Strategies for Preserving Status Quo in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*

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Abstract

In George Orwell's two most famous novels Nineteen Eighty-Four and Animal Farm we find a totalitarian state, and in each case there are strategies that enable these societies to stay totalitarian. The reader of today not only sees the Soviet Union when reading Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four, but a large number of other totalitarian societies with similar structures and systems that exist throughout the world. A close reading of the novels shows that the strategies for the leaders in Nineteen Eighty-Four and Animal Farm to preserve the status quo include the control of media and flow of information, maintaining the class system, controlling education, creating distractions from issues that matter, being able to put the blame on a traitor, and enforcing control of people’s memory. Media is used to make the inhabitants believe that they are better off now than before, so that they will be content with what they have. Traitors and enemies are used to silence resistance and make sure that people stay in line. People’s memory is something that the leaders manipulate, even if it works in different ways in the two stories. In Animal Farm the animals just have a bad memory, and in Nineteen Eighty-Four it might be that the people have lost their ability to think critically and thus their ability to remember. Maintaining the class system and controlling education is to remain in control and minimizing the risks of another uprising. The reason why the Animal Farm becomes totalitarian is because the animals themselves looked the other way as the pigs started to take more than their fair share, which means that the responsibility of this situation is just as much the leaders as it is the peoples. The totalitarian societies in these books remain at status quo, but the message of these novels is that it can be different in real life. If we do not let things get out of hand, and if we keep on being aware of what is happening around us, we can stop this from happening.
In George Orwell's two most famous novels *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (NEF) and *Animal Farm* (AF) we find a totalitarian state, and in each case there are strategies that enable these societies to stay totalitarian. The two novels were written as warnings against Stalinism and the totalitarian society that was emerging in the Soviet Union (“Orwell”). However, according to John Rodden, it is not only Stalinism that is warned against in these allegories. *Animal Farm* “has a stinging moral warning against the abuse of power […] it is] a political treatise that suggest larger lessons about power, tyranny, and revolution in general” (72). The same, I believe, can be said about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I shall identify the actual strategies used in these two allegories, in order to learn Orwell’s lessons to the fullest. What is described in these novels can still happen in the real world. As Mohamed Talbi argues, Orwell’s “predictions were mistaken only in terms of geography”. These allegories not only warn against Stalinism, but also against how totalitarian societies in general function. The reader of today not only sees the Soviet Union when reading *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but a large number of other totalitarian societies with similar structures and systems that exist throughout the world.

Winston Smith, the protagonist in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, asks the question ‘why’. The question is not of an existential nature; he wonders why the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* wants power. He understands how the Party can stay in power, he just does not understand why. Winston directs his question to an inner Party member, O’Brien, and the answer is: “The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake” (NEF 275). With the question “why” answered it remains to find out how the Party manages to keep control, what strategies they use. In this essay I explore how the rulers in the two books stay in power, in particular the strategies used by them to create a status quo where no changes are possible.

The first strategic step taken in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in order to preserve the status quo is controlling the media, ensuring that the government is in total control of what news reaches the general public, and maintaining the illusion of perfection within society. That is, no one can prove that mistakes are made. At the Ministry of Truth, where Winston Smith works, news, statistics, music and books are produced. Winston’s job is to make corrections in news items that have already been published. The corrections he makes are often of a rather innocent nature, but at times they are “delicate pieces of forgery in which you had nothing to guide you except your knowledge of the principles of Ingsoc and your estimate of what the Party wanted you to say” (NEF 46). Ingsoc is the ideology that the society within *Nineteen Eighty-Four* rests upon, and is a version of socialism. The illusion of perfection must be upheld at all cost. The Party is in total control of the Ministry of Truth, and thus in control of
what people learn through the news. Orwell had himself experienced this during the Spanish civil war: “I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various ‘party lines’” (as quoted in Rossi 176). This is similar to what is happening in Oceania, the totalitarian state in which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* takes place, one of the three world powers; history is written according to what the Party wants it to be.

Oceania is in constant war with one of the two other powers, Eastasia or Eurasia. The more observant citizen in Oceania might remember that the enemy has changed from time to time, even if all records that exist will state that the current enemy has always been the enemy, and the current ally has always been allied with Oceania. According to all existing records what is true in the present has always been and will always be. If any record stating anything that opposes the current truth exists it would undermine the Party’s power, and in the end could perhaps lead to their downfall. Alongside the news that The Ministry of Truth creates (and sometimes reports), they produce statistics which are normally used to prove that people are better off now than they were when the capitalists ruled. The basis for this is that if more goods than expected are produced they must be doing quite well, and if they are doing well now, considering the constant shortages and rations, the situation must have been really bad before, when the capitalists ruled. The people should be thankful, since if it were not for the Party they would all probably have starved to death in the hands of the capitalists. By using this type of deception the Party reduces the risk of people reacting negatively to the constant shortages, since after all they are better off than before, and there is no way of proving otherwise. That is, the allusion is maintained that trying to go back to the old system would be devastating for everyone, since people are taught that things are getting better and better.

Because of the total control of media in Oceania, an important counterpart to the government is eliminated, since media is one of the few means of creating opinions about various topics: it has a unique possibility to shed light on different views, and on specific issues. Media creates a public debate, and the viewers can form their own notions. Since the Party is in control of media, they ultimately control what people think they know. The government that rules Oceania has an interest, as I pointed out above, in ensuring that everything that is published fits nicely into the Party’s strategy. Due to this interest there will be no public opinion that criticizes the Party. Its position will remain strong as long as they are in control of media. This is something that Orwell himself commented on in an essay:

This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that
the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. After all, the changes that are those lies, or at any rate similar lies, will pass into history…The implied objective of this line of thought is a nightmare world in which the Leader, or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but the past. If the Leader says of such and such event, 'It never happened'- well it never happened. If he says two and two are five – well, two and two are five. (as quoted in Hitchens 3-4)

Truth looses its meaning in Nineteen Eighty-Four. In contrast to what is believed, truth becomes almost organic, as it changes according to what is decided, not what is. In this novel the Party wants to make it seem like truth is static, but by constant forgery and rewriting history they show that truth is what those who control the flow of information wants it to be, and as long as this flow is controlled status quo will not be threatened.

The same strategies that appear in Nineteen Eighty-Four can be detected in Animal Farm as well, only on a much smaller scale. In this novel it is not humans that rule and are being ruled, but beasts. There is no Ministry of Truth that informs the masses about current statistics and news items, but this is done by the pig Squealer, who is very persuasive, and is described as more intelligent than the average animal on the farm. We recognize the same strategies as in Nineteen Eighty-Four. Squealer tells the other animals how much better everything is now, compared to what it was during the rule of Man, how much more food they have and how much better harvests they produce. The animals are proud that they produce more goods than Man ever did, and they are proud that they can manage to do this all by themselves. Squealer constantly tells them that they are better off now, and encourages them to work harder. The animals oblige: they work harder and longer hours with pride, since they believe that they are not doing this for anyone other than themselves, and they have a need to prove that they are better than Man. At the end of the story some of the men from the surrounding farms are amazed how the pigs had made the other animals work much harder for less food than “any other animal in the country” (AF 79). Squealer’s job is made easier since that the majority of the animals that live on the farm are described as quite unintelligent; most of them not even being able to learn how to read, whilst the pigs are described as much more intelligent, and are looked upon as wise and fair leaders by the majority of the animals on the farm. Squealer’s persuasive skills help to reinforce this view, which strengthens the rule of the pigs. Keeping the working animals content through persuasion leads to a stronger position for the pigs. Remaining in status quo is much more likely as long as they keep the façade, and not let any discontent spread.

Winston Smith reflects in Nineteen Eighty-Four over what poor memory people
around him seem to have, and he wonders whether or not he is the only one in possession of a reliable memory. It is not clear how the memory of other people in the novel works, but no matter what they remember, there is no way of proving anything, since all facts have been changed by the Ministry of Truth. William H. Rehnquist, the former Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, discusses how memory works in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Noting that no one seem to question the war, who the enemy is, and that the enemy changes, despite the Party claiming that the enemy has always been the same, he concludes: “Oceania’s continuously shifting alliances with Eastasia and Eurasia raise no question in their minds, because they have lost whatever critical faculty they might once have had” (986). In this light one could wonder whether or not the people are depicted as having a bad memory or if they are unable to think clearly. No matter what the case is, the population of Oceania accepts whatever the Party says, because they are not allowed to remember anything else. In part three of the novel, when Winston Smith has been captured, he is told that he is faulty, a glitch in the system, insane, because he remembers something that contradicts the Party’s official stance. Unable to believe what he hears he claims that memory is something outside the Party’s control. The answer he gets is: “‘On the contrary […] you have not controlled it’” (NEF 261). The Party requires not only that the people do not think critically, and that they accept everything the Party says, but also that they do not remember anything that contradicts what the Party says. To control one’s memory and mind is what the Party requires, and anyone who fails in that can count on a visit to the “Ministry of Love”, the Party’s centre for interrogation and torture. Because there is so much fear involved, people do not remember anything that contradicts what the Party says. As a consequence, people believe everything the propaganda tells them, and since everything is just fine, there is no reason to change anything.

Another aspect of the general public’s apparent lack of memory in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that when people are vaporized, i.e. killed, by the Thought Police for various crimes, they cannot appear in any written record, since they do not exist, and have never existed from then on. All references to a vaporized person are obliterated. For example when Winston’s colleague Syme disappears, Winston is aware of how he is made into an unperson:

Syme had vanished. A morning came, and he was missing from work: a few thoughtless people commented on his absence. On the next day nobody mentioned him. On the third day Winston went into the vestibule of the Records Department to look at the notice-board. One of the notices carried a printed list of the members of the Chess Committee, of whom Syme had been one. It looked almost exactly as it had looked before — nothing had been crossed out — but it was one
name shorter. It was enough. Syme had ceased to exist: he had never existed.

(NEF 154)

This is a strategy that the Party uses to control people’s minds and awareness: a person that does not exist has never existed, and mentioning a person that has ceased to exist becomes impossible. Whether or not the population of Oceania is aware of this is not made clear, but it is highly unlikely that they are completely oblivious of this fact, at least the outer Party. The outer Party, however, as we shall see below, is a class that poses a threat to the upper class, the inner Party. The knowledge that your existence is fleeting, and that you can literally cease to exist if you break the unspoken rules of society has the effect that people choose not to see what is right in front of them, and thus the strategy is a success because it allows the ruling class to subdue the ruled classes, especially the working class, but even the outer Party.

The memory of the animals in Animal Farm is not suppressed but unreliable, the animals not being the most intelligent creatures in the world. The pigs take advantage of the memory problem when they make changes in the seven commandments that had been established when the animals took control over the farm. Since most animals cannot learn the commandments by heart, they cannot prove that changes have been made. Even if they did know the commandments by heart, there would be no way for them to prove that a change had been made since most of them cannot read anyway, and Squealer constantly tells them that their memory is faulty. The farm animals’ short memory also makes it possible for the pigs to persuade them that Snowball, an earlier leader branded a traitor, was in fact a criminal to begin with, and that he never wanted the farm to succeed on its own. Most of the animals know that they have a bad memory, and that they cannot trust it. This is how the pigs get away with changing doctrines and lying about enemies. It is a big advantage for the pigs that the memory of most animals is so short, because it enables them to adopt all the privileges they want, and get away with it.

In Animal Farm the other animals suffer from bad memory, and cannot remember exactly how it was before the takeover, but since they are told that the situation is better now, it has to be. Those who do remember something of how it was support this, since they remember being hungry and unhappy then. This strengthens the pigs’ rule, since they have proved themselves as better rulers than Man ever was, and if the animals put their faith and trust in the pigs everything will become even better. These are the truths (or lies) that the other animals are told, and if they do not believe what they are told they have no way of proving otherwise, because most of them cannot read, and even if they could Squealer persuades them that their memory is faulty.
When Snowball is branded a traitor, Boxer, the hard working horse on the farm, adopts the maxim “Napoleon is always right” (AF 34) for him to understand why this has happened. Napoleon is the other pig that took over control of the farm alongside Snowball. Since Boxer is the animal on the farm that works the most, he is an inspiration for the other animals, and since he will not question Napoleon, it becomes somewhat easier for the other animals to follow his example. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the same goes for Big Brother, who is always right, not only because the Ministry of Truth makes it so, but also because the Party needs it to be true all the time. One reason everything the leader says has to be true is that if someone found out that he was telling lies, it could start a process where people are opposed the leaders. The leaders have no problem with lying; it is just that no one shall know about it. Keeping this in mind enables the reader to fully understand why the memory people possess needs to be suppressed or made unreliable. Even in the pursuit of power the leaders in both these novels realize that their actions have to be justified so that the wrath of the people is not awakened. Fear is naturally an important tool in this, as well as the strategy of making people by their own free will remember (or not remember) what the authorities require. If the followers found out about the lies there could be protests, and that would weaken the leaders’ power.

Both in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the upper class keeps the working class as docile labour, which brings us to the second strategy: maintaining the class system. The inner Party and the pigs are the upper classes, as they are in a position of power, which means that they have an interest in keeping the working class outside the decision-making arena. The working classes are in a way slaves since they are forced to sell themselves to the employers in order to live, which in these books are not the capitalists, but the state and the pigs. In *Animal Farm* the only wages the working class animals get is food, and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the working class gets paid just enough to stay alive. Being forced into hard labour and suffering keeps them in line, since their ability to resist is broken down through hard labour and low wages. The ruling classes are aware of the power that the working class possesses if they unite and realize their inner strength. By not giving the working classes the possibility, or in *Animal Farm* hindering the ability, to develop intellectually, the masses are unable to realize the power they have in numbers. The education the animals on the farm get is separated from the education the pigs and dogs (who work as a sort of police within the novel) receive, and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the education is limited to what the Party allows. If the working class is uneducated it is believed that they are unable to revolt, since “they never revolt merely because they are oppressed” (NEF 216). This is
something that the rulers in the two novels are very aware of, and therefore they make the strategic decision to control the educational system. Education can be used to teach the students critical thinking, allowing them to develop intellectually, and if that were to happen on Manor Farm and in Oceania the masses could start to question the authorities:

In spite of the shock that Snowball’s expulsion had given them, the animals were dismayed by this announcement. Several of them would have protested if they could have found the right arguments. Even Boxer was vaguely troubled. He set his ears back, shook his forelock several times, and tried hard to marshal his thoughts; but in the end he could not think of anything to say. Some of the pigs themselves, however, were more articulate. Four young porkers in the front row uttered shrill squeals of disapproval, and all four of them sprang to their feet and began speaking at once. But suddenly the dogs sitting round Napoleon let out deep, menacing growls, and the pigs fell silent and sat down again. Then the sheep broke out into a tremendous bleating of ‘Four legs good, two legs bad!’ which went on for nearly a quarter of an hour and put an end to any chance of discussion. (AF 33)

Because the rulers control education the risk of a working class uprising is minimized. Added to this is the pure oppression enforced upon the working classes in the two novels that hinders them from having the energy to actually revolt:

True to the Principles of doublethink, the Party taught that the proles were natural inferiors who must be kept in subjection, like animals, by the application of a few simple rules… They were born, they grew up in the gutters, they went to work at twelve, they passed through a brief blossoming-period of beauty and sexual desire, they married at twenty, they were middle-aged at thirty, they died, for the most part, at sixty. Heavy physical work, the care of home and children, petty quarrels with neighbours, films, football, beer, and above all, gambling, filled up the horizon of their minds. To keep them in control was not difficult. A few agents of the Thought Police moved always among them, spreading false rumours and marking down and eliminating the few individuals who were judged capable of becoming dangerous; but no attempt was made to indoctrinate them with the ideology of the Party. (NEF 74)

This means in the long run that one of the biggest threats to the current system is under control, thus enabling the rulers to remain in a status quo.

There will be no working-class revolution in these societies, not because the
working-class is unable to start a revolution, but because, according to Encyclopedia of Marxism, “neither of the major classes can prevail over the other without winning a majority of the middle-classes to their side”. Winston muses that “If there is hope […] it lies in the proles (NEF 72), and as Robert Resch argues convincingly, “[a] middle- and working-class alliance unifying the alienated Party-member Winston and the exploited proles is impossible because there can be little common ground for a cooperative relationship between superior and inferior beings” (155). Winston Smith’s attitude towards the working class is contradictory; his belief is that only the middle class can save the working class from its bondage. The middle class, however, is always striving for power; they want to overthrow the upper class. If there is going to be a real change, a revolution, it is the working class that has to win the middle class. Winston’s contradictions could have its roots in Orwell’s own suggested elitism. As Robert Paul Resch argues, “Class prejudice … separates Winston from the values of social equality and moral community, and place him, however reluctantly, on the side of elitism.” He continues: “Winston’s ambivalence toward the proles is, of course, widely discussed by Orwell’s critics. However, the unconscious force exerted by Orwell’s elitism produces less recognized, but equally disruptive, effects on other relationships [within the novel]” (156).

In Nineteen Eighty-Four Winston Smith, a middle class citizen, wants to win the working class over to his side, to his fight. However, the reasons for the working class to start a revolution will be different from those of Winston. Because of this there will be no change in Oceania, since there is no common ground for them to revolt on. The Party has ensured that there is a divide between the working class and the middle class that is almost impossible to overcome, especially since it is not allowed for middle class citizens to communicate with the working class.

Both novels have things that all participants in the societies are encouraged to care about: in Nineteen Eighty-Four it is the constant war, and in Animal Farm it is the windmill. By making the people and animals focus on something, and letting them celebrate minor victories, the leaders can produce a feeling of happiness for the people. When the animals in Animal Farm look at the windmill they feel that they are working for something, and that their hard labor will be worthwhile when it is finished. To begin with the purpose of the windmill seems to be to actually make the job easier for the animals, but as the story goes on it is revealed for the reader that this is not the case at all. They should work hard for the pigs to make a profit, and have an advantageous position in relation to their enemies. But as long as the animals are unaware of the true purpose of the windmill they will work hard, since they believe that it will truly make their life easier. Building the windmill is a difficult job, and it
does not help that it is destroyed twice. But the animals do not despair. To their minds, if they can just finish it everything will change for the better. As the animals are completely focused on the windmill they do not complain when the pigs’ get greater power all the time. Some might not notice, and others believe that this is a necessity so that the windmill can be finished some day. The pigs use the windmill as an excuse to get more control over the farm. Once this process has started it is not possible for the working animals to stop it, and thus the pigs ensure that they will stay in power.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the working class produces war goods, because the inner circle of the Party is aware that they must be kept busy, otherwise the risk of rebellion increases greatly. The Party is also aware that if the working class produces surplus the living conditions for the general population of Oceania will be improved, and that is something the Party cannot accept. If people get comfortable they might start to complain, and even revolt. The constant war eats up the surplus that could be produced, and most of the goods produced are war goods, anyway. Also, by having a war the working class fears for their lives. There are bombs falling on a daily basis and they need the protection of a strong leadership, and that leadership they find in Big Brother and the Party. The constant war is a good excuse for the Party to keep a close rein on the power close to them. By making sure that there is always an enemy, the Party makes the people stick together, staying docile. By having an enemy the people are in need of protection. They look to the leaders for defense, and place their trust in them. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the enemy is either Eastasia or Eurasia, depending on what is currently most convenient for the leaders, and it is implied that the two other world powers use Oceania in the same way. The Party has enough knowledge about how humans react in wartime to know that if they keep the constant war there is no or at least little risk of people rebelling against their rule, since there is a genuine fear for one’s own life in war. By keeping the constant war the Party ensures that there is no real threat to their position of power, which enables them to preserve the status quo.

In both *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the leaders maintain not only enemies but traitors as well. Traitors are feared since the people never know what a traitor will do to make their life more difficult, and the people feel the need of protection. The traitors are necessary so that the leaders have someone to blame if something goes wrong. It is important for the leaders to select the traitor carefully, not just anyone will do. It has to be someone from the inside, someone that knows about the structure within society. A former leader works the best, whose treachery will be felt to be devastating for everyone. In *Animal Farm* the traitor is one of the former leaders, the pig called Snowball, selected because he did not
agree with the current leader. By portraying him as a traitor he is turned into a real threat, since he knows about the farm, its administration and presumably knows about its strengths and weaknesses. The leaders create rumors about the traitor’s whereabouts, thereby ensuring that the animals on the farm do not forget that there is a traitor. When the windmill is destroyed the first time Snowball is accused of having destroyed it, which made the animals on the farm “cry of indignation, and everyone began thinking out ways of catching Snowball if he should ever come back” (AF 42). Snowball is a convenient traitor, since Napoleon, the later leader on the farm, does not only want him out of the picture. With Snowball being branded traitor and accused of plotting against the farm, the animals need protection against him. That protection they find with Napoleon, so the more he accuses Snowball the more he can count on the loyalty of the working animals on the farm. The traitor therefore helps the leader to stay in power.

The main traitor in Nineteen Eighty-Four is Emanuel Goldstein, one of the former leaders of the Party, who is considered a real and genuine threat. There are rumors that he is leading an underground resistance called The Brotherhood, which engages in various activities, such as sabotage and all out terrorism. At least it is rumored that it is so. People do not know for certain, but they do hate him. Every day the members of the outer Party watch propaganda, a two-minute hate session, in which their hate for Goldstein is encouraged. What he has done against Oceania is made unforgivable, with the country needing protection against him. That is where the inner Party and the leaders step in, making sure that Goldstein’s agents are brought to justice and executed, after giving public confessions of their crimes. The people can see that the Party is acting to ensure that the threat is taken care of. The people have faith in the Party and in Big Brother, since they see that they can be trusted to protect them. Because of the loyalty that the Party receives when hunting down and punishing the traitor's agents, their own power position is strengthened, and since there is no real threat to their power, this ensures that they will stay in power indefinitely.

Thus far in this essay I have discussed the techniques used for staying in power within the novel. I will now end by discussing the purpose of the novels, that is, what we, readers in the 21st century, should do with the warnings George Orwell presented over 5 decades ago. The thing about the leaders in Animal Farm is that in a way it was the animals themselves that were the culprits, since they let things get out of hand. Robert Pearce relates how Orwell discusses the leaders on the farm:

But I did mean it to have a wider application in so much as I meant that that kind of revolution (violent conspiratorial revolution, led by unconsciously power-
hungry people) can only lead to a change of masters. I meant the moral to be that revolutions only effect a radical improvement when the masses are alert and know how to chuck out their leaders as soon as the latter have done their job. The turning point of the story was supposed to be when the pigs kept the milk and apples for themselves … If the other animals had had the sense to put their foot down, it would have been all right.

As Orwell argues, the pig’s reign and their lust for power could have been stopped at an early stage. However, Orwell’s depiction makes it very plausible that once in place it is nearly impossible to change the situation on the farm. Janine Utell reflects on the extent of Orwell’s warning: “Orwell shows us a world without humanity, a world where human feeling has died. This human feeling can be accessed through literature and then brought into the public sphere, and literature can serve as a warning for what might happen without that human feeling” (199). George Orwell’s message is that we must always be wary of what our leaders are up to, and that in the end it is our own responsibility to ensure that the ruling classes do not misuse the power we are giving them.

To sum up, the strategies for the leaders in Nineteen Eighty-Four and Animal Farm to preserve the status quo include the control of media and flow of information, maintaining the class system, controlling education, creating distractions from issues that matter, being able to put the blame on a traitor, and enforcing control of peoples memory. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, the Ministry of Truth’s propaganda machine controls the media and dissolves the meaning of truth. The class system is never abolished, since there are benefits for the rulers to keep the system more or less as it is. If the working class is abolished power would be divided among the people. In both novels, power is the main goal for the rulers. The pigs and the Party will stay in power forever by maintaining the status quo, and this essay has analyzed the strategies for how this is done. The totalitarian societies in these books remain, but the message of these novels is that it can be different in real life. That is to say, if we do not let things get out of hand, and if we keep on being aware of what is happening around us, we can stop this from happening.
Works Cited

Primary sources

Secondary sources