

BRAVE NEW WORLD Revisited Once Again

Just fifty years ago, at the dawn of the new era that dates from the death of Henry Ford, a young, half-blind, upper-class Englishman published a novel destined to become—along with Orwell’s 1984—one of the two most enduring prophetic visions of the future ever to clatter from the typewriter of man. The novel was *Brave New World*, its author Aldous Huxley, and the vision was of the Jazz Age gone to heaven. Anything goes in A.F. (After Ford) 632, but what goes particularly well are those two pillars of the affluent society, sex and drugs. What has been eliminated from that society as being subversive and destabilizing is: family life, passionate love, social nobility, and any art but the “feelies,” fashion design, and dance music. Here’s a sample of the song lyrics and the lifestyle of A.F. 632:

*Orgy-porgy, Ford and fun,
Kiss the girls and make them One.
Boys at one with girls at peace;
Orgy-porgy gives release.*

What was most shocking to the first readers of *Brave New World* (and probably still is, for the book has always been a favorite target for censors) wasn’t so much the way Huxley turns conventional values upside-down but the verve and logic with which his villain, Mustapha Mond, the Resident Controller for Western Europe, justifies a social order based unashamedly on the beehive and the iceberg—with “eight-ninths of the population below the waterline, one ninth above.” Mond sums up the lives of the majority of lower-caste Gammas and Epsilons this way: “Seven and a half hours of mild, unexhausting labor, and then the somaration and games and unrestricted copulation and the feelies. What more can they ask for?” Indeed, even the privileged one-ninth of Alphas above the waterline had better not ask for more than that if they don’t want to be shipped to Iceland, where rebels and skeptics are kept in permanent quarantine.

In 1952, when *Brave New World* was twenty years old and I was twelve, it seemed to me the height of all that was wicked, sophisticated, and far-

fetched. (So wicked, indeed, that I had to glue the cover of another thirty-five-cent paperback over the [wonderfully lurid but quite inaccurate] cover art of a couple dressed in nothing but wisps of cloud.)

By the book's twenty-fifth birthday and my seventeenth I still gave it high points for wickedness and sophistication, but rather than thinking it far-fetched I now believed that the world of A.F. 632 was, except for some minor details, already upon us. Those were the years, as you might remember or may have heard, of the Organization Man, of a nationwide conformity enforced not by a 1984-style Big Brother but by the rewards of an affluent consumer society. The first tender shoots of the sexual revolution were up, and even soma—in the form of tranquilizers—had appeared as an “ethical drug.” As for Huxley's system of social indoctrination by hypnopaedia, or sleep-teaching, television was already having a fair success instilling such *Brave-New-Worldly* slogans as “Ending is better than mending,” and “I love new clothes,” and “A gram is better than a damn.”

Now, a round half-century after it came out, I was curious to return to Huxley's novel and see if his batting average as a social prophet had grown or shrunk since my last visit. In some obvious ways the book is now more on target than ever—especially if one hearkens to the dire warnings of those who regard “Secular Humanism” as Public Enemy #1. Mustapha Mond, with his cavalier dismissal of family life, freedom, and God and his championing of promiscuity and drugs, is just the antichrist the Moral Majority yearns to combat. If only (they must often wish) Jerry Brown would be as up-front about things.

From a strictly technological point of view Huxley himself, in 1950, admitted: “One vast and obvious failure of foresight is immediately apparent. *Brave New World* contains no reference to nuclear fission.” And none, one might add, to television, or space travel, or computer technology, or even to genetic engineering. However, it's only the last subject that's actually relevant to the book's themes. Yet even without breaking the DNA code in advance of Watson and Crick, Huxley's blueprint for a “hatchery” for human infants remains an impressive feat of technological imagining. Less convincing is his rationale for producing people on assembly lines, like Model Ts. Present methods achieve the same results more efficiently at less expense, though no doubt there are some radical feminists who would welcome the experiment.

Where our own world most differs from Huxley's is in the matter of contention and instability. Huxley wrote at a time when it was still possible to believe that the League of Nations might evolve into a world state, that war might be rendered obsolete by sound management, and that

antagonistic class divisions might be transformed into a frictionless caste system, in which the lower classes were bred and brainwashed to be happy, dutiful morons. Nowadays world government seems about as likely a prospect as the Second Coming. 1984 has cast a long shadow across the pages of *Brave New World*. In his own book-length reappraisal, *Brave New World Revisited*, written in 1958, Huxley took a grimmer view of the global situation and predicted: “it is a pretty safe bet that, twenty years from now (i.e., in 1978) all the world’s overpopulated and underdeveloped countries will be under some form of totalitarian rule—probably by the Communist party.” Not a bull’s eye, but pretty close.

Brave New World goes widest from the mark, I think, in its picture of a trouble-free, beehive-style caste system. Huxley grew up in an upper-class family in Edwardian England and shared much of the myopia and some of the arrogance of his “class-mates” when he wrote about those who hadn’t shared his privileges. Quite simply, he could not conceive that anyone of working-class background could possess more than a rudimentary intelligence or spiritual dignity. (At least in none of his novels did he bother to imagine such a possibility.) In this regard, *Brave New World* is not so much a prophetic vision of the future as nostalgia for a mythical Golden Age before there was a servant problem.

My final quarrel with the book is one of emphasis from my first reading. I’ve always had a sneaking fondness for the world Huxley invented. I know I’m supposed to disapprove. But I would like to try soma just once, and I wouldn’t say no to a night at the Westminster Abbey Cabaret dancing to the music of Calvin Stopes and his Sixteen Sexophonists. The lyrics of the songs may be sappy, but I’ll bet they’ve got a good beat. As for the feelies, I suppose the plots are pretty simpleminded, but any more so than *Raiders of the Lost Ark*?

This is not to endorse all the sinister theories of Mustapha Mond, only to suggest that fun’s fun, and that some of the targets of Huxley’s satire are mean-spirited, insofar as he is making a case against pop culture, sexual candor, and the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

Relax, Huxley. You worry too much. Have a gram of Tylenol. Things could be worse. This might be 1984.