

“Huxley’s *Brave New World* as Social Irritant: Ban It or Buy It?”

It is obvious why someone who believes in censorship might choose to object to *Brave New World*. This world is a world of sexual promiscuity, a world with a drug culture in the most literal sense of that expression, a world in which the traditional family—in fact, any family at all—has been vilified and rendered taboo, a world in which religion has been reduced to orgiastic rituals of physical expression. It is a world in which art panders to the sensations of mass communications and a world in which the positive values of Western democracy have been ossified into a rigid caste system, in which the members of each caste are mass produced to the specifications of assembly line uniformity.

Readers who have strict standards of sexual behavior, who believe in chaste courtships and monogamous, lifetime marriages confront in this novel a society in which sexual promiscuity is a virtue and in which the sole function of sexuality is pleasure, not reproduction. Since reproduction is achieved by an elaborate biogenetic mass production assembly line, the citizens of *Brave New World* do not need normal human sexual activity to propagate the species. In fact, such activity is discouraged by the state so that the carefully monitored population controls are not disrupted. Women are required to wear “Malthusian Belts”—convenient caches of birth control devices—in order to forego pregnancies. The sole function of sex in this society is pleasure, and the sole function of pleasure is to guarantee the happiness of *Brave New World* and thus assure a stable, controllable population. State encouraged promiscuity assures that loyalty to one’s lover or family will not undermine one’s loyalty to the state. Thus, “Everyone belongs to everyone else,” and the highest compliment a man can offer a woman is that she is “very pneumatic”—a euphemism suggesting that her movements during sexual intercourse are especially pleasurable. Unlike Orwell, who in the novel [1984](#) placed severe taboos on sexual activity, since as private and personal act it might permit or encourage rebellion against the state, Huxley prophesizes that in the future the state will use sex as a means of population control on the basis of the psychological truism that men and women condition themselves to avoid pain and to seek pleasure.

Lest the pleasure of frequent and promiscuous sexual activity not be sufficient to distract the population and dissuade them from rebellion, Huxley foresees a culture in which widespread and addictive use of drugs offers a second means of assuring a frictionless society. “A Soma in time saves nine,”—a hypnopædic slogan drilled into the heads of *Brave New World*ians from nursery days on—conveys the message that individuals are to protect themselves from normal pain by frequent doses of this widely available and socially acceptable narcotic.

One of the most important uses for Soma is to insulate people from the effects of rapid aging which afflict *Brave New World* inhabitants after an artificially induced period of extended youth. In this “perfect” society—the future as heaven—most of the human qualities of life have been altered and adapted so that they are devoid of crisis and pain. Just as the inhabitants of this world age only during a brief period shortly before death and just as the drug which eases them through this period has no unpleasant side effects, so they are insulated against the normal stresses and tensions of family life. They have no parents to contend with since in Huxley’s inspired anticipation of the consequences of biogenetic engineering, they are conceived through artificial insemination, carried in assembly line placentas made of sow’s peritoneum, and decanted rather than born. *Brave New World* inhabitants spend their nursery years in state-run institutions where they are conditioned for future life. Those normal mortals who recall the pain of adolescence would be spared such in *Brave New World*; there is no adolescence. As adults, the inhabitants enjoy youth and vitality until near the time of their deaths. People never have to contend with the stress of accommodating themselves to the authority of parents, nor do they know the stress, pain, heartache—nor the joy—of nurturing and raising children.

The birth and childhood of *Brave New World* inhabitants is greatly reduced from the human world in which we daily live. After perusing the early chapters of this novel, the sensitive reader becomes aware that reduction is one of its recurrent themes, and that this reduction usually involves those attributes of life which make us most human. The purpose behind these reductions is to make all existence subservient to the state. Such subservience requires that even such basic institutions of human civilization as religion and art be sapped of their vital force.

With lives so devoid of pain and so concentrated in the physical and the immediate present, the Worldians have little need for the comfort or solace of religion. If religion is that aspect of man's culture which speaks to the spirit, then Worldians have an absence of spirit of which they are unaware. The reduction of religion is symbolized in the icon which replaces the cross as the dominant religious image—a T. The worship of a supernatural savior has been supplanted by worship of a lord of the assembly line, Henry Ford, and the sign of Our Ford is taken from the model name of one of his early cars. The four arms of the cross have been reduced to the three arms of the T.

Religion lends continuity to civilization, and so does art. Each is an important constituent of the emotional component of human life. But, like religion, art in *Brave New World* has been reduced to trafficking in sensation—slight, transitory, physical responses as opposed to the profound, sustained, psychological responses of emotion. The “Feelies”—*Brave New World's* multi-sensory version of the movies—well illustrates this pandering to sensation; rather than celebrating the ideas and emotions of human life, the “Feelies” are designed to give its participants a sensory overload of neural stimulation—the sight and feel of bare flesh on a bearskin rug, for example.

Thus art and religion are controlled by the state and subordinated to the support of the state, but the nature of that state is quite different from what a contemporary reader might expect. In the 1990s, citizens of Western Democracies see their form of government as the best form yet developed by man. As Huxley projects this important facet of human life into the future, he foresees neither Western [Democracy](#) nor its historical competitor, Eastern Communism, as the most likely political system. Instead of either he sees a five-tiered caste system occasioned through the perfection of biogenetic engineering and other modern devices of social control. Every man is created biologically equal to all others in his caste. The leisured classes are conditioned to consume, and the working classes are conditioned to manufacture what those other classes consume. Society functions almost as simply as the physical law of equal and opposite reactions.

If Huxley had perversely set out to oversimplify and reduce the most important philosophical and scientific ideas of modern times to a facile society representing a serious projection of what the world will surely become, then one might at least understand the objections of those who seek to censor the book. Neither Marx nor the founders of Western Democracy prevail. The Worldians seem to extrapolate from some of the world's great religions— Islam Christianity Judaism—such belief as is useful for their purpose. Freud's insights into family relationships are read only in their negative connotations, and these connotations then become the basis for social organization. Darwin's discoveries about adaptation and heredity are seen not as patterns for understanding how nature works but rather as patterns for manipulating nature to nefarious ends. The history of modern technology culminates in a culture where man eases his way through life on drugs, is free of painful involvement with other human beings, and is sustained by the state's manipulation of mass consumption and mass communication.

But Huxley does not offer *Brave New World* as an ideal. Neither does he render it as an idle fantasy portraying what life might be like in the future. *Brave New World* is a satire, and the pleasurable perfection of society in A.F. 689 is measured against the norm of Twentieth Century society in general and against the norm of a particular primitive society still currently extant. *Brave New World* has its critics both from within and without. The critic from within is Bernard Marx. Because of some abnormality in his birthing process, he is not a perfect Alpha specimen, which suggests that human imperfection and mechanical malfunction have not been completely eliminated in this brave new world. The critic from without is John Savage. As the child of Linda from the dominant culture and the adopted son of a Native American on a reservation in the American Southwest, he is a halfbreed belonging to neither the progressive nor the traditional societies in the book.

Marx introduces some of the universal human norms in the book. He is in the society, but not of it. He is physically smaller than other members of his caste—the dominant Alphas—and this physical distinction seems to generate in him envy and alienation, which are uncommon in the society. He rebels against his superior, and when he finds Linda and her son on the reservation and discovers her past association with his superior, he brings them back to the “World” in order to humiliate his boss. Though he has a professional, psychological interest in the two, he is so flattered by the attention he receives because of his connection with the famous pair that he begins to pander to

the society of which he has previously been so harshly critical. Marx is important in a technical sense because it is from his point of view that we see the activities of the society—activities which he both participates in and criticizes.

John, or the savage, articulates the values of both a minority culture, the Native Americans and of the culture of the past. To the degree to which he has assimilated the culture of the Native Americans, he is a child of nature communicant with the earth, sky, wind and water. He is free of the artificial and urban environment in which Bernard spends his life. Though his mother is from the dominant society, John is born outside that society and thus escapes its state-supported brainwashing nurture and its prescriptions against artifacts of earlier times. His education he obtains from the *Bible* and Shakespeare—two of the most important cultural forces in modern Western civilization. It is by the norms of this literature that he executes his criticism of this “Brave New World.”

Bernard and John convey to the reader the dilemma of modern life which Huxley expresses in the novel. Through their knowledge humans gain greater and greater control over their environment. As they gain control and are better able to manage their own destiny, they also greatly increase the danger of losing their humanity—the sum total of those facets of life by which people define and know themselves. This point is literally and symbolically illustrated through the tragic conclusion of the novel. John falls victim to that most human of human emotions—love. Yet he cannot reconcile his love for Lenina Crowne in a satisfactory way. John cannot accept her as “pneumatic,” as “belonging to everybody else,” after the fashion of his mother’s culture. Nor can he remold her into the image of the beloved he holds from the Biblical and Shakespearean cultural guides he learned in his childhood. John is caught out of time. He cannot go back to his old culture, nor can he assimilate the new. His only option in a world where he has become a freak to be gawked at is suicide. As his body swings from the rope gyrating toward all points of the compass, Huxley suggests that we too may be creating a world in which ironically there is no place for human life and for human emotion.

One of the objectors to this novel comments on its pessimism and tragedy as reasons why it should not be taught. Such an objection overlooks the tone of the book. As satire, the book’s purpose is to examine the failings of human behavior in order to encourage reform. Such examinations are painful when we recognize our faults through them. But pain and growth and regeneration are part of the human condition and prove that Huxley’s prophesy has not yet come true. And certainly if we try to prevent people—especially young people—from being exposed to the tragic, we would have to eliminate much world literature which has been universally proclaimed great.

Source: Richard H. Beckham, “Huxley’s *Brave New World* as Social Irritant: Ban It or Buy It?” in *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*, edited by Nicholas J. Karolides, Lee Burrell, and John M. Kean, Scarecrow, 1993, pp. 136–41.