



2025-05-01

Thought Control, Historiography and the Contemporary Murk

Fiction and Neuroscience in the Light of von Wright, Orwell and Hitchens

Introduction

In an age shaped by algorithmic influence, information overload, and shifting notions of truth, it is vital to understand how ideas of free will, historical agency, and the self are constructed — by language, by the brain, and by structures of power. Through reading philosophy, literature, and contemporary neuroscience, we form narratives that shape our worldview and, by extension, our democratic resilience.

Even if free will is, in some sense, an illusion, the illusion itself has real political consequences — and must therefore be defended as though it were true. And even if both the self and free will are neurobiological constructions, we must understand and protect them as if they were real — because our stories about reality shape both power and resistance, as well as the foundations of democracy.

All successful things resemble each other; every disaster is catastrophic in its own way. Thus, understanding the present is difficult. Complex. Not to say: obscured. Partly due to proximity – we are simply too close to everything that is happening. Suddenly it becomes hard to oversee and assess the relevance of all the new things, all the endless litanies. Suddenly it becomes difficult to maintain a healthy distance from all the self-steering, manipulative algorithms. Suddenly the narratives produced across Mima's platforms assert themselves as "real".

On the theme of free will, thought control, objective reality, and mass influence, I have returned to a few seemingly antiquated texts that in different ways attempt to understand the relationship between individual and society, between truth and construction: George Orwell's *1984*, Christopher Hitchens' *Why Orwell Matters*, and Georg Henrik von Wright's collection *Att förstå sin samtid* (*Understanding the Present Age*, 1994). I've also jammed in neuroscience and a bunch of more modern critics and writers.

Georg Henrik von Wright (1916–2003), a Finland-Swedish philosopher, succeeded Ludwig Wittgenstein at Cambridge. In his essays, he discusses historiography, scientific objectivity, and the power of ideas. In his comparisons between Oswald Spengler's (1880–1936) holistic civilisational prediction model and Arnold Toynbee's (1889–1975) cyclically spiritual Christian-historical model, where cultures are said to be born, mature, and die, von Wright concludes that history — unlike the present — can appear comprehensible only with some distance.

At the junction of these two historical perspectives, von Wright poses the question: did figures like Lenin, Hitler, Stalin — or, in our own time, Trump, Erdoğan, Putin, or Xi Jinping — truly shape history? Or were they merely political marionettes, swept along by forces beyond their conscious control?

Tolstoy

Tolstoy, in von Wright's discussion, raises the same issue: Did figures such as Caesar, Henry VIII, Robespierre, Napoleon actually shape history, or were they just part of a vast collective flow they themselves barely understood — mere magnifications of their own narcissistic egos?

Von Wright contrasts this with a comparative reading of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Lev Tolstoy (1828–1910), this empirical and "Aristotelian" observer, with his relentless moral logic, reasons rationally even against the subjective — and, in von Wright's reading, often meaningless — interventions of individuals. It hardly matters what leaders do: history proceeds according to its own inner necessity (see *War and Peace*, Vol III, part II, chapter I; Vol III, part III, chapter I; Vol IV, part II, chapter I; and the Epilogue, part I, chapters 1–4, and all of part II).

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy dissolves the myth of the "great man" shaping history. He portrays historical movements as organic and impersonal, driven by a web of countless minor factors rather than by individual decisions. Even though Napoleon issued commands, Tolstoy argues, these were not decisive: the development of the invasion followed a larger, uncontrollable necessity. The individual's experience of free will is, according to Tolstoy, a necessary but ultimately illusory feeling. History is not shaped by mighty wills, but by the movements of the masses and the play of chance. Tolstoy's anarchism and quasi-communist Christianity strike me as rather romantic – in the sense that he envisions a kind of primordial humanity that is fundamentally good, provided we cooperate and love one another. It may be a utopia – but a beautiful one.

Dostoevsky

Or, as Fyodor Dostoevsky's (1821–1881) demons, according to von Wright, are torn between conflicting inner forces, where the archetypal man of action blindly hurls himself forward, clinging to rigid convictions against a seemingly hostile world, while the chronic sceptic paralyses himself in endless reflection and accomplishes little beyond the creation of dangerous ideological constructs. "Dangerous" precisely because average people are drawn into these repeated ideologies, recognising them through sheer repetition and thus mistaking them for truth — to the point of being willing to die for them.

Von Wright demonstrates how the very idea of free will becomes difficult to uphold within a deterministic view of history.

Some contemporary scientists and neurophilosophers, such as Thomas Metzinger, Robert Sapolsky and Anil Seth, seek to show, like Tolstoy, that the self is a construct: a dynamic model that the brain creates from bodily experiences (interoception), perception and action, and which we experience as an "I" with an immediate sense of reality. In these models, it is difficult to get away from an almost blind determinism. I think that even if the self is a construct and free will is an illusion, the illusion itself has political consequences – and must therefore reasonably still be defended as if it were real.

History's great actors, like ourselves, do not act solely under external necessities, but also according to this inner, constructed "self", which Metzinger calls the "transparent self-model".

Neuroscience

On the clinical side, we find the emotion researchers Joseph LeDoux, Lisa Feldman Barrett and to some extent Antonio Damasio, who have integrated constructionist models with empirical research and interoceptive and predictive processes in emotional psychology. Impressions and experiences are made up of essentially two neuroanatomical pathways: first, the fast perceptual pathway, which reacts reflexively, and second, the slow pathway, which loops through the frontal lobes and therefore becomes more thoughtful and interpretive of

various impressions for better or worse, such as pleasure and discomfort, or kindness and hostility, or offended aggressions.

The phenomenon of exploiting resentment, loneliness, and the fear of exclusion has been embraced by populist movements across nations. They direct their hatred towards the establishment, "sluggish" bureaucracy, the queer, and the different. They queue up on the Glistrup-Spies runways, carrying their stifling prejudices and nursing temporary grievances. These figures are always present — crouching in blustering martyrdom — and when the wind shifts, they may suddenly gain loud momentum. You cannot simply click them away; they are part of society's normal anomalies.

Prediction and simulation theories notably those of David Chalmers, Andy Clark, Mark Solms, and Karl Friston — particularly Friston's "free energy principle" — suggest that our brain builds reality through evolutionary predictive mechanisms. In predictive psychology, the brain uses expectations and past experiences to construct our perception of the world. And, startlingly, a similar principle seems to hold even in cosmology: according to Stephen Hawking and Thomas Hertog's top-down model, our understanding of the universe is shaped by our observations — and, paradoxically, even our stories about the past.

Thus, the brain's predictions function as a way of "projecting" reality, filling gaps and constructing coherence from limited sensory input. In both cognitive processes and in the holographic principle of the cosmos, the observer's role is central to the making of the whole.

Fiction

Similar recurrences in modern fiction. Margaret Atwood warns in her dystopias against systemic ideological gender oppression and ecological collapse. Don DeLillo depicts human alienation and loneliness in a collapsing world. Olga Tokarczuk writes with cosmopolitan tenderness about the place of human beings, even in a crumbling ecological and political fabric.

Han Kang probes power's most intimate territories — the family, the body — where silence, shame, and refusal become forms of resistance. Karl Ove Knausgaard's make-believe autofiction moves from the personal to the cosmic, portraying a human being trapped within the historical, biological, and emotional maze of language.

And Annie Ernaux, with her pared-back style and almost sociological self-examination, chronicles life with a sense of duty — remembering without embellishment, offering vulnerability without drowning in self-affirmation. She flows like a modern Tolstoy, while her subtle style perhaps conceals and controls the truth even more skilfully.

While history may dissolve the myth of the energetic individual, literature sometimes offers a clarity that the action itself never can—the ability to discern patterns, even if we cannot change them. If neuroscience explains how we misinterpret the world, fiction helps us understand what these misinterpretations actually cost.

Hitchens

Christopher Hitchens' reading of Orwell deepens this perspective. He stresses how Orwell was less concerned with the outer forms of power than with its inner language. It is in the grey zones of everyday life that power establishes its reality. And today, as ever, hate objects such as "cancel culture" and "woke" are manufactured, while media-driven outrage surges through algorithmic amplification systems.

Our political and bureaucratic institutions are built to manage gradual change — according to what might be termed a Durkheim-Habermas principle of bureaucratic inertia and cooperative consensus. Surely, they are not built for the impulsiveness and affective explosion that today's mass media and political actors, often deliberately manipulatively, reinforce?

When click-optimisation, crises, and political emotions race through the systems, democracy is not primarily threatened by coups, but by a gradual drift towards irrelevance. Eventually, people become desensitised by the flood of online debris and rubbish on the internet and the mass media — even the sharpest minds risk turning anti-intellectual under the endless barrage of punditry.

The question remains: what is required to prevent democracy from collapsing into fragmented chaos or authoritarian zeal for order?

The contemporary form of resistance may lie precisely in understanding these mechanisms — and recognising that many counter-movements are themselves puppets within larger political-economic power structures. Behind figures like Trump, Putin, and Erdoğan stand a power elite and armies of operatives vying for control of oil, minerals, and influence — often blind to human consequences.

A genuine defence of an open society demands understanding, conceptual stability, and resilience against fragmentation — not scattered outbursts of opinion.

Putin & Big Brother

Poisoning Putin would not alter the strategic balance between NATO, the EU, the USA, and Asia. Just as it does not matter whether Big Brother actually exists: the war between Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia in *1984* rages on regardless, dryly and remorselessly.

"War is peace" — the machinery of manipulation never rests. Or, in the more polished words of former Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt: "My wars are in the service of diplomacy and peace."

Putin's worldview — of being attacked by Western politico-economic infiltration into Ukraine — is, from a Russian "Ministry of Truth" perspective, hardly an unimaginable construction. But just as unobjective are the conservative think tanks and truth-makers in the West. Two Minutes of Hate-like phenomena in outlets such as Fox News offer no alternative models of reality beyond what is already embedded in the structures of Doublethink. Echoes

of Newspeak can be heard from Europe's old national wars and colonial ventures to today's conflicts in Ukraine, Iraq, Myanmar, Bosnia, and the dealings of Lundin Oil in Sudan.

With internalised Thoughtcrimes, avoidance behaviours — born of fear and surveillance — become automated, à la Arthur Koestler (the Soviet sphere) and Herta Müller (Romania). The fear of thinking differently becomes embedded in the self.

"Indoctrination", as sociologist Joachim Israel described it in the 1960s, mirrors today's AI concepts of "implanting false memories" — a phenomenon Orwell foresaw in *1984* through Winston Smith's experiences of fabricated recollections. What was once science fiction now presents itself as both chemical and psychological possibilities in the 2020s.

Thus, Christopher Hitchens was right to insist that *1984* and *Animal Farm* remain urgent readings for our time.

The Power Elite

If one tries to understand the elite's efforts at controlling society and citizens, it can be reduced to three pressing factors: (a) climate change, (b) access to natural and water resources, and (c) energy consumption. These alone are sufficient to grasp the enormous vested interests that drive media narratives and political constructions.

The fact that we can measure how many people are recruited to absurd movements such as Flat Earth or Pizzagate, means that we can also predict how the propensity to change can be manipulated in all other conceivable ways. The art of creating — or shattering — explanatory frameworks shapes public attitudes in everyday matters, in our poor, naïve little collective minds.

Nevertheless, I believe that a reasonable democratic consensus is still possible, despite the corrosive power of manipulative concepts. Resisting these forces is not just an intellectual task — it is the very lifeblood of why the apparatuses of thought control (*telescreens*) must remain under the authority of open, democratic systems.

Barry Karlsson