

# Huxley's Changing Homeland: Politics and the Planned Society in Britain, 1906–1931

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*Brave New World* is clearly, in many ways, a perspective on a future dystopia, but, as this chapter shows, it also reflected the changing nature of contemporary politics in Aldous Huxley's homeland of Great Britain. Whilst much attention understandably has been given to Huxley's view of both American capitalism and Soviet communism, the encroachment of the British state into areas unimaginable in the nineteenth century, along with the veneration politicians of left and right were enjoying, provided him with significant contemporary context for his output. Mussolini's Italy and Stalin's Russia were held in high regard by many mainstream British thinkers, and this worried a varied cast of anti-totalitarians, from the Austrian émigré economist F.A. Hayek to the many-time Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin. The fact that one of the leading 'pro-planning' politicians of the interwar period was Harold Macmillan—who walked many of the same educational paths as Huxley—lends a neat symmetry to considerations of Huxley and the British planners. Whilst Huxley, it must be said, sometimes denied following politics in any avid sense, this was something he conceded was only a half-truth. Writing to his brother shortly after leaving England for Italy in 1923, he argued that, "I try to disinterest myself from politics; but really, when things are in the state they are, one can't help feeling a little concerned about them" (Smith 222). It was this concern, the political context in which it was held, and how British politicians reacted to *Brave New World* that form the basis for this chapter.

Like many leading Britons of this—or any—era Huxley was schooled at Eton College in Windsor. A few months before the young Huxley travelled to Eton, a reforming new Liberal Government was swept to power in Westminster with a thumping majority of one hundred-twenty five seats. The 1906 Liberal government in Britain

brought in several interventionist policies designed to alleviate the plight of the poor. These included labour exchanges to provide hubs of information for local jobs, compulsory health insurance for thirteen million low-paid workers, and unemployment insurance for professions where employment was largely seasonal. These reforms changed Britain for the better, and still are almost universally lauded across the political spectrum. But they also involved a degree of involvement by the state that was rather alien to the British tradition at the time. The New Liberalism stressed the use of wealth taxation to fund measures to alleviate working class struggle, whereas the same party fifty years earlier had been arguing for generally *lower* levels of taxation. A commission into Britain's Poor Laws—the previous rather ad hoc method of welfare dispersal—split into so-called ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ factions, with the former arguing that the state needed to do more and the latter contending that any action from the state would simply displace private sector activity and thereby lower wages, making things worse. What government could and should do was certainly a live issue in Huxley's youth.

The 1906 administration fundamentally changed the way British politics worked. In 1906, public spending as a percentage of GDP, i.e., total output, was around fifteen percent. By 1910, this more than tripled to 50.3 percent (to drop to 30.2 percent by the time Huxley emigrated in 1923). According to the website [www.ukpublicspending.co.uk](http://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk), public expenditure rose fourfold from £308.5 million in 1906 to almost £1.4 billion by the time *Brave New World* was published in 1932. This latter figure no doubt was exacerbated by Britain's war-debt payments to her former allies after 1918, but it also reflected a shift in attitudes of what a good government should do, and where this action should emanate from. Local government expenditure exceeded that of the central government for the last time in British history in 1914. Huxley was no doubt thinking wider than Whitehall-municipality relations, but he did touch on this broad phenomenon in the foreword to *Brave New World*: “unless we choose to decentralize.... We have only two alternatives to choose from: either a number of national, militarized totalitarianisms...or else one supranational totalitarianism” (xxi).

At Eton, Huxley first encountered Harold Macmillan, then a fellow pupil and subsequently Britain's Conservative Prime Minister between 1957 and 1963. Macmillan—later widely described/derided as a stuffy old gentleman—appears, at first glance, quite the contrast from the meditating, drug using, and very much new wave Huxley. Yet the two had much in common. After Eton, both would go on to study at Balliol College, Oxford. And both would discuss issues of planning throughout the 1920s and 1930s—Macmillan from parliament, and Huxley through the written word. The one major difference would be their respective experiences of the First World War, with Macmillan performing active service and receiving three bullet wounds for his troubles, whilst Huxley was rendered unable to fight by his keratitis. Given his hatred of war, this was a blessing in disguise. And though he hadn't suffered Macmillan's fate of spending an entire day lying wounded in a slit trench, it is not so hard to envisage Huxley taking the similar decision to read the classical playwright Aeschylus in the original Greek to help numb the pain.

Whether at home or abroad during the conflict, however, one could hardly fail to notice British society again changing. Fighting a total, global war necessitated further expansion of state apparatus. The Defence of the Realm Act gave the state the power to requisition land or buildings needed for the war effort, to limit the opening hours permitted to pubs, and to allow breweries to water down beer. More seriously, it imposed state censorship, which allowed the imprisonment of anti-war protestors, such as Bertrand Russell—an associate of Huxley. The press, as World War I historian Adrian Gregory notes, provided a framework in which stories of German atrocities—some no doubt true, but vastly inflated—became *the* truth: “Most British people, by as early as the middle of September 1914, had no doubt in their minds that Germany bore responsibility for the war” (Gregory 68). Much of this emerged from bottom-up gossip rather than top-down imposition—with stories heard from “a friend of a friend” of crimes committed by the German army becoming accepted truths as many more nuanced accounts either fell victim to government censorship or were simply deemed

unprintable. War began a culture where alternate narratives were hardly welcome.

It is not so hard to read the Pavlovian overtones of *Brave New World* from such an atmosphere. And certainly Huxley's later foreword to the book—and not, of course, to say his general pacifism—suggested that he did not approve of such jingoism:

For the last thirty years there have been no conservatives; there have only been nationalistic radicals of the right and nationalistic radicals of the left. The last conservative statesman was the fifth Marquess of Lansdowne; and when he wrote a letter to *The Times*, suggesting that the First World War should be concluded with a compromise, as most of the wars of the eighteenth century had been, the editor of that once conservative journal refused to print it...with the consequences we all know...the ruin of Europe and all but universal famine (xlvi).

This view that the Great War was dysgenic to the British aristocracy sometimes is slightly dismissed by political historians, and exaggerated it no doubt can be. But it is worth outlining some recently analyzed statistics. One in five Etonians who fought in the Great War died (approaching double the national casualty rate of one in eight), with one in three winners of the Newcastle Prize for Classics also making the ultimate sacrifice (Seldon and Walsh 239). Huxley would not have been the only former Etonian to be affected by the loss of friends during the war, with future politicians like Alfred Duff Cooper and scientists such as J.B.S. Haldane in varying ways influenced by the loss of so many former classmates.

Tragedy apart, war also intensified the industrial process. Henry Ford's Model T had rolled off the production line in 1909—the same year Marconi received the Nobel Prize for his work in pioneering radio communication—but the technological advances seen in war and the collective labour required to produce them were both new phenomena. In many ways, the condition of the British working class was elevated by the war, with those previously deemed 'unemployable' being needed to fill jobs Britain's soldiers had left behind. But the incessant need to keep factories producing shell after shell, tank after tank, and gun after gun was no doubt grinding.

The fact that real wages remained ahead of production levels was doubtlessly of some comfort, but the type of Fordist production line mocked in Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film *Modern Times* was already present in the UK with all its de-humanising effects. And industry itself was heavily regulated. In a 1915 letter to his brother Julian, Huxley noted the introduction of:

measures of a state socialistic kind, which will probably continue after the war and be extended to other trades besides the suppliers of war material...reduction of profits, fixation of wages and the like. And what will the Boches do afterwards? A republic I suppose...they can hardly tolerate Kronprinz...a sort of magnified Fabian society state, organised even further than at present...automatism as opposed to life (Smith 79).

Three years after this message, Britain and her allies proved triumphant. But the war unleashed a series of reactions across Europe, which split the continent between communist left and fascist right. Germany indeed became a republic as Huxley predicted, but it was not to be of a 'Fabian society state'—i.e., a reforming, centre-left democracy—for very long. To borrow the historian Mark Mazower's memorable description, Europe fast became a "dark continent," where democracy appeared to be a deserted temple, in which increasingly few had anything close to total faith in (Mazower 1998). Britain formed Europe's last major, non-totalitarian outpost by 1940, but several years earlier, and particularly in the 1920s, it was almost *de rigueur* to praise Mussolini and Stalin rather than denigrate them in English high society. Such sympathetic elements extended beyond politics into scientific practitioners like George Pitt-Rivers, but within Westminster circles, the British Conservative right welcomed Mussolini as ridding Italy of its potential to go Bolshevik—and if personal liberty was the price for that then, for many, it was probably worth paying (Hart 2015). Their reasons for doing so varied from directly pro-fascist types, such as Archibald Ramsay MP (imprisoned in 1940 as a potential enemy of the state) to more pragmatic elements who simply felt Mussolini's government was one they could do business with, but whatever the reason, the

practical effect was more or less the same—totalitarianism of the right had been tacitly endorsed by the British government. Given this stance, it was somewhat ironic that the Conservative Party continued to bait their socialist Labour opponents as being sympathetic to the new Bolshevik regime in the Soviet Union. Some Tories—including Macmillan, who visited the Soviet Union in 1933—were more sympathetic to the collectivist aims of the Stalinist regime, but most used the connections between the Communist ideology and Labour’s 1918 pledge to nationalize (i.e., bring under state ownership) “the means of production, distribution, and exchange” to portray that party as “un-British.” In electoral terms, this clearly worked, as the Conservatives were in power nineteen of the twenty-one years between the two world wars, while Labour was in power for just two. However, it also meant that totalitarianism and the authoritarian state were constant reference points in British politics.

As Huxley was writing *Brave New World* in 1931, the Macmillan Committee (not referring to the aforementioned Harold) reported on the British banking sector. It recommended vastly expanded state interference in finance, with the creation of two new state-run banks to facilitate the movement of capital. This was a perfectly sensible policy, which was replicated in post-1945 Germany, Sweden, and other countries, but to one thinker, F.A. Hayek, this was the path to the destruction of free society. Hayek, later awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1991, was highly critical of the Committee’s aims and wrote in his wartime tract, *The Road to Serfdom*, that this sort of policy was contrary the very notion of liberalism (Hayek 12).

Hayek’s view was an extreme one, but, at the same time, fears regarding the increasingly centralized and planned economy were not his alone. As historian Richard Overly notes:

planning...was far from a monopoly of the left. As a result of the slump, elements among the academic, political, and business community still favourable to the idea of economic individualism came to the conclusion that reliance on market forces or economic orthodoxy alone would not save capitalism from the consequences of its own deficiencies (Overly 80–81).