

Aspects of the Class-structured Society in *The Penultimate Truth*

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Introduction

The Penultimate Truth was written by Philip K. Dick in 1964, a year in which, the world was divided into two oppositional sides by the Cold War. In this novel, the theme stated intentionally by the author is that a war is fabricated through the mass media for the masses, who are deceived by a dictator and managers which are called “Yance man.” In my thesis, I would like to analyse how the “dominant class” is described in this novel, by comparing two dictators, and consider to Nicholas St. James, who represents the masses.

1. Basic information and Background

The class-structured society is definitely devised in this story. Dominantly the top of the hierarchy is Stanton Brose, who generally seems to be recognized as a dictator. Just below his socioeconomic group is reserved for the elites called Yance men. They live above ground and their work is to govern the subterranean. At the bottom of the layered system, the masses settle down in “Ant Tank.” They work hard trying to produce and repair robots, called “Leady,” in order to let them fight a proxy war on radioactive ground. However, like that war which is far past, Yance men make proclamations that are aired on a sole screen in the subterranean tank with Talbot Yancy, “a dummy, bolted to an oak desk, programmed by Megavac 6-V”(132). Consequently, leadies are utilized as tools for Yance men though the masses try to meet leady’s quotas. Leady has different roles both upper and lower sides of structure. Similar plots can be seen in a stream of dystopian novels which refer to the administrated society, such as George Orwell’s *1984*, and Herbert George Wells’s *The Time Machine*. In short, two characteristic points are depicted in *The Penultimate Truth*: One is that this novel positions the group which deals with after nuclear war in the historical SF lineage. The other is that this story describes the structure of hierarchy as an administered society.

The liberalism of even the seemingly most hard-nosed dystopian SF in the American 1940’s-50’s, with its illusions of Back to the Spirit of 1776, pales into insignificance beside Dick’s pervasive, intimate and astoundingly rich understanding of the affinities between German and American fascism, born of the same social classes of big speculators and small shopkeepers. (Suvin 13)

As Darco Suvin states, Dick was concerned with the similarity between American and German fascism in the process of writing through his life. Confrontation between “Pac-Peop” based Soviet and “Wes-Dem” centered around Germany, in fact, is premised in the story of the Cold War. Relations between the dictator and the masses in German fascism emerge as an analogous situation in the story.

2. Stanton Brose As a Dictator

Stanton Brose has many elements of a dictator, the emphasis on ugliness. All characters in this novel almost universally despise him because they know for sure that the system controlled by him is wrong, though they also know that nobody can revolt against him. He stays alive, using artificial organs, which are called artifogs in the novel, all over his body, except the brain, to survive. The reason he looks hideous is that he monopolizes and overuses artifogs. He is an ugly 82 years old dribbler, moving in a wheelchair, looking like a rubber balloon. However he has power as a dictator, so that the world order is kept by him. Brose tries to derail Runcible’s plan in order to keep peace in the world. Runcible wants subterraneans to emerge above ground again so as to live in buildings above ground. Brose’s project is simply landing up in jail for a crime be fabricated out of whole cloth. The means, on the other hand, is enormously complex and powerful. Brose, as the supreme authority, has special tools which is possessed by only him. One of them, “Time scoop,” which is a time machine that can only travel to past, is a superhuman machine by his arm. Brose makes use of fabricated facts and prompts people to assume that it is historical fact, consequently, Runcible has to be jailed. Brose’s privilege, in other words, controls the concept of time that nobody else can. The hypostatized society in this novel emerges as a visible hierarchy whether living on the ground or not, and time is also determined by the level of power organized in a hierarchy of rank. To maintain the balance of power between the top and bottom, the state stabilizes class relations to avoid conflict again. Zygmunt Bauman states how controlling time concept has considerable effect on authority.

Mastery over time was the secret of the managers’ power -and immobilizing their subordinates in space through denying them the right to move and through the routinization of the time-rhythm they had to obey was the principal strategy in their exercise of power. The pyramid of power was built out of velocity, access to the means of transportation and the resulting freedom of movement.

(Bauman,10)

As he explains, a structure of power is attributable to the degree of freedom of the movement of persons in the hierarchy. Brose is able to imagine the art of the possible and makes it possible to change the value of time. On the other hand, the masses exist in

time-invariance which is constant, consequently, a difference of ranks between the top and bottom of the hierarchy unfolds in the power structure. And furthermore, Brose intentionally stops the auditory system from working, as a symbol of a powerful ruler.

When Brose reviewed each and every TV tape of Yancy's speeches, he did not listen; horribly, or so it seemed to Adams, the fat, semidead organism received the aud-portion by direct wire: through electrodes grafted, skillfully implanted years ago, in the proper section of his elderly brain ... in the one original organ, which was Brose, the rest now being, tin-woodmanwise, a mere procession of Arti-Gan Corporation's plastic, complex, never-failing (they had, before the war, proudly carried lifetime guarantees, and in the artiforg business the meaning of the word "lifetime," that is, whether it applied to the life of the object or of the owner was delightfully clear) replacements which lesser men, the Yance-men as a whole had a kind of nominal, formal claim on--in that, while still warehoused in the subsurface storage vaults under Estes Park, the artiforg supplies belonged to the Yancemen as a class and not merely to Brose.(34)

Intentional removal of the auditory function benefits Brose because it prevents him from hearing critical chatter, hearing someone talking about. Brose treats subterranean crowds as if they hardly exist. "'Well,' Brose strummed, 'they chose to come up. And they didn't have the ability to join us; we couldn't use them so what else but those row-on-row little apts? At least they've got Chinese checkers.'"(38) Brose artfully creates a political gimmick to draw a line between ruler and subjects in a hierarchy by removing his own ability to listen. Therefore, Brose is only a dictator who is not dominated by anyone in a hierarchy.

3. David Lantano As a "spir-pol-mil leader"

Stanton Brose is not alone in making the world go around. David Lantano also mentors masses into the "optimum" society. As a way to be that, Lantano determines to kill Brose who shows malevolent behavior, and revolts against his regime. It is not a kind of revolution but a coup. Lantano is depicted as a heroic leader who tries to establish a new government. He serves as a model for Talbot Yancy who is spiritual, political, and military leader for masses in underground. Dick cited the name of Adolph Hitler as a leader against plutocracy. He tries to find intrinsic value in a point of beating the system, even though he detected the Nazis.

I speak of & for the irrational & the anti-rational, a kind of dynamic nihilism in which values are generated as mere tactics. Thus my real idol is Hitler, who starting out totally disenfranchised rose to total power while scorning wealth

(aristocracy) plutocracy to the end. My real enemy is plutocracy; I've done my (Fascistic) homework. (*In Pursuit of Valis* 140)

Therefore, the man who assumes the status of leader is Lantano who overthrows the regime of Brose's fabricated world. As is the case of Brose, Lantano also enables moving through time, because the "Time scoop" makes it physically possible to survive for 600 years after 1425 to the present, consequently, he is only strong enough to confront Brose who has powerful force at the top of hierarchy. However, there is crucial distinction between them in terms of the concept of time. Adams ratiocinates it in comparison, "The force which Lantano had unique control over--time--was the force which was corrupting the organic tissue of Stanton Brose."(174) These sentences show great differences of power between ruler and subject in time. Brose's power works for manipulating masses through the medium or fabricating baseless facts, consequently, he does not really have a direct effect on time. On the contrary, Lantano is permitted to move himself through time by direct action of "Time scoop." However, what is more important is that the conflict between Brose and Lantano emerges from having used "Time scoop" by chance. It seems that there is no tangible feud between them. Class confrontation means that it works for masses and some Yance men are overwhelmed with a sense of guilt. "That was the rationale. The masses had egged their leaders on to war in both Wes-Dem and Pac-Peop."(48) It depends on the lower echelon worker's will to bring down Brose's government.

4. Nicholas St. James As One of the Public

Nicholas St. James, is the president of "The Tom Mix," which is one of the ant tank, is forced to go to radioactive ground, in order to obtain an artificial pancreas and save the life of Maury Souza, the chief mechanic. He literally is representative of the subterranean because Dick focuses on the elite's suffering, and millions of lower workers make little appearance from the very beginning. Nicholas undoubtedly is one of the suppressed people and in unconscious of this. He had settled on the ground before the war, and he calls for a return to a vanished past. This desire has possessed by him as a repressed undercurrent. For him, this lost time has been an invariant rhythm. "He had known Souza, been shut up with him here at the Tom Mix, for the total war-period: fifteen years."(9) When Nicholas actually goes back above ground, his wish to return to the past is released himself because he runs into Lantano who has attractive power for time. Lantano's age is literally depicted as visible in his facial expression. His estimated age keeps it changing slowly and he is beyond time.

And, as Lantano made his way through the basement, among the cots, stepping over people, their meager stores, saying hello here, smiling to someone there, Nicholas thought, My god, when he came through the entrance he looked like an

old man, weathered, dried-out, but now, closer, Lantano appeared middle-aged; the aura of extreme age had been an illusion due to the scrawny quality of the man and the peculiar stiffness in the way he walked; it was as if he were delicate, feared an injury, a fall.(136)

Nicholas discerns the difference in ability for time from Lantano who is able to pass through time with “time scoop.” Finally, Nicholas reveals the identity of Lantano’s power.

Time, Nicholas thought. It’s as if a force that grips us all in a one-way path of power, a total power on its part, none on ours, has for him divided; he is moved by it and yet simultaneously, or perhaps alternately, he seizes it and grips it and he then moves on to suit his own needs.(139)

The deeply rooted desire for Nicholas is to go back living above ground again, so incredible insight and consciousness of Lantano’s ability stems largely from the difference of power that Lantano is able to fill Nicholas’s wish. His desire is suppressed by fear of war but comes back again to him as desire of traveling through time and it can bridge the gap to high society. Therefore, it becomes equivalent to advancing his social status, nostalgic place. Jean Baudrillard states that marking a distinction from others is achieved by manipulating objects as signs of upper rank.

The principle of analysis remains as follows: you never consume the object in itself (in its usevalue); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status. (Baudrillard 61)

As trying to attain a rank of an upper class above ground, Nicholas is about to realize the past once again. Lantano’s power is merely an expression of Nicholas’s desire, a moving through lost time with relative freedom, however, it marks a concrete difference of a rank in power structure in this society. So Nicholas’s return to the surface the links directly to class conflict in the hypostatized hierarchy.

Conclusion

In terms of the capitalistic governance structure in American society which is shares a marked similarity to German fascism, as making a comparison between two powerful persons, those different aspects are reflected in a dominant hierarchy, whether they are heroic struggles or not. Brose is the type of person that tactically monitors and manages the society makes to keep the power balance and peace. In addition, he enforces sanctions against dangerous elements and utilizes authority to deceive the public. On the other hand, Lantano counters the threat of power and influence with the peculiar power of time travel,

hence, the author places his last glimmer of hope on Lantano as a historical hero. And besides, in terms of the dominant relationship between Lantano and Nicholas at the top and bottom of the hierarchy, what authority controls time functions as making the masses self-conscious about the distinction of power. Its desire is what Nicholas fills the gap with and is restated as one who attempts to jump to a higher class from a low one. As a result, class segregation is maintained through class strife. The whole construction of the unequal society remains unchanged, nevertheless it is possible to shift between classes.

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