

# **BRAVE NEW WORLD**

**Aldous Huxley**

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**A Critical Paper by**

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The beginning chapters of *Brave New World*, introduce the reader to Huxley's futuristic eugenics as we accompany a group of trainees on a guided tour of the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre, where future humans – or humanoids – are born and bred for life in a carefully regulated society. The process follows the basic concept of an assembly line as introduced at Henry Ford's Detroit automobile factory. The time in which the action takes place is styled A. F. 632, which translates to 2540 CE. A. F., After Ford, does not refer to his birth or death date, but to the day a Model "T" Ford first rolled off the assembly line on 1 October 1908.

As Huxley describes it, the human ovum is fertilized by a gamete in a test tube and the emerging embryo is soon transferred to and nurtured in a glass incubator filled with various nourishing fluids. It makes its way along a conveyor belt that is closely monitored and into which, from time to time, various ingredients are added that will advance or retard the embryo depending on the type of humanoid one wants from that particular jar. There are essentially five types or castes of humanoid manufactured: Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons, in descending order of intellectual capacity and social status. Within these categories there are pluses and minuses. Although Alphas and Betas may do the most satisfying jobs, Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons are not envious of them because all five social-vocational orders have been conditioned to believe that they have the most attractive job in their world and they are fully content with their particular life style. The lower three castes are produced in the thousands as pairs of identical twins. The upper two castes are developed as individual superior beings. If anyone in any of the five orders is having a bad day or runs into a challenge of any kind, he or she need only take a dose of *soma*, a narcotic that takes away all mental, physical or moral stress. The universal objective for all life in A. F. 632 is that everyone – at all levels of society – should be content.

Huxley's socially engineered hierarchical system is not all that different from the England in which he grew up. English society changed radically in the post-Elizabethan era, when, first, the enclosure acts created a huge displaced rural poor and, second, the Industrial Revolution caused a demand for cheap labor filled by

those displaced persons. By the early 19th century this was the essential structure of English society, with the landed gentry and urban aristocrats at the top and an exploited labor base at the bottom; with several gradations in between. Huxley, however, removes any concept of upward mobility and thus the potential for unrest and revolution among the various castes. There is no need to change anything since there is nothing controversial that requires change. Toward the end of the book, Mustapha Mond, Western Europe's Resident World Controller, tells his listeners: "People still went on talking about truth and beauty as though they were the sovereign goods. Right up to the time of the Nine Years War. *That* made them change their tune all right. What's the point of truth or beauty or knowledge when the anthrax bombs are popping all around you? That was when science first began to be controlled... People were ready to have their appetites controlled then. Anything for a quiet life... It hasn't been very good for truth, of course. But it's been very good for happiness." (p. 228) The Nine Years War took place, as best I can calculate, about the middle of the 21st century CE; A. F. 141. Mond, thus, treats it as history and not as a dystopian present. Nevertheless, Huxley makes it clear that the *Brave New World's* industrial production of humanity resulted directly from an apocalyptic event that had evidently wiped out much of the world's population almost 500 years earlier.

The main characters – and the plot – of this story are:

- In the first half of the book, Bernard Marx, an Alpha-Plus, a sleep-learning specialist at the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre is the central figure. He occupies a superior social status, but he doesn't quite fit the true Alpha mold. Rumor has it that his formula got mixed up in the assembly line and he decanted four inches shorter than a true Alpha-Plus, which, in any uniformly molded society, would draw attention. That combined with his unconventional grumpiness, makes him unpopular to many of his associates. He covets Lenina Crowne, an exceptionally attractive fetus technician at the Hatchery. Lenina, unlike 70% of her sisters, is fertile. She is an avid proponent of the World State's promiscuity policy and contraception and is generous in sharing her favors with a wide range of companions. Eventually, she and Bernard do have a relationship that Bernard somehow thinks will be strengthened by taking her with him on holiday at a Savage Reservation in the American southwest.
- This adventure proves to be the turning point of the book. There, among the natives, Bernard discovers Linda and John. Linda, who was having a youthful affair with the present Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning, Thomas, some years earlier, disappeared during their visit to the Reservation and was presumed to be dead. The Director, in an unguarded moment, had told Bernard the tale

before he and Lenina went west. Since Thomas also told Bernard, unwisely, that he was not particularly happy with Bernard's work and that he would probably be exiled when he returned, Bernard has an incentive to delve more deeply into this story while at the Reservation. Sure enough, he finds Linda, somewhat the worse for wear, a bloated alcoholic still offering her charms to the few Indians who will have anything to do with her. John, her son by none other than DHC Thomas, has suffered an unhappy upbringing due to the contempt most of the Indians, male and female, have for his mother's casual behavior. He is a bright and thoughtful boy. His mother had acquired along the way a book, which she had never bothered to read, but passed it along to John. It turned out to be an edition of the complete works of William Shakespeare. Largely through his own initiative he learns to read and devours the book, which firmly provides his moral base in life and gives him a peculiar archaic way of speaking.

- Bernard now thinks he has enough ammunition to sink the DHC and he and Lenina return to England, bringing with them Linda and John. This proves to be a mixed blessing for Bernard. The DHC is humiliated and dismissed, as anticipated. But Linda proves rather an embarrassment to all and mercifully dies not long after returning home. John, however, becomes a star at the outset but the star sets quickly as it is realized by others that he rejects their inflexible society and will remain a non-conformist. Lenina desperately wants him and he her but he is not prone to promiscuity and, reluctantly but firmly, rebuffs her advances. He rejects *soma*, too, and the vacuous pastimes of those around him. Bernard has clearly over-played his hand and is soon to depart for exile at the fringe of Antarctica, a non-conformist. The book ends with John's failed attempt to find solace in a seemingly remote location not far from London and his successful attempt to hang himself.
- There are several minor characters of note. Helmholtz Watson, the personification of a true Alpha-Plus and friend of Bernard's; lecturer at the College of Emotional Engineering. He is eventually found guilty of non-conformism and exiled. Henry Foster, one of Lenina's friends and a model World State citizen. And, Mustapha Mond, Resident World Controller of Western Europe, whom we have met already and who Huxley employs to make the principal intellectual arguments in favor of the reproductive and social system they now live in, and its ethos of "Community, Identity, Stability".

The concept of producing better human beings, refined by selective breeding and physical training, dates back to the Greco-Roman era. In recent times, it has appeared in more complex forms under the rubric "Eugenics", which was coined by Francis Galton, a distant relation of Charles Darwin, in the late 19th century to

define a set of beliefs and practices that sought to improve the genetic quality of a class of humans. Galton argued that Darwin's theory of evolution could be extended beyond plants and animals to include humans as well. Darwin vigorously rejected the notion as did the writer G. K. Chesterton and several other prominent figures of the day. But the idea attracted considerable attention, nevertheless, in England, the United States, Western Europe and elsewhere during the period 1890 to 1940. In the United States, the eugenics movement was spearheaded by a prominent biologist, Charles Davenport and an educator, Harry Laughlin. The former founded the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, and the latter was its first director. The purpose of the ERO was to "improve the natural, physical, mental and temperamental qualities of the human family." It was active from 1910 to 1940. The data collected included family pedigrees and physical, mental and moral inheritance traits. It was focused on the white race and what were termed "undesirable" traits, including pauperism, mental disability, dwarfism, promiscuity and criminality. Their principal suggested method for counteracting perceived negative traits was sterilization of those possessing them with the aim of reducing, if not eliminating these human defects.

Indiana was the first state to pass a sterilization law in 1907; followed by California and 28 other states by 1931. It is estimated that these laws resulted in the forced sterilization of more than 64,000 persons in America. Legal validation for them came from the U. S. Supreme Court in its decision *Buck v. Bell*, 1927, where the State of Virginia sought approval to sterilize Carrie Buck, an imbecile, on the grounds of promiscuity and won. Speaking for the majority, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote: "It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind."

Not all was so negative. Eugenics proponents also recommended programs styled "Fitter Families" and "Better Babies" that encouraged the poor, who were its main targets, to adopt nutritious eating habits, to do vigorous physical exercise, read books and to be morally responsible. A touching photo in one of the sources consulted, shows that year's winning family, dressed in their Sunday best standing before the Eugenics Building at the Kansas Free Fair sometime in the 1920s.

These initiatives, too, were followed with interest by many other countries that encouraged or created similar self-help or state sponsored measures. However, the revelations of the extreme perversity and horror of the German experiments in social engineering as exposed in graphic detail by allied troops when they liberated the extermination camps near the end of World War II pretty much marked the end

of the eugenics movement internationally and I'm not aware that it has much credence in today's world, although I could be wrong.

Huxley, of course, wrote *Brave New World* more than seven years before World War II began and was apparently unaware of the impending genetic atrocities that were on the horizon. Of greater interest is a somewhat parallel movement in science of which it is certain he knew and which is reflected in this book; and that is the concept of cloning. Although we have heard much about this subject during the past 25 years, it dates back to Huxley's time, when J. B. S. Haldane coined the Ancient Greek word for "twig", clon, later with an "e" added and pronounced clone, to define *in vitro* fertilization, ectogenesis and the beginnings of what today is subsumed under the broad rubric Genome Research. Huxley and Haldane were life-long friends and read one another's books. Haldane's writings are acknowledged to have influenced *Brave New World*.

Natural cloning occurs in humans in the reproductive form of twins. A wide range of animals have been cloned in recent years, but, to my knowledge, no humans have been reproduced by this technology. A South Korean claim of human cloning was proved bogus in the early 21st century. Further, the experiences with eugenics of mixing science, pseudo-science and political motives in the 1930 - 1940 period has made governments globally more cautious in making decisions about artificial birth methods and their application. For example, our National Institute of Health now has within its organization the National Human Genome Research Institute which has created regional centers that are studying the ethical, legal and social implications of genomic research. One of these centers is located in Case Western Reserve University.

When it appeared in 1932, *Brave New World* was met by mixed reviews. At the top, Rebecca West gushed that it was: "The most accomplished novel Huxley has yet written." Granville Hicks of the Communist Party USA, in an article for *The New Republic*, observed, after commenting on Huxley's privileged social status and his insulation from the working classes: "Of course he wants something to worry about – even if he has to go a long, long way to find it ...Mr. Huxley must have his chance to suffer and be brave."

Despite the general ambivalence with which it was received, *Brave New World* has continued to be read up to the present. I am told that it is a frequent selection in high school English literature courses. None of the reviews or commentary that I have read treat it within the context of science fiction, which is somewhat surprising; but probably due to the fact that it doesn't go far enough out in time, and is a more cautionary, sometimes prescient, forecast largely within a biological frame of reference. As social satire, it is effective in conveying his dismal view of

a vapid contemporary society, not exclusively American. It was banned in Boston and elsewhere because the book was considered by some to be pornographic. Despite its institutionalized free love, feelies, and zippy pajamas it seems more sophomoric than pornographic. Well, why not? Huxley has given us a world in which the inherent human instincts of aggression, competition, and curiosity have been largely bred out of the manufactured humans of 500 years hence. I was left with the sense that Huxley was trying to define the forces, some hopeful, others ominous, that were then competing for power within a turbulent 1920s and 30s Europe. He clearly saw that modern science and political power had the potential for combining in ways capable of producing both good and evil results. We continue to struggle with that relationship and its ramifications in our world today.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In a world where all children are factory made and raised by the State and the institution of marriage appears no longer to exist, what purpose does Huxley have in giving persons last names?
2. Huxley's title for this book, *Brave New World* seems intentionally ironic. Do you think that he has created a fictional world that has any plausibility? If you had the chance, how would you refine this society to meet your standards of life and morality?
3. Are there any characters in this story whom you think are sufficiently defined so that you could make a judgement as to whether or not you would like to know them better?
4. How would you characterize Huxley's depiction of the status of women in the Fordian future?
5. Huxley, some years after this book was published, said that he did not foresee nuclear weapons. Yet, he did seem to visualize future weapons of mass destruction in the Nine Years War with its anthrax bombs in the mid-21st century. Is he suggesting that the only way for humans to live in peace is to neutralize their inherent aggressive and acquisitive instincts? If so, would this be a positive step forward for humanity?