

EUROPE IN THE EIGHTIES : CHANGE AND

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

OPENING ADDRESS TO BE DELIVERED BY COMMISSIONER RICHARD BURKE

TO N.I.H.E. CONFERENCE ON "INDUSTRIALISATION : THE INDIVIDUAL

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We are just one year away from the date set by George Orwell for his vision of the terrible future which could await us. Orwell - you might agree - was perhaps the most realistic and clear-sighted of recent writers about politics. But when he wrote "Nineteen Eighty-Four" in the mid-Forties he found himself able to contemplate the near future only with dread. The outlook he depicted is one of unrelieved horror and despair.

It is true that Orwell in that book is not saying : "This is how it will be", but rather "This is how it might be - if our luck is out, and if we make the wrong decisions now and fail to defend our freedoms."

Well, how do we stand as we find ourselves on the threshold of 1984? Is the Orwellian nightmare coming true in a general sense? Or are particular aspects of his vision being realized? Have we something still to learn from what Orwell imagined?

The first thing to say about "Nineteen Eighty-Four" - the book - I suggest, is that it retains its imaginative power even while the real 1984 comes into view. It does uncannily evoke many of the features of our world which did not exist, or had scarcely begun to exist, when it was written. One is tempted to say that as a prophet of doom Orwell got most things right - except the doom itself.

When he foresaw the development of technologies capable of virtually total intrusion into private life - and hence the destruction of private life - he was surely accurate. When he spoke of the gradual replacement of traditional language by a propagandist jargon - "Newspeak" - which would force words to mean whatever their manipulators wanted them to mean, he took to its logical conclusion a process which has certainly begun in our day.

But reading his book now is a little like looking at a photograph in negative. The forms in his picture correspond to those in the world we know, but with a reversed significance. One striking example of this is Orwell's use of television, which was a medium scarcely known when he wrote his book.

In "Nineteen Eighty-Four" - just as in the real 1983 - television is everywhere. In the home, the pub, the workplace it is always in evidence, and usually claiming attention. It is the dominant instrument of information and of culture in this new society. So far, Orwell's picture is almost weirdly accurate.

It is nevertheless a picture in negative. Television in "Nineteen Eighty-Four" is above all an instrument of surveillance and control, by which the totalitarian "Party" exercises total dominance over the citizens. "Big Brother is watching you". But, as Professor Tom Stonier has pointed out in a recent fascinating book, the reverse is actually true of television as we know it. Television for us is a device

by which the people watch the rulers and, often, catch them out. Rulers subject to the scrutiny of television in our system have little chance of growing into Big Brother, even if they wished to. Instead of being an instrument of totalitarian control, it has become an instrument of democratic accountability.

Television is one device of surveillance in "1984" which has been turned in the opposite direction to that which Orwell feared. One cannot, unfortunately, be as cheerful about other forms of surveillance described in the book which have also been developed in real life, and which do threaten an unwarranted intrusion into the privacy of individuals. All that apparatus of surveillance which runs from telephone taps to the computerized storing of credit card transactions needs to be strictly controlled by legislation. I believe, however, that the will exists to do this, and it should be done.

I decided to begin this talk with "1984", because the year that is in it makes it topical; because the book is still one of the most brilliant pieces of futurology we have; and because of the lessons we can draw from it. Some of these lessons, I suggest, are the following:

- That it is more normal to regard the future with dread than with hope;
- That new technology does open frightening possibilities of state control and the destruction of individual freedom. These possibilities are

already being realized in certain Communist states and, tragically, in a number of third world countries also;

- That, on the contrary, the new technologies, if rigorously safeguarded, can enhance individual freedom by improving communication between governments and electorates - and hence the accountability of governments;
- That the impact of these new technologies in the economic sphere can be as dramatically beneficial as in politics - provided, again, that they are rightly applied. Orwell's proles lived a material life of dingy discomfort because the all-powerful Party wanted it that way. But in reality the new technologies provide us with the possibility of unprecedented material welfare for everyone - if we exploit them wisely.

The first lesson I draw from Orwell has to do with our instinctive fear of the future. This is a widespread phenomenon at the present time. A minority of people - usually scientists or a certain kind of confident economist - typified by the journal of that name - manage to look on the future with determined optimism. They are sometimes so cheerful as to be quite scary. They depict a world of such intense material satisfaction, peace and plenty as to be almost beyond human ken.

The rest of us, meanwhile, tend to live in a mood of doubt, if not of depression. Part of that instinctive fear of the future which I mentioned, is our instinctive distrust of science and scientists. If we read the famous Churchill sentence warning of "a new dark age, rendered more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science", we fancy we know what he is getting at. We know that science has brought us the nuclear bomb, and is ever-ready to refine further its achievements in that area. And, finally, those of us of a certain age and with a certain educational background are often so devoid of anything resembling a scientific imagination that, even with goodwill, we have enormous difficulty in fathoming what the scientists are up to. So our fear, our distrust of the future, is compounded by ignorance, by a kind of functional illiteracy in face of the scientific mind.

To the timidity which non-scientists tend to feel about science must be added another factor, namely the acute foreboding which we have all experienced in recent years about our economic future. Two decades of growth and prosperity ended with painful abruptness in the mid-1970s, and we have now had a decade of decline with no early end in clear view. The demoralization which flows from this is felt throughout our society, but perhaps especially among young people. They form a disproportionately large element of the unemployed, who by 1985 may total some fifteen million throughout the EEC.

It is well-understood that the decline which began in the mid-1970s had as its trigger the literally shocking increase in oil prices which followed the rise of OPEC and the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. But what we have been experiencing since then, without always realizing it, is not a recession of a remotely familiar kind. Rather it is a unique combination of deep recession and dramatic technological change. In lamenting the first of these - as we naturally do - we are in danger of not perceiving the importance of the second, or grasping the opportunities it brings.

If OPEC had never existed, and the oil price remained low and stable, we would still have had to cope with the technological revolution. The sharp decline of traditional industries, and the wholesale disappearance of jobs from all industries, would still have been there to contend with. The specifically economic crisis has aggravated the technological phenomenon, but it has not altered its character.

When the economic crisis passes over, as we must hope it soon will, those traditional industries will usually not revive, those jobs shed throughout industry will not be replaced. There must, of course, be some recovery in industrial employment as the market revives, but because of the new technology that recovery will be too small, probably much too small, to resolve the unemployment crisis.

The machines and microchips are doing what workers used to do; the computers and word-processors are making redundant a whole battery of clerical and secretarial skills; the home-computer linked to the television receiver will perhaps have a similarly devastating impact on another range of traditional services and products, from the postal service to the daily newspapers.

It has been said, and is worth repeating, that the change now so rapidly working through our society represents a social dislocation at least as acute as the Industrial Revolution and the agrarian clearances which preceded it. When eighteenth century landowners found the means to dispense with peasant labour, and the cities began to swarm with rural refugees - displaced persons, just as surely as the war refugees of our own time - the scene was set for traumatic change. The trauma continued over many decades, and was marked throughout Europe by enormous misery and social injustice, and intermittent bloodshed.

The question for us, I suggest, is this: are we, in the transition to the post-industrial society, about to inflict on ourselves a similar period of suffering? I cannot believe that we are.

The first Industrial Revolution happened, if I may attempt a bold simplification, because on the one hand landowners found the technical means to expand production while greatly reducing their dependence on the labour of the rural poor; and on the other hand industrialists found the secret of mass production by the employment of cheap labour newly driven from the land. What both practises had as their common objective and technique was the accumulation of personal fortunes by the exploitation of mass poverty.

Our society today is far from perfect, but it is not like that. Those features of the Industrial Revolution need not and should not be paralleled in the experience we are beginning to undergo. A society like ours, based on mutual respect and democratic control, ought to be capable of weathering the storm which the new technology is bringing. Moreover, that technology, because of its cheapness and accessibility, ought to be inherently suitable to democratic exploitation and control. It does not lend itself to the old trench warfare of capital and labour, as the coalmine and the steel-works surely did.

So my optimistic guess is - and that is all it can be - that we can cope with the difficult transition we are facing. On the way we shall see the death or decline of many traditional activities, and the growth of new ones - most of which we cannot fully imagine at this stage. These will probably lie in the service sector rather than in any new industrial undertakings. (Certain current industries, of course, can still stand an enormous degree of further expansion. You don't have to think beyond the state of this country's food production sector to see how much more could be done).

As we change jobs, so we shall change working styles. There is nothing sacrosanct about the forty-hour working week, any more than there was about the sixty-hour week. There is nothing sacrosanct about "putting in time" - of whatever duration - in the workplace. With computer terminals in the home, there may be no need for certain workers ever to go to the workplace, if they choose not to. They may work at home, in their own time, on an assignment basis. This decentralization of the work-place should in time lead to the decongestion of the cities, even perhaps the revival of village life.

One could go on speculating, but really these are only speculations. The reality about this brave new world is that we know something of the kind is on its way, but we lack a precise idea of what it will be.

There is a further problem : I am, as I have indicated, rather convinced by the "benign scenario" of the future. But there is nothing inevitable about that scenario. It is not inevitable that society will achieve an orderly transition, that the new technology will be generally available and ready to serve the community as a whole, that work-sharing and job-creation in new industries and services will ensure a just distribution of benefits. None of this will happen automatically. It will not happen at all unless we will it and work for it.

What this requires in the first place, I suggest, is a much fuller understanding on our part of the new technology and its possibilities. I spoke earlier of what I believe to be a certain distrust of science in our culture. To put it mildly, we ought to rid ourselves of that. Some of us may be of an age where this is difficult. But if the next generation is to manage the new technology - not just technically but politically and socially as well - then an enormous effort of preparation is urgently needed.

It has been part of the conventional wisdom for a long time that investment in education has to be among the priorities of any government. But it has also been part of harsh economic experience in recent years that education budgets suffer cuts like every other branch of public expenditure. I have the feeling, however, that as we face into the new society which technology is busily erecting

/around us

social impact, and by a general layman's fear of the scientific realm.

Fifty years ago exactly, the world and especially the United States were languishing in an economic depression even deeper than our own. Then a great American President found words - and policies to match them - which enabled his country, and later other countries, to make their way back to economic health. When Roosevelt said "We have nothing to fear but fear itself" he touched a theme which, I suggest, exactly fits our situation now.

I feel confident in saying that there is nowhere in Ireland where the necessity for this kind of courageous spirit is better understood than here in the National Institute of Higher Education in Limerick. The N.I.H.E. is in the vanguard of Ireland's response to the technological challenge. It deserves every support. I hope that we on our side in the European Commission will also be making a constructive contribution, by means of the Esprit Programme and other Community efforts under way, to help the Community as a whole, including Ireland, to respond to the opportunities opening to us.
