

Effects of conformity on the individual and the society



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Robert Anthony once said, “ The opposite of bravery is not cowardice but conformity”. Zamyatin’s *We* depicts the advantages and disadvantages of conforming to a small group of people, an authoritative society in general, and to the extreme totalitarian society of OneState. Through the heroic actions of I-330, Zamyatin clearly indicates that it is more admirable and beneficial to fight for change in a totalitarian government than to ignorantly live in oppression like D-503.

Although Zamyatin undeniably depicts a totalitarian society in a negative light, there are advantages that can be inferred from conforming and obeying authoritarian rule. On a small scale, assimilating into a group of people allows one to feel more connected with his fellow man. This can be seen in the way D-503 experiences great joy and satisfaction from joining the laborers building the Integral: “ I descended and mingled with them, fused with their mass, caught in the rhythm of steel and glass...I was floating over a mirror sea” (79). Complying with the majority is simply easier, and at times more natural and gratifying, than ostracizing oneself and attempting to fight the accepted societal norm. For example, when D-503 breaks the law by skipping work and then lying about his absence to his co-worker, he feels great guilt and shame. He condemns himself and realizes that he will never again be able to feel at ease with his co-workers, which causes him great pain, and he reflects: “ I, corrupted man, a criminal, was out of place here. No, I shall probably never again be able to fuse myself into this mechanical rhythm, not float over this mirror-like sea. I am to burn eternally from now on, running from place to place, seeking a nook where I may hide my eyes” (80). It is obvious from this passage that D-503 derives much pleasure from

his conformity and unity with the laborers, and that he regrets ostracizing himself from the group.

On a larger scale, conforming to an authoritarian society guarantees one's safety and possible advancement in the social hierarchy. To elaborate, authoritarian societies often have government forces such as the secret police (represented by the bureau of guardians in "We") that monitor possible uprisings and acts of treason. Complying with authoritarian rule means not having to worry about being persecuted by the state or in extreme cases, executed. Also, the more an individual adheres to the authority of tyrannical societies, the higher chance he has for advancing in the social hierarchy. For instance, the guardians of OneState are responsible for upholding the strict laws of the government and for this reason they are granted more authority and power.

In the extreme totalitarian society of OneState, conforming to the authority comes with a lot of benefits. By being part of this society and contributing to it, citizens have access to an ever-present source of food and shelter, since OneState has a "radically transformed social system that has established a stable and secure world order for the general population" (Hatchings 87). In addition, the citizens of OneState are protected from most crimes and are even allotted time for all basic human needs, such as eating, sleeping, socializing and having sex. The citizens are brainwashed into believing that they live in a state of paradise and that all other lifestyles are absurd. This brainwashing can be viewed as a benefit because these citizens live care-free lives and are completely oblivious to the true horror of their oppressive circumstances. For D-503 any other life seems implausible, as he writes, "<https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-conformity-on-the-individual-and-the-society/>

One thing has always seemed to me most improbable: how could a government, even a primitive government, permit people to live without anything like our Tables-without compulsory walks, without precise regulation of the time to eat...such a life was actually wholesale murder” (14). For these citizens, their imposed ignorance is bliss.

Along with the benefits of conforming and of submitting to authoritarian rule, there are also, of course, a great many disadvantages. On a small scale, conforming to a group often means sacrificing your sense of individuality and becoming indistinguishable from the crowd. An extreme example of this is the daily, identical routine of every individual in OneState, during which every citizen is an identical copy of another. In his diary, D-503 writes, “ Every morning...at the same hour, at the same minute, we wake up, millions of us at once. At the very same hour, millions like one, we begin our work, and millions like one, we finish it” (13). There is no opportunity to be spontaneous or distinguish oneself during these routines.

In a totalitarian society, submitting to authoritarian rule means giving up the freedom of speech and the right to privacy. In *We* this can be seen in the character of R-13, a writer who has no choice but to compose works glorifying the actions of the State, even though he does not support those actions. For instance, when D-503 compliments R-13 on the poem that he wrote for an execution, R-13 exclaims, “ I am dead sick of it. Everybody keeps on: “ The death sentence, the death sentence!” I want to hear no more of it!” (59). R-13 is frustrated by the fact that he has no choice but to promote support for the Benefactor and the State, even though he opposes both. This practice of stifling one’s own opinion and instead creating

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propaganda for the autocracy is common in most totalitarian societies. Apart from extreme censorship, the government of dictatorial societies often invades the privacy of its citizens as well. Such violations of privacy generally include going through someone's mail, financial records, medical documents, as well as random property searches and more. In *We*, a more extreme invasion of privacy is enforced by subjecting the citizens to a life in a city of glass, so that most actions are visible and "beneath the eyes of everyone" in the city, especially those of the guardians (19).

In the extreme case of OneState, "that is governed by its despotic and malevolent Benefactor," submitting to the tyrannical rule of the Benefactor and the dictatorial laws of the state in general leads to the loss of most of the citizens' rights, imagination, and independence (Hutchings 85). As mentioned before, the rights of the citizens of OneState are nonexistent. They cannot speak, write, or act in any way other than how the law explicitly permits them to. The OneState in *We* is so oppressive that it even manages to place restrictions on thoughts and imagination, classifying dreams as "a symptom of disease" (62). Moreover, "The imagination, or 'fantasy' which is considered to be the 'last barricade on our way to happiness' in OneState, is something which needs to be 'cut out or extirpated'...for this process 'nothing but surgery' will do" (Burns 76). This surgery is referred to as the "Great Operation," and it is forced upon all of the citizens towards the end of the book. Lastly, the citizens of OneState are also robbed of their independence. This is evident in the way that they are kept imprisoned by the State inside the "eternal glass... [of] the Green Wall" (5). These citizens

are forced to be completely dependent upon OneState and are unaware of the fact that life is possible outside of the Green Wall.

The choice of whether or not to conform and yield to the authority can be a difficult one to make, and the impact of each decision varies, as can be seen by studying D-503 and I-330. D-503 ultimately chooses to conform to OneState, sacrificing his past memories and leading a robotic life that is completely devoid of any emotion. This decision comes as no surprise, however, since D-503 suffers great anxiety over his lawbreaking and scheming actions with I-330 throughout the entire novel. This can be seen in the way that he is constantly tempted to turn himself into the Bureau of Guardians. The strongest reason for D-503's resolution to relent to OneState is his realization that I-330 has betrayed him and is simply using him. Without I-330, D-503 has little motivation to resist the Benefactor or keep to I-330's cause. He succumbs to OneState and undergoes the "Great Operation", after which he appears "before the Benefactor and [tells] him everything known to [him] about the enemies of happiness" (217). By choosing to surrender to the Benefactor, D-503 makes the conscious decision that for him, it is more important to forget his past with I-330 than to continue trying to introduce freedom into OneState. As a result of this decision, D-503 regresses back to his former state of ignorance and bliss, and continues on to lead an insignificant, empty life.

On the other hand, I-330 "rejects everything that the OneState stands for" and refuses to surrender to the demands of the Benefactor, proving that she is the true hero of the novel and the character whose actions should be praised and followed (Burns 82). From beginning to the very end, I-330

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strives to free the citizens of OneState from oppression. Even when she is continuously tortured in the Gas Chamber, she still “ does not utter a word” about her mission or her followers (218). Her actions, unlike those of D-503, have a lasting impact on OneState. This is evident in the several changes that take place after her rebellion. First, the Machine used to execute criminals with its “ electric ray” is obliterated, as the narrator writes: “ the disorderly fragments of the Machine, which was once perfect and great, fell down in all directions” (204). In addition, the Green Wall is destroyed, letting in life from outside the wall, such as birds, which “ filled the sky with their sharp, black, descending triangles” (204). Lastly, citizens began to speak out against the State, hanging banners that read “ Down with the machine! Down with the Operation!”(192). Through her relentlessness and refusal to give into the Benefactor, I-330 is able to seriously undermine the authority of OneState, provide hope for change and improvement, and convince other citizens of OneState to carry on her legacy.

We allows readers to make a variety of interpretations about conformity, ranging from small to larger scales. The novel describes the conflicts individuals may face when debating whether or not to conform and obey an autocratic ruler. However, the novel ultimately points out that only those who are brave and strong enough to fight against conformity and oppression, such as I-330, have a chance at a better life, and the possibility of instilling a positive change in the society.