



Literary Studies

The Failure of Bartleby Politics in Orwell's *1984*

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to provide a contemporary interpretation of Orwell's masterpiece, *1984*, through the lens of Žižek's radical violent Act and political withdrawal. Using textual analysis with a psychoanalytic approach, the research examines the failure of Bartleby politics within the protagonist's journey living in a totalitarian society. Initially, the protagonist commits a radical Act by seeking to rebel against the Party. However, due to the overwhelming power and control exerted by the Party, the protagonist ultimately practices a political withdrawal. Yet, his political withdrawal, commonly referred to as Bartleby politics, is not a mere act of retreat. Rather, it is a strategic decision aimed at preserving his physical existence in the face of imminent destruction. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding political resistance and survival in Orwell's dystopian world

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Žižekian perspective, individuals find themselves constantly constrained by the power structures within society. Power, with its pervasive nature, permeates every layer of the symbolic order (Žižek, 2008, 2010). Most frequently, it operates at a subconscious level. As the complexities of power dynamics progress, there emerges a group of people who actively participate in the practices against the authorities, and on the other side, those who passively submit to ideological dominance. The latter is considered far more radical than the former as the subjects are apathetic toward any practices occurring around them. They no longer have any concerns about the state, even the local environment within their community (Bojesen & Allen, 2019). Thus, the practices done by this unconcerned group of people are claimed the most non-ideological ones.

To delve further into the passive practices, an essential question arises regarding the motivations driving these individuals. The practices that qualify as radical must remain entirely non-ideological. It means they should not be affiliated with or tied to any specific ideology. Consequently, when individuals disengage from political practices due to external pressure from another party, their practices are questioned. They cannot be merely seen as political withdrawals—or, Bartleby politics in Žižek's term (Kang, 2021). Rather, these practices mark the failure of Bartleby politics. This case is found in George Orwell's dystopian novel, *1984*, particularly represented by the protagonist.

1984, first published in 1949, has become an influential literary work that continues to captivate readers and lead to critical analysis (Spence, 2018). The novel portrays a dark portrait of a totalitarian regime governed by the Party, in which individualism is criminalized and surveillance and ideological control are widely practiced. Orwell's depiction of an authoritarian state and the manipulation of truth resonated with readers, triggering intense debates about the threats of authoritarianism (Giroux, 2015; Valverde & González, 2022) and the deterioration of civil liberties (Cole, 2023; Sunstein, 2005). The story's contentious themes and depiction of a dystopian future have resulted in ranging research by

scholars, experts, and readers, who have investigated its relevance to modern society and its fundamental implications for political, social, and economic systems.

With its immense influence, the novel has been extensively examined from various perspectives, including totalitarianism, surveillance, manipulation of truth, mind control, suppression of civil liberty, and rebellion. These themes are interconnected with one another, creating a web of conflicts that question the essence of power. Beyond the fundamental questions of power, several studies (Çelikkol, 2018; Storrie & Martin, 2018; Sunstein, 2005) examine the novel from a sexual perspective. The prohibition of sexual pleasure by the Party in the novel creates intrigue among readers, as the protagonist rebels by engaging in a sexual act. Additionally, Orwellianism has emerged as a prominent topic in modern society, driven by the recognition that the destructive and oppressive governments depicted by George Orwell resonate with the contemporary world. For example, Halper (2021) incorporates Orwellian opinions to analyze constitutional issues. Taking a different approach, Frauen (2022a) explores the establishment of singularity within a tightly controlled environment. In the same year, they published another paper on *1984*, which reveals the novel's twisted satire of Orwell's narrative as a reflection of the present rather than a mere projection of the future (Frauen, 2022b).

The extensive exploration of research themes in *1984* highlights the complexities of the storyline. Despite that the work was published several decades ago, the novel remains relevant to contemporary society because it serves as a reminder to remain vigilant about protecting civil liberties and questioning authority. In light of this, the objective of this paper is to revisit the novel and undertake a fresh investigation using a contemporary critical lens proposed by Žižek. It is fundamental to explore the intersection of Žižek's thinking with *1984* as both discuss a radical subject who engages in acts of resistance against the symbolic order. Moreover, the subject goes beyond mere resistance and instead chooses to disengage from any further actions, embodying an apathetic stance.

II. METHOD

This study analyzes a sociological and qualitative approach by focusing on the two points of Žižek's perspective, particularly radical violent Act and political withdrawal. Non-numerical data, specifically texts from the novel, are collected and analyzed in qualitative research. Additionally, this study uses sociological literary analysis. This approach employs a sociological perspective to investigate literary works' social and cultural context. By implementing a sociological qualitative approach, this study provides novelty to previous studies examining the *1984* novel from a different lens.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Radical Violent Act: Rebellion against the Party

In Oceania—the superstate in the dystopian future in *1984*—the Party is characterized as an oppressive government. Oceania covers territories of the Americas, the British Isles, Australia, and parts of Africa. Within the society, the citizens are subjected to constant surveillance, manipulation of information, and strict adherence to Party ideology. In this case, the government exerts absolute control over the lives of its people, suppressing individuality and enforcing obedience at all levels of social existence (Morgan, 2018). First, in terms of constant surveillance, the government monitors every behavior of its citizens through the telescreen that is installed in each citizen's house. Not only monitoring the citizen's actions, it is also able to monitor the citizen's thoughts all the time. Additionally, the Party employs the Thought Police which might be a part of the family members, neighbors, and colleagues, whose duties are to spy on any suspicious actions taken by the citizen. Second, in terms of manipulation of information, the Ministry of Truth is responsible for ensuring that any information disseminated to the citizens promotes the propaganda of the regime in Oceania. The recreation of the information is also massively broadcasted on the telescreens. Further, the Party also developed a simplified language called Newspeak which aims to restrict the vocabulary spread in society. Third, in terms of strict adherence to the Party ideology, the citizens are subjected to intense indoctrination through educational systems and propaganda campaigns

at an early age. To control its ideology, the Party also rewrites historical narratives and manipulates past events that do not promote the principles ruled by Big Brother.

The subjugated society depicted in *1984* is a perfect representation of Žižekian thinking of a world where the ideology of the authorities is instilled into the citizens' perspective. Žižek, as a contemporary philosopher, is very cynical about our reality. He proposed three alternative practices of action that are conducted by the subject within the society: 1) "the Bartleby politics" which can be interpreted as a political withdrawal by the subjects who choose to be apathetic to their reality; 2) "Radical violent Act" where the subjects take an action that is beyond the symbolic order where they live; 3) Interdependence between the subjects and "local pragmatic interventions", where the subjects choose to accept any ideological indoctrination instilled by the ruling government (Žižek, 2010, 398). These practices of action indicate the level of individual subjugation to power. The lesser the number, the more radical the subjects' resistance to the authorities.

A radical subject, based on Žižek's thinking, acts against the symbolic order. The symbolic order is a set of shared meanings, regulations, and norms within the society. It is a constructed framework that shapes people's perceptions (Robinson & Tormey, 2005; Žižek, 2000). Language, culture, and social institutions are several aspects that are closely related to symbolic orders. In one of his works, Žižek defines symbolic orders as the network of meanings that construct our reality. Within this network, power operates to regulate social interactions among the subjects (Žižek, 2008). With the influence of these symbolic orders, people could not become free individuals who are able to determine their decisions independently.

As depicted in *1984*, Orwell developed his imagined symbolic orders that people referred to as Orwellian societal conditions. Orwell's symbolic orders show a totalitarian world where the government fully controls all layers of society. Not only the working class, but even the members of the Party are under the eye of the ruling government. The symbolic orders in the novel are represented by the dominant ideologies instilled by the Party. These orders include the language that is fully controlled by the Party through the application of Newspeak, a manipulated language that is set by the government to limit the range of thought of the people. Another symbolic order that is applied in Oceania is the manipulation of history which is perceived as a common activity. Through the Ministry of Truth, the government distorts all information that is considered harmful to the glory of the country. They remove published news that is not aligned with reality, and instead, release make-up news that supports the government's interest. In essence, the symbolic orders in *1984* demonstrate how the Party uses language and historical narratives to use power, reshape reality, and maintain its totalitarian regime.

In a theoretical context, ordinary people resignedly follow the symbolic order in a simply monotonous way. In *1984*, this group of people is represented by the civil society who live their dull lives believing in the absolute power of Big Brother. They have no voice, nor independency. They really are subjected to the power of the ruling government. These people fall into the third category in Žižek's alternative practices of action in which they coexist with the "local pragmatic interventions" (Žižek, 2010, 389). This coexistence highlights the resignation of those who passively adhere to the dominant ideology established in society. These individuals are receptive to the tangible changes brought about by the practical interventions. In other words, they accept the status quo determined by people of power without questions.

Compared to the third group of Žižek's alternative practices of action, the second one constitutes a group of people who actively participate in pragmatic interventions. These individuals are categorized as radical subjects who challenge the symbolic order with their radical violent Act. They recognize the need for alternative actions, and eventually, resist the grip of the dominant ideology. Winston, the protagonist of *1984*, clearly represents this group proven by his rebellious practices against the Party. At that time in Oceania, taking such a defiant act is considered revolutionary because the citizens of the state are used to being fully controlled by the government.

The initial act of Winston's rebellion is marked by his attempt to write a diary. Even writing a diary needs courage because every single word put down on the paper is monitored by the Party. Even worse,

he believes that his thinking that is not yet elaborated in spoken or written words is also monitored by the Party. As the narrator says, “He was already dead [...] when he had begun to be able to formulate his thoughts” (Orwell, 2004, 36-37). Initially, buying the book itself charges him with a lot of fear. Then, when he starts writing to express his thoughts about the Party’s oppressive control, he needs to avoid the telescreen to capture what he is doing because every suspicious act monitored by the Party will be tracked down. Additionally, what makes writing the secret diary challenging is the content of Winston’s diary, in which he aims to describe the Party’s depravity to people who are blinded by the power of Big Brother. Though he understands very well that the act is highly risky, however, he is determined to keep writing his secret diary. Once Winston starts writing his secret diary, his motivation to revolt against the Party grows stronger.

Seeing the case of *1984* from Žižekian perspective, the protagonist demonstrates a radical violent Act as a response to his dissatisfaction with the Party. Winston is a member of the Ministry whose main duties are to manipulate any information shared with the community. As a member of the Ministry of Truth—which apparently does not disseminate the truth at all—Winston witnessed all the manipulation arranged by the Party. He is forcefully involved in the manipulation practice, delivering fake news that aims to maintain the Party’s victorious image in the eyes of the people. The dilemma grows stronger as he recognizes the systematic distortion of truth within society. The Party even legalized the practices of erasing any facts that do not upload their propaganda and facilitated the Ministry to rewrite the historical narratives. Apparently, Winston’s awareness of the manipulation of the information left a question mark on the morality of the Party. He longs for truth, individual freedom, and sincere connection between individuals. In this consent, Winston does not choose to accept the “local pragmatic interventions.” Instead, he suspects the established system followed by the people. He even questions the authentic existence of Big Brother—an act that is considered criminal according to the regulations of the Party.

Because of Winston’s irritation with the Party’s dishonesty, he is then involved in forbidden activities, one of which is his affair with Julia. In Oceania, sex should not involve romantic or emotional relationships. It should be seen simply as mechanical movements of the body between two people with the aim of the production of offspring. Winston’s real partner in crime, Julia, plays her own role as a catalyst for Winston’s rebellion. Without her, Winston might never have taken such rebellious action against the Party. Julia has a strong desire for personal freedom as her motivation to oppose the Party. Her willingness to engage in forbidden acts stems from her defiance of the Party rules. Further, her dissatisfaction with the dictator system set by the Party leads to her longing for moments of pleasure, which eventually, she seeks from sexual relationships. However, due to the Party’s strict regulations, even sexual relationships cannot be a source of enjoyment, as explained in the quotation below:

In the old days, he thought, a man looked at a girl’s body and saw that it was desirable, and that was the end of the story. But you could not have pure love or pure lust nowadays. No emotion was pure, because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred. Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act. (Orwell, 2004, 171)

Although fundamentally, the major intention of sexual activity is reproduction, it surely has other purposes (Benaghiano & Mori, 2009). Apart from physical and/or emotional pleasure, it provides connection with the partner, intimacy, and clarity of the meaning of the relationship. From the Party’s perspective, however, sexual activity is limited only to reproduction. Sexual activity is not moments of joy between two love birds, on the other side, it is merely the touch between skins that aims to produce offspring for the Party’s regeneration. Thus, any sexual behaviors that involve affection are considered a form of crime. However, as a form of protest, Winston commits a sexual act with Julia—an act that is considered corrupt based on the Party’s regulations.

‘You’re only a rebel from the waist downwards,’ he told her.

She thought this brilliantly witty and flung her arms round him in delight.

In the ramifications of party doctrine she had not the faintest interest. Whenever he began to talk of the principles of Ingsoc, doublethink, the mutability of the past, and the denial of objective reality, and to use Newspeak words, she became bored and confused and said that she never paid any attention

to that kind of thing. [...] Talking to her, he realized how easy it was to present an appearance of orthodoxy while having no grasp whatever of what orthodoxy meant. (Orwell, 2004, 212-213)

Winston's rebellion indicates Žižek's radical violent Act. This Act is a form of resistance against existing power structures. It ranges from civil disobedience to protests that aim to disrupt the status quo. In Žižek's philosophy, the Act is not associated with violence that harms other individual beings. Rather, the Act represents political and social struggles to make a radical change within the society that adheres to a dominant ideology. Because in Oceania, sexual acts should only correlate to productive manners of giving birth to a member of the citizen, Winston overthrows the ideas. Winston's and Julia's relationship moves far beyond this mechanical bond. From his illegal sexual intercourse, he redefines the term that has been understood for a long time. He becomes a model of the revolution of sexual politics, showing that the love between a pair of two individuals does exist.

The Paradox of Surrender as a Political Withdrawal

Political withdrawal occupies the first group in Žižek's practices of action. This action is also known as Bartleby politics in which the term is inspired by a short fiction titled *Bartleby, the Scrivener* by Herman Melville. The fiction narrates a story about the main character Bartleby who refuses to do any particular thing in his workplace. The turning point is simply motivated by his boredom doing the same routine every day. The act is highly contrasted with his initial behavior in which he used to be the most diligent employee who never for once disappoints his superiors. "I would prefer not to" (Bojesen & Allen, 2019; Kang, 2021) becomes his only expression to answer every request from his colleagues, even his seniors. This peak of passivity inspires Žižek to formulate Bartleby politics as an act of subjects to be politically apathetic in response to any political practices encountered by the subject.

Bartleby politics is the most revolutionary action taken by subjects. It is beyond the radical violent Act because, at this level, the subjects are no longer concerned about anything happening in the symbolic order (Bojesen & Allen, 2019). It is a political withdrawal in which the subjects withdraw themselves from reality. In opposite to the radical violent Act in which the subjects take a major action to confront the dominant political power, the subjects of Bartleby politics choose not to take any actions at all. That is why the subject "prefers not to do" anything in this framework of thinking.

In Orwell's *1984*, the protagonist reaches the culmination of his antipathy to the Party after engaging in rebellion. He (and his partner Julia) are arrested due to their forbidden sexual relationship, which is against the Party's regulations. Ironically, they are betrayed by O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party whom they had trusted. Even though they have established a mutual bond that seems to go against the Party, O'Brien apprehended him for the crime. This proves that the Thought Police are everywhere in Oceania; they can be a colleague that we place our trust in for a long time. As a result, they are subjected to not just harsh interrogations at the Ministry of Love, but also physical abuse. However, his capture did not signal the end of the uprising. With unwavering tenacity, he refuses to submit to the Party's authority. He stays faithful to his beliefs, thinking that ordinary people have the fundamental right to free thought, expression, and individuality.

With its tremendous power, the Party applies various tactics to compel Winston to surrender and admit the crime he had done. Through persistent propaganda, the ruling government breaks Winston's persistence by growing feelings of fear and uncertainty within the targeted subjects. This way, we can see that the Party easily uses its power to manipulate the situation. Winston's entire existence is watched, his thoughts and actions controlled, leaving little room for protest. The Party's purpose is to take away his individuality, abuse his rebellious spirit, and shape him into a submissive and obedient member of the collective. They take advantage of his anxieties, desires, and vulnerabilities, using psychological and physical torment to break his will and direct his views. Despite his initial resistance, the Party's efforts eventually made him surrender. This blurs the distinctions between truth and propaganda, leaving him on the verge of capitulation. The Party's ultimate goal is to utterly destroy Winston's spirit, eliminating all traces of resistance and creating a compliant subject who is completely under their control.

'Now I will tell you the answer to my question. It is this. The Party seeks power entirely for its own

sake. 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. (Orwell, 2004, 359)

Due to the relentless efforts of the Party in forcing its doctrine to Winston, he eventually surrendered. The surrender is not a mere submission to the Party, but Winston has his reason to do so. During the punishment stage, Winston (and Julia) undergo(es) a sequential process of psychological and physical manipulation. They both are forced to accept the Party's ideology and admit their sin.

He accepted everything. [...] He remembered remembering contrary things, but those were false memories, products of self-deception. How easy it all was! Only surrender, and everything else followed. It was like swimming against a current that swept you backwards however hard you struggled, and then suddenly deciding to turn round and go with the current instead of opposing it. Nothing had changed except your own attitude: the predestined thing happened in any case. He hardly knew why he had ever rebelled. (Orwell, 2004, 379-380)

As the acts traced back, the protagonist's political withdrawal is a failed representation of an absolute withdrawal. According to Žižek, political withdrawal is motivated by a deep disillusionment with the existing ideological and political systems (Sivkov, 2021). Subjects may perceive these systems to be oppressive, corrupt, or incapable of addressing society's fundamental problems and injustices. They may also recognize the constraints and contradictions of traditional political activities and institutions. As a result, as a form of protest and resistance, they choose to withdraw from active political engagement. This is not a passive disengagement, but rather a determined decision to break free from existing power structures and seek alternative forms of resistance and transformation. It is driven by a desire for dramatic change and an unwillingness to maintain an unjust status quo.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Orwell's depiction of the dismantled dictatorship in *1984* sparks a broad debate about tyranny. Orwell's vivid and terrifying vision of a dystopian society digs into the extreme expression of authoritarian authority, as well as the terrible ramifications for individual freedom, privacy, and truth manipulation. The setting remains relevant to today's political environment as many issues become the center of problems within society. Therefore, revisiting this masterpiece is considered a subtle way to make contemplation of the present reality.

This study reveals the roles taken by the protagonist of the literary work by employing Žižek's political theory. The subject differs from other ordinary people as he does not want to live alongside the local interventions. At first, the subject commits a radical violent Act by having an affair with another member of the Inner Party. However, as the Party suppresses the subject with its power, the subject takes a more radical action by committing a political withdrawal. The withdrawal is applied to save himself from the Party's cruelty. This indicates the failure of the subject to practice Bartleby politics and to become an authentic one.

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