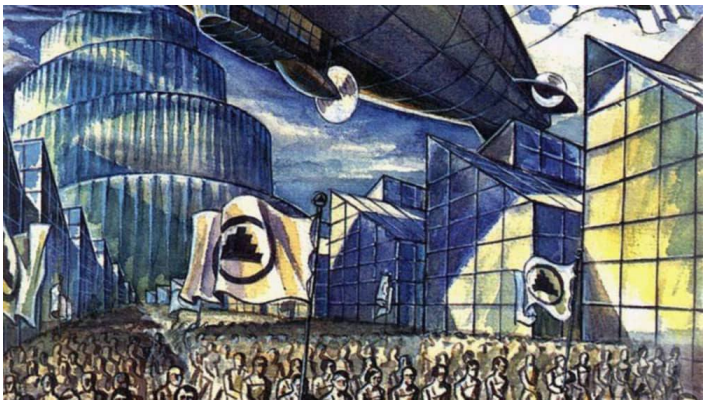
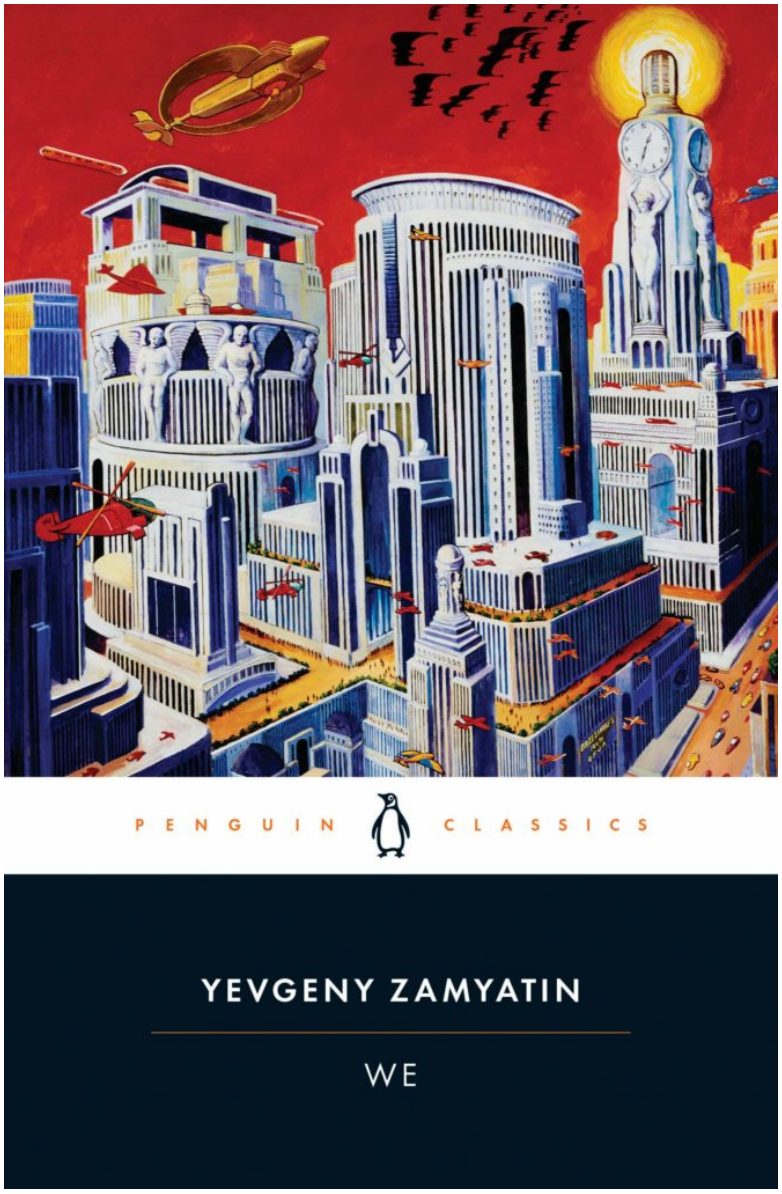


WE: A DYSTOPIAN MASTERPIECE BY YEVGENY ZAMYATIN

Posted on May 1, 2021 by Charles

Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, written in 1921, is the ur-dystopia of all modern dystopias. True, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*, both of which this book influenced, get more attention today. In fact, it is nearly a cliché, at least on the Right, that we are heading to some combination of the two, the only question being which our future society will resemble more, if we do not first overthrow the lords of the present age. That is as it may be, but Zamyatin's novel offers a third future, certainly a future more to the liking of today's ruling class than either of those other futures. And, crucially, its story ends with a lesson lacking in those other books, even though that lesson is, it appears, universally ignored by those who discuss this book.



I warn you now, this entire review is one big spoiler. *We* is written as a journal of sorts, the stream of consciousness of a man named D-503. He is a mathematician and the Chief Engineer of a spaceship, named INTEGRAL, being prepared for imminent launch to explore Venus, Mars, and beyond. D-503 is a citizen of OneState, under the absolute rule of, apparently, one man, the Benefactor. D-503, along with other members of the citizenry, has been ordered by the Benefactor to create intellectual cargo for INTEGRAL, to be delivered to inhabitants of other planets in order to propagate the ideology of OneState. He decides to simply record what he sees around him, because what he sees is the

“mathematically perfect life of OneState.” To speak of it is to herald its perfection. But D-503’s journal turns out to be, without his intent, a journal of his awakening.

Why does D-503 consider OneState perfect? It is the twenty-sixth century; OneState is two hundred years old, and followed two hundred years of war that killed the vast majority of Earth’s population. OneState is a single city, surrounded by an impenetrable glass wall, the Green Wall. All construction within is also of glass, both a technological achievement and a means of ensuring every citizen may be observed. Nobody ever goes beyond the Green Wall—not because the wilderness is a blasted wasteland, but rather because it is the opposite, an area of uncontrolled growth, a riot of plants and animals.

It is not random that D-503’s rocket is named INTEGRAL. The theme of calculus is shot through this book, and the purpose of the rocket is to “integrate the indefinite equation of the universe”—that is, to subject the rest of the universe to the perfection that is OneState, to turn the natural curves of the universe into the straight line and finite quantity of OneState. It will be, for those unknown peoples in space, “the fiery Tamerlane of happiness.”

OneState aims to order the life of man rationally, in contrast to the disordered irrationality of past ages, that led to war, disease, and suchlike unclean and inefficient happenings. The ideology of OneState is not Communism, or any other modern ideology that actually gained traction in real life. We should remember that Zamyatin wrote in the early days of Bolshevism, and before any example existed of the modern cult of personality. Thus, not only is this book not an attack on Communism, the Benefactor is not an analog of Stalin or other Communist big men. He is not even an absolute ruler, but simply the manifestation of the ruling class that has created and maintained this supposed utopia. Who the others at the top are, how they live, and how power is handed onward, is unclear. It doesn’t matter; what matters is the ideology of OneState, and what that does to the minds and lives of the mass of citizens.

The ideology of OneState is Taylorism, or rather the perfectibility of man through Taylorism, the achievement of his total happiness through a total loss of freedom. Frederick Winslow Taylor, who died in 1915, was, of course, the apostle of efficiency engineering—the breakdown of industrial tasks into smaller tasks and an obsessive focus on completing each such task as efficiently as possible, that is in minimum time with minimum labor. (Very strangely, a translator’s footnote says that the Taylor constantly mentioned in the book was “long thought to be” an obscure early eighteenth-century British mathematician, Brook Taylor, who worked with calculus. How that mistake could be made is beyond

me, even with the frequent references to mathematics in the book.) Taylor's "motions per second" are the underpinning of the Table of Hours, which for each citizen, each Number, is a breakdown of what he is to be doing at any given moment throughout the day, down to "fifty statutory chews of each mouthful." The story sold by OneState to the citizens, as the narrator tries to remind himself as the truth dawns on him, is that because of the reduction of all action to pure rationality, "the gods have become like us—ergo, we've become like gods." This fake theosis is what the ruling class of OneState offers the regimented citizenry.

Conformity to the Table of Hours is enforced by the secret police, the Guardians. They are needed because not all is as perfect as it seems. In fact, public executions for crimes against the state are common, for such crimes as writing a poem that criticizes the Benefactor. Such executions are a public religious ritual, a type of Girardian scapegoating. Zamyatin describes one, conducted as always through dematerialization by the Benefactor's Machine. He explicitly analogizes it to the ancients' "divine service" and the Benefactor to a high priest, who "slowly passed through the stands—in His wake were gentle white female hands raised aloft like branches and a million hosannas in unison," with the invisible (to the populace) Guardians standing in as angels.

The government's control over the minutes of citizens' lives is subject to only one limit: two hours in the day when citizens have Personal Hours, and can occupy their time with what they please, within strict limits, naturally. This highlights the interesting separation between the ideology of OneState and that of Communism, or more broadly the ideology of the Left, of which Communism is merely one branch. Left ideologies desire to control the thought of the people; this is what Orwell got right. To that end they use many tools, among the most important of which are the mutilation of language and the perversion of justice. But even as their thoughts are constrained, citizens can spend their time largely as they please, the opposite of OneState. As Orwell pointed out, in a review before he published 1984, in which both thoughts and actions are regimented, Zamyatin offers a much more realistic dystopia than Brave New World, which would in practice immediately collapse of ennui and enervation. Here, the citizenry has a feeling, even if wholly artificially inculcated, of meaning, unity, and accomplishment, which can continue indefinitely—until the spell is broken.

We should remember that in 1921, all elite opinion, or at least that found in decent circles, West or East, assumed the scientific perfectibility of man, and that is still a core belief of the Left. (This was one reason the Bolsheviks were treated as serious thinkers; there was some small excuse for reasonable people thinking that at the time.) Still, the idea of regimentation under total government control has

always seemed undesirable to most of us in the West; that's why *We* has always been thought of as a dystopia. Liberty, or now libertinism, sells better. Or at least it did until 2020, when our own governments reacted to the very modest problem of the Wuhan Plague with a grab for total control, aided and abetted by large swathes of the population, ants who were suddenly revealed as eager for safety and the comfort of being regimented.

As I have noted before, there is something in human nature, and in particular in those who climb the greasy pole of political power, that loves an unfettered ability to minutely control others—but they need an excuse to get the people to swallow it, and usually the excuse fails to convince the populace (as was the case with global warming alarmism). Rarely does the populace cooperate, but when they do, climbing back out is not allowed, as we see all over the West today. The desire for control is not purely a Left impulse, to be sure, although because extreme control is needed to allow rule while denying reality, as the Left inherently does, it is necessarily a very prominent trait among all Left regimes. But maybe, if there were any Right regimes, it might be evident there as well. Viktor Orbán's Hungary, generally center-right and reality-based, has implemented an extremely strict plague regime, which surprises me, and is something I cannot understand, but perhaps this is the answer. After all, virtuous regimes that enforce limited government reach are not thick on the ground of modern history.

Despite the best efforts of the ruling class, peeking through the Taylorized life of OneState are human emotions such as jealousy, and the desire of the woman sexually "assigned" (non-exclusively) to D-503 to have a child, forbidden to her because she is short, and eugenics demands she meet the Maternal Norm for height to be allowed to reproduce. D-503 largely lacks the vocabulary or thought patterns to identify emotions, however, making such things, and any non-rational human behavior generally, an irritation to him, because they are something unquantifiable and therefore disturbing. But, as happens, he falls in love, another emotion that has been supposedly Taylorized out of existence. The object of his love is I-330, a mysterious woman he meets, whose public behavior skirts the boundaries of acceptability, and whose private behavior, smoking and drinking and talking treason, goes far beyond it. The meeting is not coincidental; she has targeted him, because she is a leader of a group desiring the overthrow of OneState, the Mephi, and he is the operational leader of INTEGRAL, which they wish to hijack.

No surprise, falling in love troubles D-503, who cannot understand what is happening to him. When I-330 fails to follow the Table, he knows he should report her to the Guardians, but finds excuses to not do so. He logically concludes that he is sick. This sickness is not just his newly discovered romantic

feelings, but all his newly discovered emotions and unbidden thoughts, slowly morphing into the realization that he has been lied to his entire life—a realization against which he struggles mightily. He intermittently tries to retreat into the linear realities of mathematics, which he has always believed are the same realities as those offered by OneState—but even there, reality pursues him.

As he descends into what feels like madness, but is really coming awake, D-503 realizes that the conspiracy of the Mephi is broad, and extends through tunnels to outside the Green Wall, where live wild, fur-covered humans. It even extends to within the Guardians, perhaps. He also realizes that I-330 is, if not wholly using him, at least partially using him. But he doesn't care. Tension rises in the city as the Mephi begin to move—a mini-riot ensues when a marching citizen (they all march in unison as a matter of course) breaks ranks to try to free a prisoner of the Guardians he sees on the street. The newspapers start to make strange statements: "Reliable sources report the discovery once again of signs pointing to an elusive organization whose goal is liberation from the beneficent yoke of the State." Then comes the annual Day of Unanimity, where the Benefactor is reelected by the assembled populace, the "We" of the title, who vote publicly to show their devotion. He descends from the sky, explicitly a divine figure—and when the pro forma question is asked who votes "No" to his reelection, thousands of hands are raised, instantly casting the city into chaos, as the Guardians pursue those who have dared defy the power of OneState.

The city is, to a small degree, as the organs of OneState retreat, left free. Yet for every action, a reaction, and only a fool ignores this truth in his battles. The powers of OneState announce "Rejoice! For henceforth you are perfect!" In what way? In that every person is to complete the transition to a machine of flesh, through an operation to burn out the "imagination"—meaning independence of thought, including emotion. (This being allegory, we can ignore that turning a person into a calculating machine might very well result in him calculating that the overthrow of the Benefactor made mathematical sense, even for a purely rational actor.)

Perhaps surprising the ruling class, the Operation is greeted with widespread opposition from the populace at large. Wildfire, disorganized resistance arises. Meanwhile, the Mephi implement their plan to seize INTEGRAL—which is thwarted by the Guardians, who had caught wind of the plan. No matter—fighting spreads in the City, and the Mephi smash through the Wall, something thought impossible, letting in the wild outside, heralded by the appearance of birds of prey in the air. Free men skirmish with Guardians and "postoperatives," bringing up light arms and then heavy weapons; D-503 perceives his civilization collapsing.

Or does he? The last pages are written deadpan again, without the strained emotion characterizing those immediately before; D-503 has been seized and subjected to the Operation. He then gladly, or rather without emotion, betrays what he knows of the Mephi. I-303 and her compatriots have been tortured and are to be executed the next day. But why tomorrow? Because OneState actually is collapsing. The executions "can't be put off, because in the western quarters there is still chaos, roaring, corpses, animals, and, unfortunately, quite a lot of Numbers who have betrayed reason. But on Fortieth Avenue, which runs crosstown, they've managed to build a temporary wall of high-voltage wires. And I hope we'll win. More—I'm certain we'll win. Because reason has to win."

But of course, reason, with its ever-fluid meaning in the modern world, doesn't have to win. Reality has to win, and that final sentence reveals the truth—OneState is doomed. D-503's journal is a narration, though he never realizes it, of the inevitable reimposition of reality. Reality cannot be made to conform to calculation; this is the flaw in all ideologies that purport to perfect mankind, because reality always returns, whatever its opposition. The revolt of the citizens of OneState could, for example, be an allegory of the January 2021 Electoral Justice Protest (which, I just noticed, took place nearly one hundred years to the day after this book was written). The parallels between this book and that event are not coincidental; they are the nature of resistance to the loathsome tyrannies of the modern age, which resistance will always rise in a recognizable shape.

As I say, Zamyatin's book has of late started receiving more mention on the Right, as intellectuals on the Right try to understand the present moment. Yet they ignore the crucial lesson of the book—that OneState is tottering and about to fall, not because of an inspiring book or pithy article, but because the Green Wall has been breached with explosives, corpses litter the street, and the Guardians have been reduced to cobbling together makeshift barriers to the advance of militia forces. Our Right intellectuals ignore that the road back to reality when oppressed by a pernicious ideology, forward to renewal, is always steeped in blood, because ideologues never give up their power voluntarily. He who denies this lies to himself. Once all men knew this; they will be reminded of it, to their sorrow and pain.

Those on the Right who wail about the coming dystopia, whatever brand they forecast, are entirely right that we have already long passed the foothills of dystopia, though its shape remains to be revealed precisely. But most refuse to countenance that the Mephi are right, and they are wrong, with their Benedict Options and grey-man passivism. In a passage that some say was the cause of Zamyatin being exiled by the Bolsheviks, even though his book was not published in Russia until 1988, I-330 says just as infinity dictates there can be no final number, then "how can there be a final revolution? There is

no final one. The number of revolutions is infinite. The last one—that's for children." So it is.

What does that imply for us? Does it imply that we should join whatever the equivalent of today's Mephi is? Not necessarily—though not because things aren't that bad. On the contrary, they are that bad. Our current state is fully as evil as OneState (with our internet standing in for their ubiquitous glass). It offers less Taylorism, and more of an even fouler tyranny of false emancipation and forced egalitarianism, combined with sedation through catering to each citizen's emotions and base desires, as long as those emotions and desires are approved ones. These are distinctions without a difference; the control sought by our rulers is the same as the rulers of OneState, as is their behavior. Just ask Derek Chauvin, this week sacrificed in a Left religious ritual, a parody of justice, on our equivalent of the Benefactor's Machine.

To be clear—our current American state is entirely illegitimate and a criminal organization; it has no moral claim on our loyalty, and actively working for its complete destruction is wholly morally justified, that our children may live decently. Paradoxically, however, the reason it now makes little sense to form or join our own Mephi is because our Brawndo Tyranny is far more fragile than the state Zamyatin portrays. Unlike the Benefactor and his myrmidons, our overlords are incompetent idiots, disunited, fragile, stupid, and cowardly. Perhaps that means they could be pushed over the easier, but cornered rats fight, and why pay the cost if not needed? We can be sure they will begin to fracture of their own accord, or under the pressure of external events, at which point the equivalent of the Mephi will be much more effective, though no doubt the types of costs borne by our Mephi, even then, will be the same as those borne by Zamyatin's. It is in denying that the Mephi are ever necessary that the error lies, not in refusing to build the Mephi now.

To be sure, this is the easier and safer course, and lays the proponent open to the charge of dissimulating, trying to avoid risk while talking big. Perhaps this is a fair charge. Time will tell, and not much time, either.

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