

An immunity to intellectual thought in brave new world

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



The equation of “ civilization is sterilization” is central to the theme of Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World. To the “ sterilized” mind, this idea would simply mean that cleanliness is the hallmark of a civilized population; it is exactly what Lenina, a sterilized character in Brave New World, thinks when she sees a filthy Indian Reservation and states “ cleanliness is next to fordliness” (110). However, Huxley intended to assert something much deeper than just cleanliness— in Brave New World, he was reflecting on the submission of a society that is controlled by an oligarchy whose primary concern is stability. By, “ civilization is sterilization,” Huxley meant that civilizations, for the purpose of stability and through any means necessary, are capable of stifling intellectual activity and thus, throttling individuality.

In the utopia/dystopia of Brave New World, Huxley describes a society in which people are conditioned to think in a way the supreme power, the World State, wants them to think. One class of its factory-produced infants is electrically shocked to avoid books (the source of heretical views in this state) as well as other things the World State finds inappropriate. The effectiveness of these exercises is very apparent: by instilling a hatred of books and other objects/concepts in the minds of the people, people cannot question the norm because “ what man has joined, nature is powerless to put asunder” (22). Lenina and her fellows commonly repeat phrases they have learned subliminally. For example, the use of the panacea “ soma”, a drug used to send one’s self into quiet ecstasy, is encouraged via jingles such as “ a gramme is always better than a damn” and “ one cubic centimetre cures ten gloomy sentiments” (89-90). People then take the drug whenever it’s prescribed, firmly believing it’s good for them, when in fact

soma prohibits the majority of the people from thinking outside the norm as their thoughts are limited to “ every one belongs to every one else” and other thoughts requiring no real thought (40). These people are “ sterilized” from knowledge for the purpose of stability; the World State fears change because change threatens instability and thus, keeps Shakespeare and other influential books away— “ you can’t make tragedies without social instability. The world’s stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get” (220). When Lenina experiences the filth on the Indian reservation, her conditioning “ cleanliness is next to fordliness” prevents her from tolerating the reservation; she is not able to mentally process such an experience and questions why the Indians are wrinkled and toothless and has to take soma to relieve her of the experience. The conditioning of the World State is extremely powerful; it doesn’t allow intellectual thinking, as is the case with Lenina and its effects of sterilization against knowledge are constantly renewed with soma, just like a child is repeatedly injected throughout his youth to be immunized to chicken pox.

Through the conditioning, Huxley shows that opportunities are lost with the system of division through caste in Brave New World. The lower castes, Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons, are conditioned to do low-grade work, such as being elevator operators. The higher caste, Betas and Alphas, do more complex work such as lecturing at colleges or vaccinating at the conditioning center. The lower castes are conditioned to not mind the work and to be able to do it regularly without complaint. The World State does this again for stability, stating, “ An Alpha-decanted, Alpha-conditioned man would go mad

if he had to do Epsilon Semi-Moron work... Only an Epsilon can be expected to make Epsilon sacrifices, for the good reason that for him they aren't sacrifices; they're the line of least resistance" (222). The lower caste liftman, for example, is awed by just seeing sunlight on the roof floor, exclaiming, "oh roof!", since he spends most of his time in darkness (59). His awe reflects a desire from his inner soul to experience something outside his routinely defined life but his lack of intelligence prevents him from understanding and taking that kind of action; in other words, he does not have the capacity to do what he wants to do. The lower caste Epsilons are also bred to be semi-morons because they are "too stupid to be able to read or write," reflecting another aspect of the World State hindering intellectual activity through sterilization, this time before a person is even born (27).

The World State's discouragement of intellectual activity shatters opportunities for Helmholtz Watson, a lecturer at the College of Emotional Engineering in Brave New World. Watson has an urge to express his feelings through words; he describes it as: "Did you ever feel as though you had something inside you that was only waiting for you to give it a chance to come out? Some sort of extra power that you aren't using..." (69). He knows that he has got the power to say something but he doesn't like using his talents in writing just to think of catch phrases to glorify the World State's products (i. e. scent organs). When he creates rhymes on solitude and presents them to his students, trying to make them feel like he did when he wrote the rhymes, he gets into trouble with the authorities for going against the students' conditioning. Helmholtz has the mental capacity and resources

to bring the change he wants in his life but lacks the inner emotions and ideas that propel a person to write about a particular topic, which is signified when he laughs at the tragedies in a work of Shakespeare; his problem is the opposite of that of the liftman. Refer to this quote: “ Not so much like drops of water, though water, it is true, can wear holes in the hardest granite; rather, drops of liquid sealing-wax, drops that adhere, incrust, incorporate themselves with what they fall on, till finally the rock is all one scarlet blob” (28). Helmholtz is a good example of when the rock is covered by a layer of wax so thin that he is just an inch from his goal but stifled by that layer of wax. His exile to the Falkland Islands actually serves as a boon to him because the hardship that the unhappy climate causes will get his emotions going and give him something to write about with the freedom to do so. The overarching message is that the destruction of human potential results in debased sensibilities that don't have the tools to create great art, thus stifling intellectual thought in people.

Huxley's interpretation of civilization having a sterilizing effect has been apparent in the real world as well, for Huxley's novel is in part a reflection of our world. Retail companies do a good job of marketing their products to the consumer society which will buy anything these days. People are continuously replacing their cars after a few years because they are “ bored” with them or falling prey to Apple and buying the “ new” iPods that are almost exactly the same as previous models. The cultural strains present in society promote such behavior even more as people struggle to receive satisfaction from “ status items” such as suburban homes, blu-ray players,

and brand new cell phones. Some people will not even step outside and experience nature unless it is for sport, such as skiing. Nature is devalued unless it can pay, a philosophy of the World State. People don't need to be born as morons to be hindered intellectually but just need to be mentally influenced, something that is becoming more and more common in today's society.

Huxley has some truth in his words " civilization is sterilization," as civilizations can be excessively influential on a person to the point of denying him/her intellectual freedom. In Brave New World, the World State's strategy of conditioning people for stability is an exaggerated but insightful example of extreme control that isn't violent; it keeps people happy and satisfied through unconscious control. Its control comes at a price however, as the conditioning doesn't allow people to truly think for themselves and stifles opportunities, as people's roles are predetermined before they are born. The Alphas who are capable of some intelligent thought are unfortunate because even if they can think, they cannot do anything to pursue their dreams as the World State forbids them from doing so. The people are just like the Unknown Citizen from W. H. Auden's The Unknown Citizen, doing exactly what they are supposed to with nothing out of the ordinary (with the exception of the people sent to the islands); the world state's people aren't identifiable and are thus " unknown". Because Brave New World was published in 1932, we can see that Huxley was right in some of his predictions of the future, particularly that of " civilization is sterilization" as today's society somewhat mirrors, though not as dramatically, the society in

Huxley's novel. It is terrifying that Huxley had some truth in his words; it is even more terrifying to now wonder what the future holds in store for us and if more of Huxley's predictions will start to come true.