdig.com. Hedges graduated from Harvard Divinity School and was for nearly two decades a foreign correspondent for The New York Times. He is the author of many books, including: War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning, What Every Person Should Know About War, and American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America, Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle. His newest book is "Death of the Liberal Class."