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“Just as Orwell said”: The Emergence of a “Dystopian Framing” in French Conservative Media in the 2010s



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Introduction: Unexpected Orwellian Apparitions

IN France, science fiction has long struggled to be recognized as a “serious” form of literature, and not just as a form of “paraliterature” (Langlet). Yet in recent years, we noticed a growing number of references to dystopian fiction in the French public sphere. Our aim in this paper is to understand the meanings and political implications of these increasingly frequent references to dystopian literature.

First, a search of the keywords “dystopi*,” “Orwell*,” “novlangue” (the most common translation of Orwell’s “Newspeak”), “Big Brother” (generally used in English in French media), “Winston Smith,” and “Le meilleur des mondes” (the title of the French translation of *Brave New World*) in major French newspapers and news magazines confirmed our impression: the overall number of occurrences nearly doubled between 1999 and 2019, with a first peak in 2007, and a steady growth since 2012 (albeit with a slight decrease since 2019). These patterns correspond to political milestones (such as the 2007 and 2012 presidential elections) so that we wondered about the potential political significance of dystopian references in the French public sphere. Surely, the growing popularity of dystopia as a fictional genre in literature, television series and movies since the 2000s could in itself account for this growth. But the use of the words based on the root “dystopi*” (principally the noun “dystopie” [dystopia] and the adjective “dystopique”) has only increased very recently (since 2010 and more rapidly since 2016). Moreover, among the references to specific well-known dystopias, while those alluding to Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) have remained relatively stable, references to Orwell’s *1984* (1949) have increased the most (from 214 in 1999 to a peak of 504 in 2018, and 396 in 2019). No republication

or film adaptation explains this surge in the popularity of *1984* over this time period. In addition, in comparison to *Brave New World*, allusions to *1984* involve a more varied network of references: the characters of Big Brother and Winston Smith are regularly mentioned in their own right. Above all, the concept of “Newspeak” has become central (with occurrences increasing by 665% between 1999 and 2017).

“Newspeak” as a Framing Device

In order to better understand the meaning of these recurring references to Orwell, we began by exploring references to “Newspeak” in major French newspapers of different political orientations. While references to “Newspeak” remained relatively stable in left-wing media (*L’Humanité*, *Libération*), the growth from 2012-2013 onwards was driven by newspapers at the centre and towards the right side of the French political spectrum (*L’Express*, *Le Figaro*, *Marianne*, *Le Point*, *Valeurs Actuelles*). Moreover, an examination of the concrete uses of the word highlighted significant differences between left- and right-wing media. Left-wing media typically refers to “Newspeak” as part of a critique of capitalism (“Financial capitalism, as it is called in Newspeak, is only a stage of capitalism delivered to its own savagery, adapted to our time” [Anon.]) or corporate language (“the Newspeak of business schools feeds the abstraction of managerial discourse” [Giret]). As in other countries, left-wing political activists in France have also drawn on Orwell to condemn surveillance practices and infringements of privacy rights in the digital age (Krieg-Planque). Meanwhile, references to “Newspeak” in right-wing newspapers and news magazines are generally used as a synonym for “political correctness” (“And then, who knows why, but probably under the influence of a certain puritanism, Big Brother’s Newspeak, imagined by George Orwell in 1949, insidiously appeared not in 1984, but in 2014 [political correctness was perhaps only an ersatz version]” [Chiflet]), “the current” (Fonton) or “dominant Newspeak” (“How could we not regularize illegal immigrants, who, by the magic of the dominant Newspeak, have become ‘*sans-papiers* [undocumented people]’ or, better still, ‘migrants?’” [Anon 2003]), a general “modern Newspeak” (“It’s entertaining to watch modern Newspeak being enriched with new concepts, day after day”) or “socialist Newspeak” when the socialist François Hollande was president.

In these uses, the world depicted in *1984* does not only serve as a metaphor

or a comparison. References to this well-known novel also act as a sort of lens, suggesting a perspective on the present as a dystopia, or a dystopia to come (using the “slippery slope” argument). In this sense, references to *1984*, particularly through the neologism “Newspeak,” serve as powerful “framing devices” aimed at promoting a particular problem definition and formulating grievances (Entman; D’Angelo). We thus refer to their use in this way as an “Orwellian framing.” In this context, news articles condemned even small changes in the language of the French administration in the wake of same-sex marriage as “Newspeak.” In this Orwellian framing, the replacement of “father” and “mother” with “parent 1” and “parent 2” on administrative forms meant that the former categories would simply disappear not only from official language, but from “reality” (Vaquin. et al.).

Invoking Orwell to Fight the “Gender War”

Orwell would have been puzzled to see how often his book was invoked in the context of tense debates over marriage equality legislation in France in 2012-2013, as we found out in the course of our attempts to reconstruct the genealogy of Orwellian references in the French public sphere. At the time, a social movement coalesced against this bill around the organization “La Manif pour Tous” (“Protest for all,” a reference to “Mariage pour Tous,” the slogan associated to the legalization of same-sex marriage), crystallizing both conservative opposition on issues of biopolitics (Béraud and Portier) and anti-elite and anti-media resentment. Within this heterogeneous movement, activists and intellectuals from conservative Catholic circles disseminated and thus helped to popularize dystopian references. Major conservative Catholic publishers such as *TerraMare* and websites such *Le salon beige* linked the reform to *1984*—a book that had in their opinion become a “frightening reality” (Boucher). A part of the movement expressed intellectual ambitions, notably through the practice of reading texts at night-time “vigils,” including Orwell’s *1984* (Bourabaa), and frequently quoting figures from Aristotle to—again—Orwell (Tudy). Often, “Newspeak” acted as an autonomous reference in its own right, requiring no elaboration or explanation of *1984* to be understood. But the movement also used more precise and varied dystopian references, particularly Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. In 2015, “Manif pour Tous” activists Eric Letty and Guillaume de Prémare published an account of the social movement entitled *Resistance to the Best*

of *Worlds* (*Résistance aux meilleurs des mondes*), referring to the title of *Brave New World's* French translation, *Le meilleur des mondes*. With the legalization of same-sex marriage the movement dwindled, but references to *1984* continued to serve to crystallize multiple forms of opposition to the Socialist government, particularly around the politics of language. References now came not only from established intellectuals from the Catholic right, but also from broader political circles. In 2015, the philosophers François-Xavier Bellamy (who self-identifies as a Catholic conservative) and Michel Onfray (originally from the Left but now self-defining as a “popular sovereignist”) converged on a similar critique couched in terms of the “thought police,” a direct reference to Orwell (de Villers and Deveccio). Soon after, “sovereignist” essayist Natacha Polony founded an “Orwell committee” which vowed to combat “language manipulation,” which she presented as a present-day “soft totalitarianism.” In this instance, Orwell’s rights holders protested, and the committee was forced to change its name to “the Orwellians” (Durupt and Guiton).

A Tool for a Gramscian Counter-Cultural Revolution?

The wide range of established actors actively promoting an “Orwellian framing” helps to understand its emergence in mainstream media throughout the 2010s. Not incidentally, many of the press outlets disseminating this Orwellian framing underwent a shift to the right at the same time, in line with structural changes in the French press under the pressure of digitalization. This is the case with the new editorial policy of the weekly *Valeurs Actuelles* since 2012, but also of *Le Figaro* which launched the polemical website *FigaroVox* in 2014. Both shared writers with the (originally centre-left but now) sovereigntist weekly *Marianne*, directed by Natacha Polony since 2018, as well as with the online-only right-wing outlet *Atlantico* (launched in 2011) and the magazine *Causeur* (launched online in 2007, and in a monthly paper version since 2008).

These recognized, professional, but increasingly right-leaning press titles were also frequently quoted by a series of conservative and radical right-wing news websites that had emerged since the 2000s, helping share this “Orwellian framing” across an ideological network that self-identified with the notion of “reinformation,” a keyword for a collective cultural struggle against mainstream media (Stephan and Vauchez). As in other countries, radical-right movements and parties had engaged in

online activism from early on, beginning with the founding of *Novopress.info* by the Bloc Identitaire in 2005. The *Front national* (FN) was the first French political party to invest heavily in the use of online communication tools (Dézé), as it attempted to maintain its core political identity while pursuing its strategy of normalization (Hobeika and Villeneuve). Other websites were launched by activists who did not share this constraint, as they claimed independence from political parties. This was the case of *Le salon beige* (“The beige lounge/salon,” evoking a neutral space for discussion), which came to play a prominent role in the opposition to same-sex marriage. Founded in 2004 by Catholic activists in their thirties and forties, often from traditionalist circles, it became the forerunner of a network of Catholic blogs and webpages (Blanc). It has since been bought by the activist Guillaume Jourdain de Thieulloy, who owns a number of other websites that take a similar conservative Catholic, economically liberal line, e.g. *Nouvelle de France* and *Riposte catholique*. Outside the conservative Catholic milieu, there was also the well-known blog and, later, news website *Fdesouche* (short for “François Desouche”). Its title is based on a play on words with the older phrase “Français de souche,” an expression referring to having many generations of French ancestors, used by Jean-Marie Le Pen in particular to refer to an ethnically, a.k.a. white, French population. It was founded in 2006 by Pierre Sautarel, who worked closely with the Front national on communication in the late 2000s (Albertini and Doucet). Beyond their ideological differences (on economics and State secularism in particular), these websites are connected through their media practice: they relay articles from all kinds of media as well as opinion pieces and quickly began to relay articles from each other as well. Studies analysing their links to one another have shown how they merge around nodal points, each aggregating a sub-family of the radical right (Blanc; Froio).

This online activism among radical right-wing political activists is, of course, not unique to France. But French activists have explicitly referred to the “metapolitical” strategy of “counter-cultural Gramscianism” developed by the Nouvelle Droite (New Right) at the end of the 1970s as a way to turn the left’s own weapons against it (Griffin; McCulloch). In fact, while many websites were launched by young activists and/or linked to new movements such as the *Bloc identitaire* (Identity Block), it was, in part, older actors who unified and connected them to one another around a common goal, by transmitting the strategies of the New Right and adapting them to the Internet age. In 2008, a key actor on the Nouvelle Droite, Jean-Yves Le Gallou, a

senior civil servant and former executive of the Front national, launched a manifesto for a “technological Gramscianism,” which was widely distributed at the time on these emerging right-wing websites. In it, he urged readers to make use of new technologies to produce “re-information” that is “just,” “non-conformist,” and “pluralist,” in order to win “the battle of ideas” (Le Gallou). A foundation launched by Le Gallou and other activists in 2002, the Polemia Foundation, also played a pivotal role in the emerging radical right-wing online sphere, with a ceremony ironically celebrating mainstream media lies (Bobards d’Or, “Golden Fibs”) and the publication of pamphlets such as the *Dictionary of Newspeak* in 2009. All of these writings link the “counter-cultural” ambition to references to Orwell and particularly to “Newspeak.”

Activists such as Le Gallou who made their political debuts in the 1960s and 1970s had read *1984* first as an anti-communist pamphlet and redirected it against the French socialist actors and governments of the late 20th century. But these references quickly spread more widely in the so-called “reinfosphere,” extending beyond this initial reading in the process. Since its beginnings, the website Fdesouche has presented ironic thematic pages on language, including a page listing “Newspeak among us” with sourced examples “taken from the press or the media”: the comparison of these media terms with more common and stigmatizing expressions is intended to reveal a violent reality marked by inter-ethnic conflicts that the media seek to describe euphemistically, e.g., “Don’t say ‘average Frenchman attached to his culture,’ but ‘racist’ instead” (Fdesouche). The *Dictionary of Newspeak*, republished in 2015, also focused on words supposedly subverted by the Left: again in the context of same-sex marriage (“actors involved in the conception and education of children”), or when debunking what the authors saw as euphemisms for racialised groups: e.g., “Adverse events: Euphemism used by the RATP [Parisian Transport Authority] when supporters of the Algerian soccer team block bus traffic” (Le Gallou and Geoffroy).

Right-wing Orwellian references can thus be traced back to an older *Nouvelle droite* strategy of debunking “political correctness” through language. The 2012-2013 social movement against same-sex marriage was key in spreading this framing of gender politics beyond Catholic and/or radical-right circles, from fringe radical-right websites to newspapers of the mainstream right and the centre.

The use of this “Orwellian framing” in the context of new “cultural wars” served, explicitly and implicitly, as a unifying device for various movements opposing the socialist government in power until 2017, but also beyond. In the right-wing online



media and the traditional conservative print press alike, references to “Orwell,” “1984,” or “Newspeak” are still used on the one hand to oppose any societal reforms shifting the balance of power between majority and minority groups, particularly along gender and race lines, and on the other hand, without reference to current news, as a kind of an ideological anchoring point, in a long term perspective. In the end, progressive movements are not the only ones able to recognize the disruptive power of dystopia to reframe the present (Harrison); right-wing movements can do the same, in order to hinder different kinds of social transformation.

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