

Brave New World: A Historical Perspective

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History and commerce

Aldous Huxley wrote *Brave New World* in 1931 at the beginning of a worldwide depression. It was also the year that the Empire State Building was completed.

The American stock market crash of 1929 had closed banks, wiped out many people's savings, and caused unemployment rates to soar. The effects of the crash were felt worldwide, including in England, where Huxley lived. People must have longed for the kind of prosperity that Huxley gives to the citizens of his fictional brave new world.

Automation, before unemployment, had been rapidly replacing many workers and Henry Ford, who invented the modern factory assembly line in 1913, was able to efficiently mass produce cars that were affordable to many of his workers. For those who didn't have the ready cash - well, there were always bank loans ... until the crash, that is. Sound familiar?

Huxley measured the calendar in *Brave New World* pre- HF or post HF; giving Henry Ford an almost Christ-like importance.

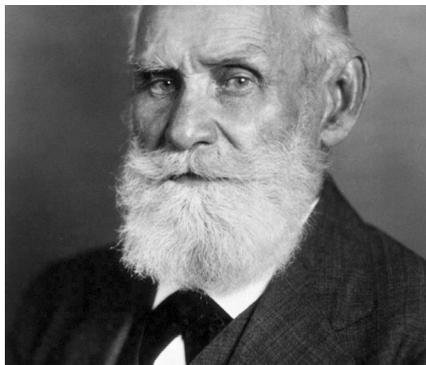
Ideas

In Huxley's day, people's values and ideas were changing rapidly. By the 1920s, Victorian values were giving way to a much more permissive outlook. The idea of free love (sex outside of marriage) was advocated by Gertrude Stein and given some credibility by anthropologist Margaret Mead. These new sexual attitudes are taken to an extreme in *Brave New World*.

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Science

Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936) was exploring the ideas of 'social engineering' by demonstrating that one can create a conditioned response in animals. Pavlov rang a bell whenever he fed a group of dogs until eventually Pavlov's dogs began to drool when the bell was rung without any food being brought.

Eugenics

Born of an idea to decrease the birth of 'inferior' human beings, the notion of eugenics perhaps came into being when William Goodell, an American gynaecologist, first advocated the castration of the insane in the nineteenth century.

However, it was only turned into a 'science' a bit later, by Charles Darwin's half-cousin, Sir Frances Galton, a psychologist and anthropologist, who coined both the term "eugenics" and the phrase "nature versus nurture".

In the 1930s, the scientific and moral standing of eugenics started to decline as it was adopted to 'accommodate' the discriminatory policies of the Nazis.

Huxley's description of genetic engineering in the Hatcheries of his *Brave New World* was prescient of both the huge advances that were going to be made in the field of genetics but also of the use to which it would be put by the horrific totalitarian regimes that were rising out of the economic ruins of the Great Depression.

Brave New World was written just before the rise of Adolph Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy, leaders who created totalitarian states in countries fraught with economic and political problems. Huxley could not have fully predicted what was on the horizon.