

THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH'S OMNICOMPETENT STATE

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Abstract

That Hideous Strength is clearly connected to C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, where he writes of the conditioners who seek to create a new society via the rejection of universal moral law and the rise of an educational and scientific elite. For Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* was a way to communicate the concerns expressed in *The Abolition of Man* in a story format that would appeal to those who might not read a treatise on the subject. This paper examines his concerns about a totalitarian threat as expressed in *The Abolition of Man* and *That Hideous Strength*, and then shows how those concerns appeared in his post-war correspondence. Were his fears and concerns valid? How, in particular, did he communicate his concerns to his many correspondents? How predictive did he consider *That Hideous Strength* to be as he experienced the reality of post-WWII Britain?

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C. S. Lewis often protested that he had no interest in or taste for politics. What he really meant by that was the type of politics he imbibed growing up in a Belfast suburb, listening to his father discuss with friends the nature of the local and national politics of his Irish/English homeland. Was it the pettiness that turned him against political discussion or the boredom he suffered from those overheard conversations? Whatever the cause, he normally abhorred purely political discussions.

Yet there is a clear distinction that must be drawn between politics per se and the principles of governing a civil society. That second topic interested Lewis considerably, and he commented often, both in his published works and in letters, particularly to Americans, on the subject of government. He was quite direct in his statements on the tendency of civil government to take upon itself too much power over individuals' lives.

One can find Lewis's thoughts on the limits of civil government's authority and the proper manner in which Christians should interact with the political system in a number of his essays, in particular. In his "Meditation on the Third Commandment," for instance, found in the essay collection *God in the Dock*, he lays out his plan for Christian political participation. In it, he argues against setting up some kind of explicitly Christian political party. No party, he explains, can possibly speak for all Christians. And if it does claim to speak for all Christians, it inevitably casts any Christian who disagrees with it as someone who is betraying the true faith.

By the mere act of calling itself the Christian Party, it implicitly accuses all Christians who do not join it of apostasy and betrayal. It will be exposed, in an aggravated degree, to that temptation which the Devil spares none of us at any time—the temptation of claiming for our favourite opinions that kind and degree of certainty and authority which really belongs only to our Faith. ("Meditation," 432)

Some Christians, he notes, may believe that a more authoritarian state is necessary to establish a moral life for the nation. Such a viewpoint might make accommodations with fascism. Others, fearing that kind of state control, would assert instead that limited government is the way to go since sin is found in everyone and no one should be trusted with too much power. The possible downside here is that they will align themselves with whatever the status quo is that exists in their society in order to preserve what liberty they have. Then there are those, also arising from a Christian perspective, who see the primary issue one of class privilege and who would support a Leftist revolution. These Christians would welcome sworn enemies of the faith in order to accomplish their revolutionary goals.

Since Christians will naturally divide into these separate groupings, Lewis advocates instead a movement that will stay outside the political parties to operate as an influence on each one. No party should consider itself the spokesperson for the Christians. Rather, Christians ought to band together in an interdenominational effort to apply pressure on all the parties who want their votes. Christians are to be loyal, not to any party, but to God, and the parties need to pay attention to the concerns of Christian voters.

“So all it comes down to is pestering M.P.’s with letters?” Yes: just that. I think such pestering combines the dove and the serpent. I think it means a world where parties have to take care not to alienate Christians, instead of a world where Christians have to be “loyal” to infidel parties. (433)

What might be called Lewis’s unique contribution to this concern about the tendency of government to take on an authority that endangers the common good is his linkage with trends in science and education that could form the cornerstone for a more totalitarian system of government. A nation of people—especially those more accustomed to greater political liberty—who would bristle at a direct attack on their liberties, perhaps might be accommodated to it via the more indirect route of changes in science and education, and, in particular, in the idea that these scientists and educators, being experts in their field, should be trusted. This trust would extend to the belief that whatever they tell us is for the best and that they only have our best interests at heart.

Lewis’s 1937 novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*, is arguably his first foray into commentary on an elite that seeks to use science and government to attain absolute control over a society. In it, he introduces the scientist Dr. Weston as a believer in man’s ultimate destiny to inhabit other planets. If there are inhabitants already on those planets, too bad for them. They can be wiped out for the “good” of the human race. Lewis incorporates this philosophy into the novel because he sees it as a new danger that is becoming more prevalent in his day.

But it is not until the 1940s that he begins to stress that theme more frequently. For instance, in his 1943 essay, “The Poison of Subjectivism,” he takes aim at a self-appointed societal leadership that wants to plan everyone’s lives minutely. “Many a popular ‘planner’ on a democratic platform, many a mild-eyed scientist in a democratic laboratory means, in the last resort, just what the Fascist means,” Lewis opined. “He believes that ‘good’ means whatever men are conditioned to approve. He believes that it is the function of him and his kind to condition men; to create consciences by eugenics, psychological manipulation of infants, state education and mass propaganda.” In that same essay, he critiques the qualities voters are beginning to look for in political leaders: vision, dynamism, and creativity. Instead, he urges that we turn from a government-created “good” and return to God’s absolutes. In doing so, we would then value more highly “virtue, knowledge, diligence, and skill.” He concludes, “Give me a man who will do a day’s work for a day’s pay, who will refuse bribes, who will not make up his facts, and who has learned his job.” (“Subjectivism,” 229)

But it is in *The Abolition of Man* and *That Hideous Strength* that Lewis’s concerns come to the forefront. The former, the product of three lectures Lewis gave at Durham University in 1943, lays out the philosophical case against the

loss of absolutes and the consequences that will follow in the wake of that loss. The latter is his imaginative approach to describe what might happen in a society that suffers from the arrogant amalgamation of science, pseudo-science, occultism, and totalitarian government. Lewis, in fact, clearly states in the preface to *That Hideous Strength* that this novel comes directly out of his philosophical arguments in *The Abolition of Man*.

Abolition's first chapter centers on how certain concepts can be smuggled into education. Lewis's deconstruction of what he calls the "Green Book" reveals an attempt by the authors to undermine the very concept of objective truth. Values that have been inculcated in students throughout the ages are no longer valid. Propagation of those values, in the case of this book, has been replaced by propaganda for pure subjectivism. Chapter two carries the argument further as he develops the idea of the *Tao*, which in Western and Christian culture we are more accustomed to call "natural law." Rejection of natural law, which comes from God, will end up destroying all values.

The final chapter of *The Abolition of Man* is where Lewis directs his readers' thoughts to the practical outworking of the rise of this totalitarianism. "Man's conquest of Nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized," he warns, "means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men." What we need to understand, he continues, is that "there neither is nor can be any simple increase of power on Man's side. Each new power won by man is a power over man as well." In essence, this will be "the power of some men to make other men what they please." (Lewis, *The Abolition*, 58-59)

He is careful to note that this is not new: men in all ages have attempted such things. However, this time he believes the danger is greater. Even though Plato would have liked every infant "nursed in a bureau," and others have devised similar educational schemes, he says we can "thank the beneficent obstinacy of real mothers, real nurses, and (above all) real children for preserving the human race in such sanity as it still possesses." So what is different now?

But the man-moulders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omniscient state and an irresistible scientific technique: we shall get at last a race of conditioners who really can cut out all posterity in what shape they please.
(60)

This will be made easier by the rejection of the *Tao*, or natural law, that all societies have, up until now, acknowledged. The conditioners will concoct an artificial *Tao* of their own making and will be free, therefore, to start from scratch.

To the hope that perhaps these new elite planners will somehow be benevolent, Lewis has a rather succinct reply: "I am very doubtful whether history shows us one example of a man who, having stepped outside traditional morality

and attained power, has used that power benevolently. I am inclined to think that the Conditioners will hate the conditioned.” (66) Once we give up our souls to get power in return, we will discover that we have become “slaves and puppets of that to which we have given ourselves.” (72)

Lewis then brings the subject directly to types of government:

The process which, if not checked, will abolish Man goes on apace among Communists and Democrats no less than among Fascists. The methods may (at first) differ in brutality. But many a mild-eyed scientist in pince-nez, many a popular dramatist, many an amateur philosopher in our midst, means in the long run just the same as the Nazi rulers of Germany. Traditional values are to be “debunked” and mankind to be cut out into some fresh shape at the will (which must, by hypothesis, be an arbitrary will) of some few lucky people in one lucky generation which has learned how to do it. (73-74)

Lewis is not claiming that the England of his day had given itself over to this complete debunking of all traditional values. He was alarmed, though, by what he could see developing. If England was not yet at the place he described in *Abolition*, it was nevertheless on the path that would lead to it, and he felt a duty to sound the warning. Yet not many will read a philosophical treatise based on university lectures. Lewis knew that a novel that issued the same warning would attract a larger audience.

Enter *That Hideous Strength*, first published in 1945, one year after the appearance of *The Abolition of Man*. The centerpiece in the novel of the unholy alliance between science and the omniscient state is the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments, or N.I.C.E., a rather clever way of demonstrating how totalitarianism can put on a humane face. In a sentence tinged with an understated sarcasm, Lewis describes the N.I.C.E. as “the first-fruits of that constructive fusion between the state and the laboratory on which so many thoughtful people base their hopes of a better world.” (Lewis, *That Hideous* . . . 21) One of the true believers, albeit woefully misinformed about the N.I.C.E.’s ultimate goals, is James Busby, Bursar for Lewis’s fictional Bracton College, from which the N.I.C.E. is going to appropriate the land it needs to fulfill its diabolical purposes. Blissfully unaware of the real intent of the organization, Busby enthuses,

It’s the first attempt to take applied science seriously from the national point of view. The difference in scale between it and anything we’ve had before amounts to a difference in kind. The buildings alone, the apparatus alone--! Think what it has done already for industry. Think how it is going to mobilise all the talent of the country; and not only scientific talent in the narrower sense. Fifteen departmental directors at fifteen thousand a year each! Its own legal staff! Its own

police, I'm told! Its own permanent staff of architects, surveyors, engineers! The thing's stupendous! (36)

As the rather vain and eager-to-enter-into-the-inner-ring Bracton professor Mark Studdock is introduced to the goals of the N.I.C.E. by the devious Lord Feverstone, he is informed that someone needs to take over the human race and re-condition it. Techniques will include sterilization, liquidation of backward races, selective breeding, and psychological conditioning leading to biochemical conditioning and direct manipulation of the brain. Playing to Studdock's desire to be part of the new age that is dawning, Feverstone entices him with this promise: "Man has got to take charge of Man. That means, remember, that some men have got to take charge of the rest—which is another reason for cashing in on it as soon as one can. You and I want to be the people who do the taking charge, not the ones who are taken charge of." (40) Studdock's role is to be one of the propagandists for the organization, writing untruths to win over the general public and also to influence the House of Commons. Lewis doesn't seem to see much difference between the two audiences—both are equally and easily led by the nose.

Mark Studdock is Lewis's modern man who, as he explained in *Abolition*, has been educated away from the values of the ages. "It must be remembered that in Mark's mind hardly one rag of noble thought, either Christian or Pagan, had a secure lodging. His education had been neither scientific nor classical—merely 'Modern.'" Lewis portrays Studdock as "a man of straw, a glib examinee in subjects that require no exact knowledge." (182) He is also the poster boy for the desire to be part of an "inner ring." Lewis's essay on that theme offers this definition: "I believe that in all men's lives at certain periods, and in many men's lives at all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside." ("Inner Ring," 146) That desire is one reason why Lewis thinks that even intelligent people can be drawn into the web of a burgeoning totalitarianism.

During his introductory period at the N.I.C.E., Studdock meets another Bracton College professor, William Hingest, a physical chemist who has seen enough of the organization and what it is really trying to do that he has decided to leave it and cut off all future contact. In his last conversation with Studdock (since the organization arranges his murder shortly after he leaves), Hingest reveals the revulsion with which he now views the N.I.C.E., saying, "If I found chemistry beginning to fit in with a secret police run by a middle-aged virago who doesn't wear corsets and a scheme for taking away his farm and his shop and his children from every Englishman, I'd let chemistry go to the devil and take up gardening instead." Hingest added, "You also want to take away from them [the lower orders of society] everything which makes life worth living and not only from them but from everyone except a parcel of prigs and professors." (69)

The middle-age virago mentioned by Hingest, who ran the secret police, and named rather humorously by Lewis as Fairy Hardcastle, tells Studdock that he does not really understand what an opportunity he is being given. “You’re being offered a chance of something far bigger than a seat in the cabinet. And there are only two alternatives, you know. Either to be in the N.I.C.E. or to be out of it. And I know better than you which is going to be most fun.” (95) This interchange makes it clear that the ones who think they are running the nation are in for a surprise. Eventually, the N.I.C.E. will control the entire government. While Lewis is certainly opposed to the goal of an omniscient government, it is worth noting that he sees the government practically as a puppet of the real power: the scientists and the educators of this new world order they seek to create.

When Studdock questions how they can pull off a “newspaper stunt . . . without being political,” and wonders whether it is the newspapers on the Right or the Left that will print his articles, Hardcastle schools him on how to manipulate politics:

Don’t you understand *anything*? Isn’t it absolutely essential to keep a fierce Left and a fierce Right, both on their toes and each terrified of the other? That’s how we get things done. Any opposition to the N.I.C.E. is represented as a Left racket in the Right papers and a Right racket in the Left papers. If it’s properly done, you get each side outbidding the other in support of us—to refute the enemy slanders. *Of course* we’re non-political. The real power always is. (97)

Hardcastle’s explanation is another indication that Lewis views political entities as manipulable by outside forces, that is, the ones who pull the strings of the politicians.

As the N.I.C.E. goes forward with its agenda, it engineers riots, getting the government to declare a state of emergency. Then it maneuvers itself into the position of being given the authority to make the rules for the state of emergency. To top off the plan, the hope is that Lord Feverstone, who already is a Member of Parliament, will receive the post of emergency governor. Then the N.I.C.E. will, in effect, become the new civil government as its power and influence expands. Totalitarian government will then carry out the nefarious plot of re-conditioning the human race.

In the novel, all of the evil plans are thwarted by a small band of faithful followers of the true God. The N.I.C.E. is destroyed supernaturally as the faithful ones simply obey the instructions they have been given. All the leaders of this incipient totalitarian endeavor, some of whom know they are being led by “spiritual forces” other than the true God, meet their doom in a cataclysmic ending. But this is a novel. Not all evil planners meet their doom in this life.

Lewis's ongoing concern about societal planners reveals itself in letters he wrote to some of his regular American correspondents. After WWII, Britain ousted the Conservatives and Prime Minister Winston Churchill and installed the Labour party in power. Rationing continued unabated despite the war's end. The national government began to insert itself into everyday life in a manner that Lewis abhorred. In one of his first letters to longtime American correspondent Vera Mathews/Gebbert, he referred to the Labour government as "Mr. Atlee's Iron Curtain." (Hooper, *Collected* vol 2, 812) Writing to Mathews again two years later, he explained the situation in Britain: "Try living in 'free' England for a bit, and you would realize what government interference can mean! And not only interference, but interference in a 'school marm' form which is maddening." He had an example: "For instance, one of our rulers the other day defended rationing, not on the only possible grounds, i.e. the economic, but on the ground that in the old days housewives bought the food which they knew their husbands and families *liked*: whereas now, thanks to rationing, they are forced to provide their households with 'a properly balanced diet.'" Then he added this quip: "There are times when one feels that a minister or two dangling from a lamp post in Whitehall would be an attraction that would draw a hard worked man up to London!" (932-933)

Writing to Warfield Firor, a noted surgeon at Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore, Lewis comments on America getting into the Korean War situation before Britain and says he is rather ashamed at his government's reluctance to help. "You will perhaps have read already in the papers that their only move so far has been a lot of gas about 'civil defence' . . . and a resolution to seize this golden opportunity of stealing a few more of our liberties from us. Try not to judge us by our rulers. There is another side to the picture." (Hooper *Collected* vol 3 43) A year after writing that letter, Lewis tells Mary Van Deusen, another of his regular correspondents, "Where benevolent planning, armed with political or economic power, can become wicked is when it tramples on people's rights for the sake of their good." (90-91)

By 1954, the new Conservative government, with Churchill back in charge as prime minister, had ended rationing and Lewis informed his American friends that they didn't have to send any more food or other supplies to help out. But he offered this bit of sarcastic "hopeful" advice to Vera Gebbert: "But cheer up, if our friends the Socialists get back into power, you will be able to exercise your unfailing kindness once more by supplying us, not with little luxuries, but with the necessities of life!" (509) Again to Gebbert, this time in 1959: "We live under the constant threat of a Socialist government, which would finish us off completely." (1047) And to Mrs. Frank Jones, just one week before his death, Lewis sounds the same note: "Our papers at the moment are filled with nothing but politics, a subject in which I cannot take any great interest. My brother tells

me gloomily that it is an absolute certainty that we shall have a Labour government within a few months, with all the regimentation, austerity, and meddling which they so enjoy.” (1481)

Lewis’s 1958 essay, “Is Progress Possible? Willing Slaves of the Welfare State,” may be his final formal denunciation of the omniscient state. In it, he reiterates his earlier warnings from *The Abolition of Man* and *That Hideous Strength*. “If society can mend, remake, and unmake men at its pleasure, its pleasure may, of course, be humane or homicidal. The difference is important. But, either way, rulers have become owners.” He complains that two wars led to “vast curtailments of liberty” and that his fellow countrymen “have grown, though grumblingly, accustomed to our chains.” Government, he notes, has now taken over “many spheres of activity once left to choice or chance.” Natural law, the rights of man, and the inherent value of the individual, he asserts, have died. “The modern State exists not to protect our rights but to do us good or make us good—anyway, to do something to us or to make us something. . . . We are less their subjects than their wards, pupils, or domestic animals. There is nothing left of which we can say to them, ‘Mind your own business.’ Our whole lives *are* their business.”

Then he offers this poignant commentary:

Again, the new oligarchy must more and more base its claim to plan us on its claim to knowledge. If we are to be mothered, mother must know best. This means they must increasingly rely on the advice of scientists, till in the end the politicians proper become merely the scientists’ puppets. Technocracy is the form to which a planned society must tend. (“Is Progress Possible?” 513-514)

The language in the above quote mirrors the language in *That Hideous Strength*: politicians are not the ones who are in charge; behind the curtain we find the real power, and the politicians are mere “puppets,” carrying out the demented vision of the evil planners.

The only revision Lewis seemed to make in his view of the omniscient state was related to Britain’s National Health Service. In a letter to his most regular American correspondent, Mary Willis Shelburne, in 1959, he commiserated with her many illness complaints by declaring,

What you have gone through begins to reconcile me to our Welfare State of which I have said so many hard things. “National Health Service” with free treatment for all has its drawbacks—one being that Doctors are incessantly pestered by people who have nothing wrong with them. But it is better than leaving people to sink or swim on their own resources. (Hooper, *Collected* . . . 1063)

How much this change of opinion was influenced by his wife Joy Lewis's health and his own, he does not say, but given his continued opposition to socialist government right up to his death, his support for government healthcare appears to be an anomaly. Further, his comment that the treatments were "free" betrays a blind spot, perhaps, in understanding that nothing offered by government is really free.

Overall, though, Lewis deplored the tendency for the state to become the be-all and end-all in society. A nation is more than its government, he believed; the people comprise the nation, and civil government is to be reined in and kept to a minimum so that people might have the liberty to make their own choices in life. Further, people need to be aware of the philosophical trends that can form the foundation for omniscient government if there is any hope to check its progress. He wrote about and fought for this principle for more than two decades.

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BIONOTE

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