



## A New and Subversive Phenomenon

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Visiting any of our high streets these days (in most provincial cities anyway) is a depressing experience. Deserted empty shops closed as a consequence of the multi-million debts run up by their owners. In others the sad air of uniformity that one might have expected visiting a Soviet GUM in the 1950's. I often turn into Primark as it at least has the cheerful air of unadulterated free market capitalism. As someone who loves books the picture is especially depressing. Walk into almost any high street book chain and what does one see. Row after row of celebrity biography with the intellectual highlight being perhaps a small section on history dominated by military history, perhaps being peered over by some sad middle aged man with dreams of experiencing the wars he was lucky not to live through. Or a shelf or two on what are deemed to be 'classic works', a Dickens here, a Thackeray there. You will be very lucky to find much published more than a year or two ago. It is as if some modern day 'Big Brother' in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* stalked the land. Remember the Party's slogan in 1984 was "WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" (my emphasis, see, e.g. p. 18). The Ministry of Truth held vast repositories with hidden furnaces where original books were destroyed and swarms of experts would rewrite them into politically correct versions. The great subversive act of Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in response to all this was to open a diary out of view of the all-seeing telescreen. By this he could communicate *truth* to the future.

But there is a new phenomenon in our high streets. How many people realise that [Oxfam](#) has risen to being one of the UK's largest book retailers and it seems the largest second-hand retailer of books in Europe, selling

some 11 million a year. Indeed, such is the demand for these technologically backward instruments of truth that in some Oxfam shops (such as in Blandford near where I live) you will find an amazing variety of second-hand books which you could obtain elsewhere only if you were already aware of their existence and could therefore order them. For example, I recently obtained a copy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 1967) for a mere £1.99. Perfect condition despite its age. And the perfect tool to help expose the philosophical roots of current political philosophy. And of course it may be available on the internet for aficionados of buttons and screens. But it is a totally different experience to hold in one's own hands one of the instruments that has contributed to the deaths of millions of people, the torture of countless others, and the destruction of the principles of government in our own land. To hold it and read "the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property" (see p. 96) and ponder its continuing malign influence. And feel quite how slim the book, which has been one of the greatest Weapons of Mass Destruction in history, is. But I run the risk of drifting away from my main theme, subversion. For these shops cultivate the ultimate in subversion, the ability to obtain a book in its original form, unadulterated, to hold it as private property, and to experience it as it was meant to be read. And judging by the sales figures there must be many other subversives like myself still around. Long may it continue!

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