Inverted totalitarianism in (post) postnormal accelerated dystopia: the arrival of *Brave New World* and *1984* in the twenty-first century

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**Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper aims to depict how the state of inverted totalitarianism is emerging in post-postnormal times and illustrate how it shares many of the same features of the totalitarianism depicted in the novels *Brave New World* (A. Huxley) and *1984* (G. Orwell). It also shows how a “way forward” is possible through a paradigmatic reorientation of “well-being” and “happiness”.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research is based on literature within the field of futures studies, as well as relevant sources outside the futures field. It applies R Slaughter’s critical futures and F Polak’s method of social critique and reconstruction in its analysis of the state of inverted totalitarianism in post postmodern times.

**Findings** – It finds that the technological society and the US empire (with its attendant corporatocracy, Panopticon and PAC man values) in post-postnormal times is drifting toward a state of inverted totalitarianism, which is remarkably beginning to resemble Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and G. Orwell’s *1984*.

**Research limitations/implications** – The research is an essay and conceptual paper, so it is limited by its conceptual, philosophical nature and the author’s interpretation of social phenomena. It could also include the latest research on the role that the manipulation of internet algorithms plays in the state of inverted totalitarianism. It could also include more reconstructive details.

**Practical implications** – Sheer consciousness of the state of inverted totalitarianism and the need for social reconstruction should lead to a reevaluation of the meaning of the good society and how to realize it.

**Social implications** – Social critique and reconstruction are essential to the survival of any given society or civilization, as the groundwork for the emergence of wise foresight. The creative minority of a civilization must understand its predicament, the nature of its civilizational crisis, before it can even begin to understand and meet the challenge of the future.

**Originality/value** – The paper presents post-postnormal times as the backdrop through which a state of inverted totalitarianism is emerging – a social dystopia that resembles the dystopias depicted in the novels, *Brave New World* and *1984*. Inverted totalitarianism is shown to be an outgrowth of the technological society and the American empire (a corporatocracy and Panopticon increasingly global in nature). Freedom from this emerging totalitarianism begins with the realization of its existence and its given assumptions about the meaning of life and the pursuit of happiness. The paper also posits social critique and reconstruction (as well as critical futures) as a fundamental method to deconstruct and reconstruct the paradigm that supports inverted totalitarianism.

**Keywords** Culture, Analysis, Society, Politics and political science, Social values

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

1. The acceleration of postnormal times: *Ad absurdum ad infinitum* to the death of the future

The leitmotif of modern times is its idea of progress, usually interpreted as “change towards the better”, through the advances of science and technology. This notion of change as
social progress represents a departure from the norms of pre-modern times when normality meant very little change from one generation to the next. As a matter of fact, in the mostly static societies of pre-modern times, change was usually viewed as something “abnormal”; hence, one could argue that the advent of modernity represents the true origin of Sardar’s (2010) “postnormal times”, and late modernity is more of a radical extension of the postnormal (perhaps into post-postnormal times); at any rate, regardless of how it is labeled, it is an era in which the idea of “progress” is challenged, discredited and mostly discarded while the whole concept of normality is stretched into absurdity. In post-postnormal times, nothing is what it appears to be, all explanations about “reality” are suspect, and anything is possible – *ad absurdum ad infinitum*. As O’Hara (1999) relates, in the postmodern perception of normality, truth is “never more than an improvisation” while chaos, rather than being “unwelcome interludes between periods of stability”, has become episodic, yet constant, thus normalized. As the God of Progress gradually replaced the ancient God of Providence, ever-increasing “change” became the norm[1]. Even identity and one’s perception of “reality” is affected by this new norm, for “reality” is what you make it, and your identity as well is self-made rather than inherited; hence, identity and reality are constantly changing and evolving dynamically for the postmodern man/woman. As Wolin (2008, p. 28) exclaims: “We are experiencing the triumph of contemporaneity and of its accomplice, forgetting or collective amnesia. Stated somewhat differently, in early modern times change replaced tradition; today change succeeds change”.

The “triumph of contemporaneity” where “change succeeds change” and the accompanying phenomenon of “collective amnesia” is not as recent as one might think but has been taking place throughout late modernity. For example, during the 1920s and 30s, a conscious decision to focus on the present rather than the past became the “progressive” shift in the American philosophy of education and educational agenda because it was deemed more “useful”; hence, Bertman (2000, p. 114) traces the origins of the nation’s “descent into amnesia” from that point in time[2]. However, though this progressive past-to-present (then “future”) shift took place mostly in the twentieth century, one could argue that it is indicative of American culture from its very roots, as people and culture that wanted to distance itself from everything European, forget history, express itself as the “land of promise” and embrace without question the technological society of industrial civilization, as it pioneers the brave new world of the future with the motto: “It’s only the future that counts!”.

Of course, one has to wonder what kind of brave new world and “future” it is that disavows its past and, except for its mythological reveries, remains mostly disconnected from it. As Bertman (2000, p. 117) illustrates, the greatest danger to freedom is freedom itself, for “freedom” also means “the freedom to ignore, the freedom to forget”. Thus, such ironic freedom provides one the “freedom” to be a slave and/or victim, the natural consequence of the cultural embrace of ignorance and amnesia. Moreover, the obsession on the progressive present at the expense of historical and cultural identity has become a mere Faustian exchange for instrumental reasoning, techno-fetishism and a pseudo future in the image of science and technology (i.e. *the image of the machine*); ironically, rather than leading to a meaningful human future, this bargain leads to an artificial, machinelike, dystopic future – unmasked, it is the *death* of the future. As Didsbury (1999) argues, the modernist god of progress, in the form of science and technology, rather than being a motif for the future, quite to the contrary, will eventually bring about the death of the future[3]. Because hyper-accelerated technologies serve consumer society with ever-increasing speed and efficiency, every want posing as a “need” can be gratified almost instantaneously (a modern advertising mantra repeated daily); thus, a present-oriented civilization that has lost all patience, nor has use for tradition or wise foresight, becomes soft, sensate and futureless. Surely, through Hollywood films, a nation of amnesiacs can fantasize about techno-futures, even while betraying their own future, *like Cronus devouring his own children* – future generations.
2. The imaginary narrative and the emergence of inverted totalitarianism in the brave new world of “1984”

Perhaps the greatest myth of all is the belief that all myths were abolished in the modern era; in reality, one set of myths was merely exchanged for another (one idol replaced by another). As Wolin (2008, p. 12) points out, Max Weber underestimated the staying power of credulity when he wrote that scientific rationalism and skepticism brought about “the disenchantment of the world”; in fact, Weber did not foresee that the technological achievements brought about by modern science would inspire the mythical rather than banish it. Especially in a land where the imaginary narrative took hold in its very origins (as a pure child of modernity, with no trace of pre-modern history or consciousness), in its very conception of itself – in a land that gave birth to Hollywood, twentieth century advertising and the media – incredible, sometimes dangerous, myths were planted in America’s sense of identity and its role in the world.

For example, Wolin (2008) asks us to consider the imaginary, artificial world and culture that modern advertising fabricates and reinforces incessantly; almost every product promises “[...] to change your life: it will make you more beautiful, cleaner, more sexually alluring, and more successful”. You are promised to feel almost “born again”. Such bubbly promises about the future are unfailingly full of excitement, optimism and hope; hence, the corporate executive exaggerates profits and conceals losses “but always with a sunny face”:

The virtual reality of the advertiser and the ‘good news’ of the evangelist complement each other, a match made in heaven. Their zeal to transcend the ordinary and their bottomless optimism both feed the hubris of Superpower. Each colludes with the other. The evangelist looks forward to the ‘last days,’ while the corporate executive systematically exhausts the world’s scarce resources. (p. 13)

And for Americans, as the “chosen people of advertising, technology, capitalist orthodoxy, and religious faith”, states Wolin (2008, p. 13), virtual reality attains its greatest imaginary moment, its greatest triumph, through war, a reality that Americans have never experienced at home, that is, since the Civil War more than 150 years ago. As a matter of fact, most Americans only have a stomach for the Hollywood and media versions of war rather than the real thing; otherwise, the “war” should be at a distance, fought in other peoples’ countries, where others lose their lives, with “good guys” and “bad guys” – in which case war is merely an “action game, played in the living room [...] a spectacle on a screen [...]” (Wolin, 2008, p. 13). The most important thing is that the “war” remain virtual, vicariously experienced; then you can become an armchair expert and passionate commentator at leisure, and at any time you can go freely on about your business, whether it be work, playing sports or computer games, attending clubs or social events, family vacations or else just watching other types of TV programs and movies: “war” is just one more virtual reality, one more spectacle among many in your life – after 9/11, Wolin (2008) relates, terrorism becomes just one more virtual reality as well:

[...] experienced only through its re-created images, its destructiveness (= wonders) absorbed through the spectacle of the occasional and hapless terrorist or captive journalist put on public display. In contrast, official policy decrees that the coffins of the dead are not to be seen by the public. (p. 13)

In the dystopic brave new world of post-postnormal times, the corporate media places more emphasis on national myth making and cultural amnesia for the masses rather than informing its citizenry about crucial matters in a functional democracy. In truth, this so-called “democracy” has been cleverly manipulated and massaged over time into what Perkins (2004) calls a “corporatocracy”, that is, when a democracy is gradually transformed into its opposite, into what Wolin (2008) refers to as “inverted totalitarianism”. In its imaginary power narrative, relates Wolin (2008), inverted totalitarianism sanctifies and excuses itself by the “lofty ends” it proclaims, which, in fact, are normally understood to be antithetical to
democracy. As in George Orwell’s dystopic novel, 1984, euphemisms subvert language into doublespeak; hence, “empire” has now become “a precondition for democracy”, and imperial power is used benevolently to “strengthen respect for self-determination”, ostensibly, to give states back to “abused, oppressed peoples who deserve to rule them for themselves” (p. 20). Of course, they are allowed to “rule themselves” but only on the condition that they “rule” according to Empire’s playbook, granting Empire access to their resources, infrastructure and markets. Therefore, the comic strip character and mythical champion Superpower expands its benevolent empire; Big Brother becomes the world’s policeman to protect all and “save the world for democracy”.

Yet, this so-called “democracy” is its perversion into a pseudo-democracy – a creeping inverted totalitarianism that manages perceptions to gain legitimacy – a smiley-faced corporate despot that has the same objectives that classic totalitarianism had, though the means be different, at times attaining a degree of total power and consensus that classic totalitarianism could only dream about. As Wolin (2008, p. 44) explains, he invented the term “inverted totalitarianism” to explain a political system seemingly driven by “[…] abstract totalizing power, not by personal rule, one that succeeds by encouraging political disengagement rather than mass mobilization, that relies more on ‘private media’ than on public agencies to disseminate propaganda reinforcing the official version of events”. Rather than the creation of a charismatic leader, inverted totalitarianism does not rely upon any particular leader or personal charisma to succeed; instead, its model is the corporatocracy – an embedded corporate power that will survive any leader – protected and supported by an autonomous, privatized military industrial complex, not accountable to the public and driven to serve the “bottom line” global interests of transnational corporations. Moreover, because of its inverted character, rather than abruptly appearing (as in revolution or regime change), inverted totalitarianism emerges over time from within, having evolved out of the perpetual, increasingly unequal, struggle “between an unrealized democracy and an antidemocracy that dare not speak its name” (p. 213).

3. Power, chaos and the panopticon

Sardar (2010) rightfully characterizes postnormal times as an era beset by contradictions and chaos; however, the flip side of that coin is the way that power takes advantage of chaos and contradiction to transform and manage the masses, masking itself while doing so, as Foucault (1977) describes well, stating that “power abhors a vacuum”. However, one could just as easily say that power loves a vacuum, for it is the vacuum that gives power the excuse it needs to realize its will in the world. And what exactly is the will of blind power if not to bring all under its authority? As Gregg (1994, p. 192) explains (in reference to Foucault, 1977), power is driven insatiably toward totalization and so rushes in irresistibly to fill a void. As in 1984, “Big Brother is watching you”; inevitably, it wants to create a “panoptical society in which each member […] is under constant surveillance”.

Such understanding of the link between power and chaos is not just theoretical or philosophical but can be proven, as it has been consistently demonstrated in the real world throughout the era of neoliberal globalization. In fact, Klein’s (2007) shock doctrine thesis has been confirmed by case studies; power needed a vacuum to assert itself into the world, and this vacuum was created through calculated, strategic chaos in country after country in Central and South America, as well as other places around the world. Chaos was necessary to deconstruct the economy so that the ideas that just happened to be laying around would be remembered, reviewed and then considered as the only way out of the crisis, as a matter of “structural adjustment”; of course, the economic ideas that “just happened to be laying around” just “happened” to be the free market neoliberalism of Milton Freidman and the Chicago Boys. And this scenario played out over and again, country after country, with the same devastating results – devastating, that is, for the majority of the population: the
corporations and the cooperating elite, who understood the privatization game and what was expected of them, made out like bandits.

Thus, postmodern, American-led globalization and Empire link up to use creative destruction in the form of shock therapy, regime change and structural adjustment to achieve “full spectrum dominance”, that is, to break the old world and then remake it in its image, for its own purpose and interests (since it is the future that counts!). And this totalizing effort is quite unique, unlike anything that the world has ever seen before, as it is more subtle, sophisticated and totalizing than the colonialism or imperialism of previous eras. Foucault refers to it as “biopolitics”, and Hardt and Negri (2000) picked up on Foucault’s analysis in their attempt to characterize the new postmodern era of Empire, positing it as a contradictory, chaotic era, that is, at the same time, a totalizing effort in the “paradigmatic form of biopower”, for Empire not only manages a “[...] territory but also seeks directly to rule over human nature. The object of its rule is social life in its entirety [...]” (“Preface” xv). And so, it is only fitting that the brave new world order that Empire strives for is that of “inverted totalitarianism” where managed democracy is the optimal means by which to realize its rule over social life. For how else could it insert itself so seamlessly into the lives of its subjects and even rule over human nature itself?

This rule over human nature takes place primarily through social conditioning – a cultural amnesia that grows over the years. Bruno (2014) illustrates the accumulated impact of social conditioning by referring to the “lack of popular outcry regarding the new normalcy of constant state surveillance [...]”, a clear result of the mass’ inability to see through the charade of necessity and threat proposed by the Obama Administration”; ultimately, as Bruno (2014, p. 3) points out, it is indicative of a failure of critique, for critique is impossible because of the context in which “discipline and manipulation has led us to accept our imprisonment, within this post-modern Panopticon” that remarkably resembles the ubiquitous Big Brother surveillance of 1984.

The American public had already been conditioned by the so-called “war on terror” throughout the Bush years, to accept the necessity of constitutional violations with the justification that such violations are a “necessary evil” for the public’s own protection and good. Thus, even though a whitewashed 9/11 Commission never seriously investigated an unprecedented crime of epic proportions at the turn of the millennium, American citizens and foreign travelers are routinely subjected to invasions of privacy at all airports – an example that the rest of the world was quick to emulate. Likewise, the illegal warrantless wiretapping program conducted during the Bush administration was never acknowledged by the incoming Obama administration to be unconstitutional; instead, such charges were merely swept aside, as we were told that this illegal program was “not on the table” for discussion, that we should instead “look forward” and forget history, again with the ends-justifies-the-means rationale that such crimes are “necessary evils” in the overblown, largely fictional “war on terror”. Yet upon close inspection, one discovers that these measures are rarely directed at terror suspects but at citizens; in other words, Big Brother has to make sure that “you” are not the terrorist that they are protecting you from. Furthermore, as in 1984, the overall, underlying purpose of these measures is social discipline and conditioning so that you will learn to censor and police yourself; hence, when the Snowden revelations about the magnitude of NSA spying came out, the public outcry was pathetically paficic. In 1984, as in the current state of affairs, it is more desirable and certainly more efficient if citizens willingly give up their rights and police themselves; then, there is no need for the state to resort to violence, that is, if the public is conditioned to willingly oblige. So that airport security officer rummages through all of your luggage while you voice no objection and do nothing except stand by and approvingly watch. People even willingly take off their shoes without being told to and could care less if Big Brother NSA is listening in to their conversations and collecting all their online data. Now that’s progress for you! It is the “new norm” of the brave new world of “1984”, defined and regulated by Empire's
biopolitical power of inverted totalitarianism. In the post-postnormal surveillance society of Big Brother’s Panopticon, we are “perpetually monitored, with regards to our congruence with the norms put forth by the powerful, and embedded in our social institutions” (Bruno, 2014, p. 6, citing Foucault, 1977).

In the book, Cypherpunks: Freedom and the Future of the Internet, Assange et al. (2012, p. 1) describe this Panopticon as a “Postmodern Surveillance Dystopia”, in which the internet, instead of a technology to enable a new stage in the evolution of democracy to emerge, has become “the most dangerous facilitator of totalitarianism we have ever seen”, sealing into place a militarized space, “supranational and dominated by a global power” – an emerging system of global control that threatens to “merge global humanity into one giant grid of mass surveillance and mass control” (p. 6). Assange et al. (2012, p. 33) warns, “We are living under martial law as far as our communications are concerned. We just can’t see the tanks – but they are there”[4].

4. Inverted totalitarianism in postnormal technological society

The social conditioning of inverted totalitarianism is not only a matter of governmental control that has taken place subtly and gradually over the course of time, but on a grander, deeper scale, it is also the inevitable consequence of the role of the accelerated expansion of technique in industrial civilization – one of the most overlooked, understudied and underestimated areas of concern, as it stealthily fashions and fabricates the consciousness of humankind from generation to generation, profoundly reshaping and transforming us in its mechanistic image. This process of mechanization, as an outgrowth of industrial civilization, conditions society to accept and submit to the inverted totalitarianism of the technological society without question, even without the capacity to question, as strongly as those in the ancient world did not dare question God, myths or the supernatural, as if the role of technique in technological society is a fundamental given, shaping our consciousness and worldview almost from birth, an absolute means and ends at the same time. That its ubiquity is so absolute is the very reason why so few are able to reflect on it, as difficult as it is for fish to recognize water, and yet those who do study this area offer profound insights on its totalizing effects on human nature and society over time[5].

Yes, the dystopic post-postnormal brave new world of “1984” is emerging in the twenty-first century, perhaps not in every detail as Huxley (1932/1946) and Orwell (1949) imagined, yet the emerging dystopia shares, at the same time, strikingly similar characteristics with the dystopic societies both authors presciently warned of – a thoroughly artificial, mechanized, automated, consumerist society where identities are utterly lost in historical amnesia, continuously diverted and distracted by chaotic, fragmented blips and bits of media images that stream rapidly. In Brave New World (1932), absolute technical control begins at artificial conception and ends unceremoniously at a predetermined death, and such a society is considered “perfect” purely on the basis of the perfect fusion of man and technique. Though Huxley’s dystopia did not foresee present-day developments in artificial intelligence and robotics, it did depict a “World State” founded on genetic and biotechnological engineering, and this brave new world is now emerging as genetic and bio engineering, AI and robotics team up to produce more human-like features and capabilities. At the same time, as human consciousness becomes increasingly mechanized and conditioned by technological society, the two could become so similar that, in the future (as in Philip Dick’s science fiction classics), one might be hard pressed to tell the difference between what is artificial and what is human. But perhaps it will not matter then, as the blurriness of such distinctions is the inevitable conclusion, the ultimate achievement of inverted totalitarianism perfected, as the post-postnormal brave new world of “1984” comes of age[6].

In The Technological Society, Ellul (1964) points out a deeper side of inverted totalitarianism; for Ellul, it is the inversion of technique, which until the industrial revolution had been merely “a single element among a host of nontechnical activities”, having yet to
achieve an autonomous or dominating role, but has since “taken over the whole of civilization”. No longer a mere machine substitute for labor, the accelerated intervention of technique into human affairs and into all aspects of society has made it totalitarian, not only in the inorganic but also the organic (p. 128), that is, in the transformation of nature to suit technical ends.[7] And whatever technique touches, it subsumes unto itself and transforms into a mechanized automaton; as Ellul (1964) emphasizes, technique modifies:

Whatever it touches, but is itself untouchable […] does not accept the existence of rules outside itself, or of any norm […] As a consequence, no matter where it penetrates, what it does is permitted, lawful, justified […] External necessities no longer determine technique […] Technique has become a reality in itself, self-sufficient, with its special laws and its own determination. (p. 94, 133-4)

Hence, we can no longer assume that civilization belongs to humanity, is for the benefit of humanity, or determines a future in the interests of humanity; for, if “technique is itself civilization”, as Ellul (1964) asserts, and is autonomous and self-augmenting, then it determines its own future according to laws that are internal to itself – self-preserving laws that have nothing to do with the values of humanity or even humanity itself, for that matter. The typical objection that technique is “neutral” is no longer relevant, as the role of technique has become so essential its position is central to a civilization that now revolves around its dictates; indeed, technique has become “the judge of what is moral” and is thus “the creator of a new morality” (p. 134).

Yet what is the nature of this “new morality?” Is it not similar to the role of hypnopaedia in Huxley’s (1932/1946) Brave New World, except that the sleep teaching method of today’s hypnopaedia is not so literal or specific but can be seen, rather, as the metaphorical expression of the overall hypnotic effect of a fused ensemble of techniques – in the form of an abstract, alienated, mechanistic consciousness – on a humanity that is sleepwalking its way into a pseudo future, while its “new morality” is nothing else but the morality of the machine, whose only values are the values of efficiency and expediency, the values of the iron cage and the industrial grid, in which the choices of humanity have become increasingly diminished. Essentially, the task of the good citizen is but to choose among competing techniques, or less than that, according to Ellul (1964, p. 79, 93,82), become a mere “device for recording effects and results obtained by various techniques”, to note “the effects of techniques upon one another, and register the results”; thus, even while humanity is robbed of its faculty of choice, it is nevertheless “satisfied”: in this brave new dystopia, man “accepts the situation when he sides with technique”.

“Accepting the situation” is the key to survival in the brave new world’s state of inverted totalitarianism. It implies unquestioned submission to a technological society that “benevolently” allows for a limited framework of discourse for the masses while marginalizing (rather than obliterating) all discontent as the “radical fringe”, just to keep up democratic pretensions and the illusion of individuality and choice, then setting up a firewall between the two. And though this brave new world provides plenty of enticements and distractions for PAC man,[8] it is still not enough to assure that he/she will stay within the absolute boundaries of discourse set by the technological world state; hence, as in 1984, it becomes necessary to use incessant propaganda to achieve complete (or near complete, which is enough) submission. And, as in 1984’s perpetual state of war where Oceana is at war with Eurasia and then suddenly, for no apparent reason, switches to war with Eastasia, the American empire sides with “freedom fighters” at one particular point in time and then suddenly, at another point in time, switches to the opposite side, where those same freedom fighters are now denounced as “terrorists”. Such contradictions do not matter in a post-postnormal doublespeak world where “freedom is slavery” and “war is peace”; instead, what matters is that a permanent state of war is essential for the technological global imperative. Therefore, the public needs to be thoroughly and perpetually
propagandized to achieve absolute assent to the Powers that Be, that is, through the “manufacture of consent”[9].

5. The role of propaganda

Since the advent of First World War, the American public has been the most propagandized people on the planet while its military-industrial complex has grown to monstrous proportions, with its footprint in almost every country in the world. As it has become virtually autonomous, with very little oversight or accountability, it is a parasitical entity that feeds upon the life blood of the world, at the expense of its own citizens, who give it consent because it is in their very conditioning to give it consent, due to a century of propaganda directed at them by the technocratic elite – “the men who know better” the technological imperatives of a well-greased war machine.

Eerily reminiscent of the depictions of dystopia in 1984, Ellul (1964) relates how it became necessary “to force the American people to participate in the war and to impress a war psychology on them”; protected by two oceans, they did not:

[…] “feel” they were at war. War for them was not a living reality and had to be made so […] by the enormous pressure of advertising and total propaganda […] to use the obsessional technique, to subject the citizen to propaganda without letup […] of such overwhelming magnitude that he ceases to be consciously aware of them […] Propaganda must become as natural as air or food […] The individual is then able to declare in all honesty that no such thing as propaganda exists. In fact, however, he has been so absorbed by it that he is literally no longer able to see the truth. (pp. 365-6)

As mentioned, this propaganda strategy began during the advent of First World War to gain war support from an otherwise pacifist and isolationist public. And it was a great success, for the American public turned around 180 degrees in support of the war as a result of the propaganda. Chomsky (1997/2002), a razor-sharp media critic, explains how the Americans were the unwitting dupes of propaganda disseminated by the British Ministry of Information (BMI), who targeted American intellectuals with huge fabrications of “Hun” atrocities (Belgian babies with torn off arms, etc.), as they believed that American intellectuals were “most gullible and most likely to believe propaganda”, and the plan was that these elite intellectual leaders would, in turn, be the ones to “disseminate it through their own system” to the masses to drum up support for the war. As Chomsky (1997/2002) relates, many documents have since been released attesting to the British strategy, so it is indisputable; moreover, the British were quite proud of the fact that the BMI was “extremely successful in deluding hot shot American intellectuals into accepting British propaganda fabrications”. Interestingly, these Americans were the same “progressives” who advocated the past-to-present shift in education, the leading intellectuals in the John Dewey circle. As Chomsky (1997/2002, pp. 11-13) points out, they took “[…] great pride, as you can see from their own writings at the time, in having shown that what they called the ‘more intelligent members of the community,’ namely, themselves, were able to drive a reluctant population into a war by terrifying them and eliciting jingoist fanaticism”.

Chomsky (1997/2002) explains how Woodrow Wilson was elected in 1916 by a largely pacifist population on an anti-war platform; however, he was already intending “[…] to go to war. So, the question was, how do you get the pacifist population to become raving anti-German lunatics so they want to go kill all the Germans? That requires propaganda”. This is the origin of the first major effort to propagandize the American public through the creation of an official government propaganda agency, with the remarkably Orwellian doublespeak title of “The Committee on Public Information” (CPI), set up for the express purpose to “propagandize the population into a jingoist hysteria”; it worked so well that within a few months, “there was a raving war hysteria and the USA was able to go to war”. One person was so impressed that he wrote in Mein Kampf that Germany lost the war because it “lost
the propaganda battle”; Hitler determined that if Germany went to war again, a similar propaganda agency would be vital to success. (pp. 11-13).

Hedges (2010, p. 62) also describes how mass propaganda (based on the discoveries of Freud), through the manipulation of “powerful myths and images, playing to subconscious fears and desires”, was instrumental in the creation of the CPI. Hedges (2010, p. 68) recounts how one of Wilson’s former students, Arthur Bullard, also a “progressive” and social activist, shifted his energy from social reform to the creation of state propaganda by proposing to Wilson that if the government “[…] controlled all the mechanisms of information, and used the creative arts to bolster its message, the country could be indoctrinated to support the war without resorting to overt forms of control”. Headed by George Creel, the CPI became known as The Creel Commission, arguably, the first “[…] modern propaganda machine. Its goal was not, as Creel confessed, simply to impart pro-war messages but to discredit those who attempted to challenge the nation’s involvement in the conflict”, as a means to kill populism and manipulate public opinion in favor of war, that is, to propagandize the American public and squelch anti-war dissent; subsequently, by the end of the war, Wilson would be “[…] lionized by Secretary of State Robert Lansing as the ‘greatest propagandist the modern world has ever known.’” (p. 69).

“No other president in American history did more to damage the independence and freedom of the press, or set back the cause for social reform, than Wilson,” writes Hedges (2010, pp. 69-70). Moreover, Wilson and Creel’s 100-year-old model for mass propaganda, targeting journalists, artists, entertainers and media, became the standard for twentieth century American corporate and government perception management strategy ever since. As Hedges (2010) discloses, the selling of the Iraq War:

By the administration of George W. Bush was lifted from the playbook of CPI, as was the tactic used by ExxonMobil to use $16 million to fund a network of forty-three ‘grassroots’ organizations opposed to the science of climate change, recruit scientists to publish non-peer-reviewed articles challenging the scientific evidence, and the repeated placement of these ‘experts’ on the national airwaves to manufacture public confusion. The use of these propaganda techniques has permitted corporations to saturate the airwaves with images and slogans that deify mass consumer culture. And it has meant the death, by corporate hands, of news. (pp. 73-4)

It is far beyond my scope to recount the 100 year history of war propaganda by the American government, media and Hollywood; however, besides Herman and Chomsky’s (1988/2002) classic text, a number of studies document this inconvenient truth[10]. In the brave new world of postnormal “1984” times, the worldview of most Americans is shaped by a propaganda machine, which is designed to manipulate public perception and disseminate disinformation from a variety of sources so routinely that it is as ubiquitous as is water to fish. Indeed, it is the “manufactured normalcy” that Sardar and Sweeney (2016, p. 4) refer to, which has been “developed by powerful international institutions and organizations, including the media and technology companies, that function by relying on market forces, internal, unquestioned assumptions, and subtle manipulation to generate ideological and consumer desires and dreams”.

However, as Sardar and Sweeney (2016) further point out, normalcy is also automatically manufactured “by our reactions to and perceptions of change”, especially when faced with “new technological experiences”. Though the authors do not state it directly, what is implied is that propaganda manufactures “normalcy” at a much deeper level than is usually recognized, for it is the subtle, progressively more subliminal propaganda of a mechanistic consciousness that continually shapes the framework by which we experience the brave new world in post-postnormal “1984” times until inverted totalitarianism is perfected, considered “normal”. In fact, once we begin to accept it that “reality” and “normalcy” is what we “make” it, then we’re already half way there since we have already begun to legitimate the concept of manufactured normalcy; the mammoth in the room is that it’s actually the accelerated expansion of the role of “technique” and “expertise” in the technocratic society...
of industrial civilization that's doing all the “making” of the way we experience “reality” in its brave new world, as it progressively gains our acquiescence to the “normalcy” of inverted totalitarianism, while we imagine that “we” are the ones who make it, as if we had a choice in the matter.

6. The PAC man quest for happiness in the brave new world

However, the purpose of propaganda in the brave new world of post-postnormal inverted totalitarianism is not only to serve as an instrument to manufacture consent for war; rather, its overall dominant purpose is social conditioning for total conformity – that is, to manufacture normalcy, it must be able to manufacture human nature in the image of the one-dimensional PAC man, who is its ideal citizen. PAC man is one-dimensional because he/she assumes three basic “needs” to fulfill to be “happy”:

- possession of things that give him/her a sense of value, pride, and social status;
- amusement from a variety of entertaining media and online sources or else through other (non-virtual) types of games, sports, or social interactions in the “real” world; and
- consumption of the endless goods and services provided by a thriving market economy.

Hence, propaganda, largely through the corporate media, institutionalized education and advertising, manufactures PAC man’s culture accordingly, as the framework that propagates these three “needs” as all that PAC man should strive for in this life to become “happy”.

Of course, one-dimensional PAC man must work. As a matter of fact, PAC man works like a slave, sacrificing all else in the pursuit of the three “needs” so that he/she can realize these goals, considered as the meaning of “success” and “happiness” in life. Thus, as PAC man spends so much time working so hard and then spends the rest of it participating in the acts of possession, amusement and consumption, he/she does not have the time to educate herself on the social issues to perform the civic duties required of an educated citizen in a functional democracy; instead, the power of ruling is left up to the elite class – “as it should be”, for the “smart” ones, that is, the technocrats “who know better” how to rule. For PAC man, “democracy” is just another form of amusement, another game to play; it’s a fantasy that one has real power and can effect real change by voting for one of those “smart” people from the ranks of the rich and the powerful, all of whom have been selected and vetted in advance, then bought off by the corporatocracy – their real constituency.

Yet, does PAC man ever achieve authentic happiness? In other words, how is this formula for the pursuit of happiness working out for you? Psychologically speaking, can this way of life even be considered “normal?” Increasingly, according to a number of happiness and well-being studies, the overwhelming answer is a definitive “no”[11].

Hence, in the post-postnormal world, what is considered “normal” is contrary to peoples’ real needs, which leads to an abnormal, pathological way of life and state of being. As Barber (1995) points out, it is the “irony of modernization”, a prescient insight that Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about nearly 200 years ago. Rousseau had seen that “[…] the power given to us by science and technology to gratify our needs actually compounds and multiplies them so that as our power increases our satisfaction diminishes”; power is always “[…] outstripped by needs, which grow faster. Hence, modern man’s conundrum: the more powerful he becomes, the more miserable he feels. All that we have only serves to make us ‘need’ more, and the more we have the more we need in order to protect what we have” (p. 40).
According to the psychiatrist Dr Whybrow (2005), PAC man’s quest for happiness is perverted and transformed into a “frenetic chase reminiscent of mania”, that is, as “a dysfunctional state of mind that begins with a joyous sense of excitement and high productivity but escalates into reckless pursuit, irritability, and confusion, before cycling down into depression”; PAC man’s “dysphoric state of activity” may take the starting point as happiness but then overshoots its mark to spawn “[…] ‘a manic society with an insatiable appetite for more. America’s dream of a Utopian social order – fueled from the beginning by the twin beliefs that material success equates with personal satisfaction […] and that technical advance is the key to social progress – has become mired in a confusing mix of manic desire and depressive discomfort’” (as quoted by Speth, 2008, p. 137).

Therefore, if the basis for PAC man’s manic quest for happiness is considered not only postnormal but abnormal, then what should the basis for this quintessential quest be? In other words, theoretically speaking, is it possible to reconfigure the quest for happiness toward a new standard of normality? As a matter of fact, this is the very question that has become the foundation for “happiness” or “well-being” studies, which a number of scholars attempt to address.

One historical starting point is what Aristotle defined as “the good life”. Aristotle made a fundamental distinction between pleasure and happiness: whereas pleasure is based on fleeting desires, the basis for “happiness” is quite different, for it is a sense of sustainable well-being, largely based on “virtue”. However, a more contemporary starting point to consider is Maslow’s (1970) research on human nature and “needs”, which is formulated as a “hierarchy of needs”. This hierarchy begins with basic material needs such as food, shelter, health and safety; however, as humans have needs beyond material needs (such as belongingness, love and esteem, as well as cognitive, esthetic and self-actualization needs), the higher one climbs on the hierarchy, the less consumerism is able to satisfy these needs. As Aldridge [31] points out, consumerism, “[…] like Mephistopheles, delivers the semblance but not the substance. We may try to purchase love, friendship and respect, but what we buy will be prostitutes, parasites and toadies […] As for self-actualization, the fulfillment of our potential as human beings, consumerism is its antithesis. Consumerism does not raise us up, it drags us down” (p. 9). Another study, too, by Layard (2005) draws similar conclusions that contradict PAC man values, by pointing out seven outstanding factors that are considered most important in the quest for happiness: family, finances, work, friends/community, health, personal freedom and values (the key to “virtue?”) – most of which indicate that people value relationships more than anything else (as referenced by Speth, 2008, p. 135). The fundamental conclusions of happiness and well-being studies confirm the obvious, what one would think is “normal”, just basic common sense about the “good life, yet these values are so contrary to the mainstream narrative, the “manufactured normalcy” propagated on a daily basis, it’s no small wonder that PAC man is repressed and alienated, and the youth of today feel little hope for the future[12].

7. Prospects for the future in twenty-first century post-postnormal times

Gidley’s (2010) hope is that, through development of imagination; somehow, we will be able to “come to terms” with the confusion and chaos of postnormal times and “enable a richly diverse planetary pluralism”. Her strategy is to create “new stories” for the youth, so that they will believe in the future. However, while this is all fine and good, she seems facile about the chaos of post-postnormal times, not seeming to recognize that on its underbelly lies the smiley-faced inverted totalitarianism of Empire and its Big Brother Panopticon, which has at times been using, and at other times purposely generating, chaos as a means to power – to deconstruct and then reconstruct the world in its image, the image of the machine – to realize “full spectrum dominance” in the brave
new world of “1984”, with its PAC man values and the manufactured normalcy of its PAC man citizens.

In other words, mere acceptance of accelerated change and a chaotic post-postnormal world at face value implies naive consent to inverted totalitarianism and the PAC man future that it brings. Such acceptance, by default, invites the repetition of history, as Marx (1852/2005) wrote: “the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce”[13]. Undoubtedly, a new narrative about what is “normal” is necessary – on that I have agree; however, the essential thrust of this new narrative must contain, as Polak (1971, p. 178) put it, “social critique and systematic reconstruction”, for Polak, the criterion of a “utopist” (or “futurist?”), whose utopia serves as a “[...] buffer for the future, as a driving force toward the future and as a trigger for social progress”. As an “eternal questioner”, continues Polak (1971, p. 179), the utopist is also the “prototype of the revolutionary and radical spirit”, whose task is to hold up two mirrors: “one to reflect the contemporary generation, and one to reflect a counter-image of a possible future”.

Of course, Polak’s imperative should not be taken as gospel and should certainly be updated to the twenty-first century. For example, while social critique is an essential starting point for the contemporary generation to reflect and act upon, as a means of self-development and conscious evolution, I am not so sure how “systematic” the process of civilizational reconstruction should be since that particular phraseology is but a twentieth century jingoism of the technological paradigm; instead, perhaps Polak’s adage should be interpreted as “systems” or “systemic” reconstruction. Moreover, “reconstruction” should not assume a singular image of the future, as the future, as such, does not exist; instead, the creation of alternative images of the future, more imaginary than systematic in nature, are preferable, that is, as counter-images of possible futures. Nevertheless, this does not mean that such images are mere flights into fantasy; to the contrary, reconstruction of alternate futures images must begin upon the groundwork of social critique, for (as Polak pointed out), it is only when one foot is firmly grounded in the real world that the other can move forward into space and time.

Social critique is similar to Slaughter and Bussey’s (2005) “critical futures”, which are meant to “probe beneath the surface”, explore and critically examine fundamental assumptions and values underlying the belief-system that a particular society or civilization is based upon. As Slaughter and Bussey (2005, p. 11) illustrate, goals such as “health, wealth and prosperity for all humankind” are, no doubt, laudable, just as are “racial equality”, “peaceful international relations” and “planetary pluralism”; still, these “wonderful” goals cannot be considered outside the context of the way power in the real world is constituted and applied, especially as, with the “systems of exploitation, repression and destruction now in place”, such goals “are simply not realisable”, and though these “glossy fantasies mystify whole populations”, they possess little substance.

Yes, the youth of today are angry, or at least should be (once they awaken), for they have been spoon-fed with PAC man delusions about the meaning of life and happiness since birth; meanwhile, their future is literally being stolen from them, swept out from under their feet, only to be replaced by a pseudo-future of inverted totalitarianism, geopolitical schemes of world domination and an unsustainable, artificial, PAC man existence. Instead of using foresight to brainstorm alternate civilizational directions, the power elite have already chosen the path that they will take, for their only concern is the security of the 1 per cent once all hell breaks loose.

To conclude, in proportion to the acceleration of complexity and chaos during post-postnormal times, the future becomes increasingly less predictable and more dystopic; hence, conclusions are not easy to draw. Nevertheless, though alternative futures prospects certainly include “new narratives” about the pursuit of happiness and the meaning of the good life in the effort to steer global civilization toward sustainability,
reconstructive action strategies that recognize, expose, confront and challenge global ruling power and its inverted totalitarianism and empire ambitions are also imperative in this monumental struggle for the future of humankind. This generational struggle will take decades and will involve a huge organizational effort among the young, who will need to engage in various forms of resistance and civil disobedience both from within and outside of the current system and paradigm. It is a historically unprecedented, revolutionary struggle that will define the twenty-first century and, if successful, will realize a new global paradigm by the turn of the twenty-second century. That is why, in reply to the speculative question of which time in history would be his choice to live in, Martin (2007) replies: “If I could choose any time to live, I would want to be a teenager now (in a country where great education is available)[14]. The reason for his choice is because he believes that today is the most exciting time to be alive as a young person; even though the challenges for humankind are greater than at any other time, it is also a time that young people have the opportunity to “make a spectacular difference”.

Still, we should make no mistake that this “spectacular difference” will come about without a price, that is, without a fight, for if history serves as an honest guide, such struggles have only very rarely been resolved peacefully; instead, beneath smiley-faced inverted totalitarianism, inside its velvet glove, awaits an iron fist, which does not hesitate to instigate violence, stamping out all resistance as it would stamp ants, to preserve its ruling power. It is not really a question of whether activists, dissidents or critics who challenge the system will use violence, for violence is almost always instigated (and subsequently rationalized) by hierarchies of power[15]; rather, the question revolves around whether one has the moral right to defend oneself from the onslaught of violence that will be perpetuated by the Powers that Be to preserve the illegitimate rule of the 1 per cent. Ideally, such struggles should be resolved through democratic means, but we should not fool ourselves that we live in an ideal world where power recognizes authentic democracy and yields to the needs of the many or even the planet. This issue of global ruling power and its discontents will work itself out over the course of the twenty-first century and not always in a pleasant or ideal manner, yet it is an honorable, virtuous struggle worth living and dying for; moreover, it is a struggle through which young people today have the opportunity to play a historical role and realize a new identity for humankind, through the transformation of human values and human nature – once and for all to decide what it means to be human and how precious indeed is all life on planet Earth.

Notes

1. As Sardar (2010, p. 439) notes, change is “[…] itself changing–exponential acceleration has now become the norm”.
2. “Cultural amnesia” can be considered as a distinct feature of American culture (as recognized early on by Alexis De Tocqueville), even to the point of denying one even has a “culture” or that culture matters very much. This suspicion of “culture” has long been held by the masses, who associate it with the “high culture” of the noble class, as many Americans have historically tended to deny class distinctions, considered to be more of a “European” problem.
3. A summary of Bertman and Didsbury’s views regarding cultural amnesia and death of the future can be found in Lombardo (2008).
5. As for a few writers who have contributed to the literature on the totalizing effects of technique on human nature and society, see: Mumford (1934/2010), Marcuse (1964), Ellul (1964), and Roszak (1969, 1973).
6. Orwell hinted at inverted totalitarianism in the very title of his novel, 1984, which he wrote in 1948. Thus, 1984 is merely a symbolic year of a future dystopia, a state of inverted totalitarianism. I use “1984” in the same symbolic sense.
7. Arendt (1968, pp. 60-1) observed this massive, profound transformation of the natural world through technique around the same time as Ellul, writing that the moment we “[...] started natural processes of our own – and the splitting of the atom is precisely such a man-made natural process – we not only increased our power over nature, or became more aggressive in our dealings with the given forces of the earth, but for the first time have taken nature into the human world as such and obliterated the defensive boundaries between natural elements and the human artifice by which all previous civilizations were hedged in”.

8. I.e., “Possession > Amusement > Consumption”.


11. Speth (2008) cites Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being (2018) as well as more than a dozen “notable books on happiness” and other academic journal articles, all of which share the same thesis that the predominate happiness paradigm of modernity is not in tune with human nature; in reality, after a critical threshold of satisfying real needs, “more” is counter-productive and leads to states of increased dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and depression. (p. 128, 261-2)

12. As Gidley (2010) remarks, many of the youth today are “not inspired by the western materialistic worldview,” and their images of the future have been “colonized by a media-driven, ‘one and only probable future’ which is negative and frightening”.

13. Marx (1852/2005, p. 1) was elaborating on Hegel, who had remarked “[...] somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce”.


15. In “Premise 4,” the environmental activist and author Jensen (2006) writes that violence done “[...] by those higher on the hierarchy to those lower is nearly always invisible, that is, unnoticed. When it is noticed, it is fully rationalized. Violence done by those lower on the hierarchy to those higher is unthinkable, and when it does occur is regarded with shock, horror and the fetishization of the victims.

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Further reading

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