

Lecture #23 Tuesday May 11, 2010 *Brave New World*

Preludes

Thomas Henry Huxley (born 1825). At first opposed evolutionary theory. Changed his mind upon reading Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. 1860: Debated Archbishop Samuel Wilberforce.

Also had a running debate with Sir Richard Owen, famed anatomist and paleontologist, Owen held the human brain was distinct from that of other apes, especially in having a fold called the hippocampus minor. Huxley proved apes also have this feature, sinking Owen's argument.

Eugenics. Francis Galton, Darwin's half-cousin, coined the term in 1883.

Galton suggested encouraging the "fit" to have more children; this was soon turned on its head by others into moves to prevent (through sterilization) the "unfit" from having children (which should better be called "dysgenics").

Eugenics embraced by many socialists and "progressives" such as George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells.

1907. Indiana enacts first sterilization law in history.

1913 Theodore Roosevelt, in a letter: "Someday we will realize that the prime duty, the inescapable duty, of the good citizen of the right type is to leave his or her blood behind him in the world; and that we have no business to permit the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type."

1915. John Kellogg in a speech in San Francisco called for annual health inspections sterilization of the "unfit."

1927. Supreme Court decides states have the constitution right to sterilize citizens.

Early (and biased) IQ tests were used to "prove" that people from Northern Europe were genetically superior to other countries.

Opposed by religious conservatives, including the Catholic Church. Also opposed by Josiah Wedgewood IV, member of parliament and grand-nephew of Darwin's wife. In the U.S., eugenics was eventually scuttled by combination of religious opposition, revulsion at the elitism inherent, and realization that the IQ tests often used were flawed.

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) Grandson of T.H. Huxley.

His mother died when he was 16, which gave him a sense of the transience of human happiness.

Wrote *Brave New World* (1932) before the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism were fully known—therefore the dystopia was less brutal than in Orwell's *1984* (1948).

BNW begins and ends with images of death:

“Cold for all the summer beyond the panes... Wintriness responded to wintriness. The overalls of the workers were white, their hands gloved with pale corpse-coloured rubber. The light was frozen, dead, a ghost.”

It ends with the suicide of the Savage.

Huxley suggests that his future world, made in the image of Our Ford and Our Freud, is not worth living.

Major theme of the novel: a debate over the right of individuals to self-discovery vs mass happiness and stability.

Individualists, like Bernard Marx or the Savage, who are outsiders wherever they go
vs. the endless twins (clones)

Does science serve the masses or the individuals?

Does it serve the powerful or the powerless?

BNW is ambivalent: although Huxley suggests this future is undesirable, both Bernard and the Savage are neurotic and unpleasant, unlikeable people, not very satisfactory heroes.

The Savage is a poor foil for Mustafa Mond (Mond = world). John rejects Mustafa's philosophy that stability, based upon shallow happiness, is the highest good.

But John's tormented, self-hating religiosity is not very appealing either.

Although *BNW* borrows many of the ideas of eugenics, including the caste structure, what happens is not really eugenics, but biochemical and psychological manipulation. In many respects, this is the triumph of nurture *over* nature—but just as repellant as eugenics.

Huxley in his forward says, “The theme of *Brave New World* is not the advancement of science as such; it is the advancement of science as it affects human individuals.”

Note, however, that his predictions are wrong (so far): we have not entered an age of widespread nuclear power, and it has not (yet) ushered in an age of totalitarian governments.

Brave New World and science

Three simulations of future science:

Bokanovsky's Process.

“We check the normal growth and, paradoxically enough, the egg responds by budding.”

These are in fact clones (genetically identical)

Huxley makes his technology plausible through paradox: science often appears to work in ways opposite to our intuition.

“In vitro” (*in glass*) biological conditioning of fetuses:

Training future workers to be biologically attracted to heat, darkness, and being upside-down.

“Hypnopaedia:” sleep-training of children to repeat slogans played to them while they slept. Here Huxley makes his science plausible through *limitations*: hypnopaedia is useless for *understanding* or insight, but is ideal for propaganda.

Like the movie *Gattaca*, BNW warns us against the misuse of science.

Mustafa Mond makes this argument (Ch 16): “Every discovery in science is potentially subversive; even science must be treated as a potential enemy... Science is dangerous; we have to keep it most carefully chained and muzzled.... truth’s a menace, science is a public danger. As dangerous as it’s been beneficent.”

Huxley disagrees with the Controller’s aims, but they both make the same point.

Mustafa Mond: “... people in the time of Our Ford...seemed to have imagined that [scientific progress] could be allowed to go on indefinitely, regardless of everything else. Knowledge was the highest good, truth the supreme value... Mass production demanded the shift [from truth and beauty to comfort and happiness]. Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning; truth and beauty can’t.”

Questions to think about:

Whose side do you think Huxley is *really* on? Mustafa Mond’s, or the Savage’s? Do you have evidence from the text?

Who do *you* think is right? How does one balance happiness and stability against individual rights (including the “right” to be unhappy)? And what if that unhappiness lies in the “system” that makes many others happy?

Does science and technology appear to be leading us closer to or further away from a *Brave New World*? Which elements of science and technology?

Is science and technology ever “too dangerous” to pursue? How do we make that choice? Who gets to make it?