Episode 868: Science Fiction, Liberty, and Dystopia

Guest: Brad Birzer

WOODS: Always fun to talk to Brad Birzer.

BIRZER: And likewise.

WOODS: In particular, we're talking today about science fiction and libertarian themes that we find in it, and there are some great names that you have in your course that you've done for Liberty Classroom on precisely this subject, you Part I course that goes all the way up through George Orwell. I don't really know where to begin, except with this question: why science fiction? Why this theme?

BIRZER: Yeah, well, there are a lot of reasons, Tom. Science fiction I think is inherently libertarian. That is, it's not only a genre that allows the imagination to just flourish, which of course is so uniquely individual, but it also allows us to explore possibilities.

So one of the things that's really interesting just historically — and you would know this far better than I do, being so good on the Progressive Era — one of the reasons science fiction really arose — even though it didn't have that label until the 1950s, but what we look back and call science fiction. One reason it arose and did so well in America, especially in the early 20th century, is it was generally promoted by Jews and Catholics — usually edited by Jews, often written and illustrated by Catholics — because these were all immigrant groups coming into the East Coast, especially places like New York, that were not allowed, because of their religion or their ethnicity, they were not really allowed or even encouraged to be a part of mainstream publishing. So it was always an underground movement, and that meant from the very beginning of science fiction.

And this is still somewhat true; it's not as true as it was a hundred years ago. But it always had an anti-authoritarian streak, and it always has had a streak that wanted to take down the elites, especially those kind of white, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, kind of Protestant elites that had held things together for so long during Progressive America. So that's one reason that I'm very interested in it.

But also, as I mentioned just a moment ago, the fact that we can explore anything in science fiction — there's nothing off limits in science fiction, whether we're talking about genetic engineering or we're talking about exploration of the stars or exploding

a sun or creating a communist utopia, dystopia, whatever it is, we can do it in science fiction. So I think it's kind of the ultimate genre in terms of literature.

WOODS: And of course you can get both utopian tracts and dystopian tracts out of science fiction, because of course you're dealing with oftentimes a future that hasn't occurred yet and it could go in either direction. But is there a, in general on balance, if you had to say, if you had to choose, would you say science fiction in general has been more dystopian than utopian?

BIRZER: Yeah, I would say definitely. I don't even think — and I agree with you completely, Tom, because there are open-ended possibilities, you could explore a communist or some kind of nationalist utopia, and that has happened. Certainly especially in the '60s and '70s, there were some attempts to write about feminist utopias and eco-topia, kind of an environmentalist utopia. But they really fall flat. There's something in the genre that I think if you don't have a common enemy, if there's not something that has to be fought, it doesn't make for good drama at all. So I think generally, there has to be kind of — for it to work effectively, there really has to be an anti-authoritarian streak in it. So even — and I've read some libertarian utopias too, which are okay, but they kind of fall flat in the same way that a feminist utopia would. It's just not as interesting. When everybody's getting along, there's not a lot of drama, obviously.

WOODS: Let's go back to the 16th century, because you actually start with Thomas More and *Utopia*, which is an interesting place to start. A lot of people are thinking no doubt in terms of Orwell, C.S. Lewis, Huxley, at least up to the mid-20th century. Justify your decision to start there.

BIRZER: Well, yeah, that's a great question as well, Tom. And I had to make a — I definitely had to make a judgment there, and I wanted to look at the vast — Well, let me put it this way; I'll try to answer it in two parts. So the first answer I would give you is just as a historian, one of the things that I was trying to show was the discontinuity of the utopian and dystopian idea; that is, that we really have to go from Plato and stories of Atlantis and the Republic. We really had to jump all the way from Plato, so roughly 360 B.C. all the way up until 1500 A.D. to have any kind of serious examination. So we're talking about almost a 2,000-year gap in Western literature in which dystopia and utopia is not taken very seriously.

So it's not until Thomas More, when he writes *Utopia*, it's not until then with the English Renaissance that we start seeing some real serious looks at what Plato had said and what kind of possibilities there would be. And it's not just More. I didn't go into this, Tom, but I could have talked a little bit about Machiavelli and I could have talked a little bit about Shakespeare, especially with *The Tempest* and *Brave New World* and some other things.

But the second reason I chose More — so one was just to get the historical, long view. But the other reason I chose More is probably just a bit of childhood heroism. My mom went to all-girls Catholic school in Hays, Kansas, and the boys' school equivalent was Thomas More. So I always kind of grew up with Thomas More in the background of a lot that I did.

And as a kid, I had always assumed that he was kind of a bad guy because of *Utopia*, and I couldn't understand why the Catholic Church liked him so much, but then of course I started reading him, and I realized, at least from my non-tutored perspective, that *Utopia*, his *Utopia*, is really a mocking of the idea of utopia, and I think there are some very strong — certainly there is a lot of Renaissance humanism in the book, but I think there's also a lot of kind of proto-libertarianism in it as well, because it is mocking this idea of a utopia. And I think that comes out pretty clearly, at least towards the end of the book.

And then the fact that More, whatever poor choices he had made in his life — especially the persecution of Protestants is not something we could easily justify or explain — but he does end up dying of course for the good cause and fighting against the supremacy of the king and the absolute right of the monarch to do what he wants, even though Henry was one of his closest friends. So to me the whole story is pretty telling and pretty good and pretty fetching.

WOODS: But at that time, were there — other than some radical Protestants, were there really enough people calling for common ownership of goods that there would have been a need for a satire against it? That's why I think some people may wonder if it really is satirical or if it is means literally.

BIRZER: Yeah, there's a debate among Thomas More scholars, and I'm certainly not —

WOODS: Well, then, by the way — Let me jump in here.

BIRZER: Sure.

WOODS: If that's the case, if there really is a debate about whether this thing is to be taken seriously or not, what does that say about it as a work, that if we don't understand what the point of it is, isn't it a total flop?

BIRZER: Well, the fact that it's survived this long and that people are still debating about it, I would say no.

WOODS: [laughing] All right, okay, I'll give it that.

BIRZER: [laughing] That's my literary answer. But I think if you look at Thomas More's life, he never certainly — this was someone who believed very strongly in property. He believed — outside of the persecution, again, which I think was not something we could justify. But outside of that, he generally was in favor of certain civil liberties, for his time very much so. So it doesn't really fit. This is a married man. This is a devout Catholic. This is a Mass-going Catholic, someone who took the Catholic Church very seriously. So it's very hard for me to see in him the idea that there could be common property in marriage or that we could have free love. It just doesn't fit. And there are enough hints in the novel itself, or at least in the satire, that I think we can take it as kind of a joke.

Partly — So yes, Tom, there were a lot of things going on at the time that, is there a question of utopia? Well, not necessarily. The big question at the time, because of the

discovery of the American Indians, was whether or not the Fall had occurred everywhere. That was a big question for a lot of people, and that, in many ways Thomas More is trying to answer: is the New World this possible place without sin? No, that's not possible.

WOODS: All right, now I want to — there are so many different topics raised in your course, but I want to focus in on things that I know the most about.

BIRZER: Sure, yeah.

WOODS: But also because I want people to take the course, and we're linking to it at TomWoods.com/868 so that you can see the topics that are covered. And then of course, I mean, if you haven't joined Liberty Classroom and you listen to this show — is that possible, Brad? That somebody listening to this show would not be a member of Liberty Classroom? I can't compute that.

BIRZER: Come on, people. Get with it. There you go [laughing].

WOODS: Yeah, exactly. My brain doesn't work that way. Anyway, let's go on, because I remember reading a lot of this stuff when I was in school, and I remember that some of the material that you've covered was some of the most interesting stuff that I'd thought I'd read in school. Now, I am sorry to tell you, although I read the *Narnia* series, I never read *The Space Trilogy*. I bought it for my daughter because I knew she should read it and I knew I should read it. I figured she's more likely to get to it than I am. So you can shame me about that in just a minute, but let's start with *Brave New World*, because I think that was the first book in school that I put down and said, okay, finally, I'd read a book in school that wasn't a total chore to read.

BIRZER: Yeah.

WOODS: And to this day, I find it — I still kind of think about it from time to time. I found it really, really disturbing. Can you give people a two-minute overview of what's going on here, and then we'll take it apart?

BIRZER: Yeah, absolutely. And the same with me, Tom. These books just opened up my whole mind when I was in public school and not enjoying public school, so they were very, very important for me as well. But *Brave New World* was written by Aldous Huxley. Huxley is the grandson of Thomas Huxley, the famous evolutionary theorist, and so he comes from a very elite scientific background, but he himself is more of a humanist than he is a scientist.

And so he really wants to put into practice — that is, he wants to kind of draw out in the humanities would might happen if we took some of his scientific theories, some of this evolution in practice, what would happen if we started implementing these ideas. What would happen to our free will? What would happen to our own identity as humans? Would we even be humans if we started using all of these chemicals and genetic modifications?

And so science fiction — first of all, there wasn't the term at the time, but even the stuff that was being written that we would now call science fiction was all pretty much considered trash. And Huxley, there really had been nobody writing since G.K. Chesterton stuff that would be considered science fiction, so there was probably a 10, 15-year gap there in the history of literature where there is nothing that's science fiction. And when Huxley writes this, it's pretty shocking for people, because not only does it look at the futurism which is being discussed in the 1920s, especially with the rise of fascism and communism, but it really does knock all of those things down.

And Huxley's an odd character in his own life. He became addicted to mescaline and to LSD and other things towards the end of his life. I think probably of all Americans who remember him, they probably remember him as much for his influence on the rock band The Doors as they do for his actual writing and his earlier stuff. But he certainly had an odd career. And yet I think because he came from this very elite English background, when he wrote this novel it was pretty shocking. It certainly made — it was a sensation everywhere, all throughout the English-speaking world.

WOODS: Now, I haven't looked into this, but I just seem to recall — at least my instinct is telling me that Huxley's own political views leaned socialist. Am I remembering that right?

BIRZER: No. You know, Tom, he's so eclectic. There were a whole group of people, mostly Catholic and Anglican writers like Evelyn Waugh, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and they had flirted somewhat — Pound, especially — they had flirted somewhat with various forms of fascism, but they tended — the only one who ever flirted really with anything that was on the left was George Orwell among that group.

WOODS: Really? So I'm totally wrong about — I'm glad to be wrong about Huxley.

BIRZER: I wouldn't say you're totally wrong. He probably became kind of a welfare-state guy, but definitely not a lefty by any means and would have been pretty taken aback to have been considered a leftist, especially in the '30s or '40s.

WOODS: Is there anything in — Now, I didn't read the book *Brave New World Revisited*, where I think what he was trying to do was to show that some of the things that he had written about in his fictional work may actually be coming to fruition in the real world. I never read that one.

BIRZER: It's not good, Tom.

WOODS: It's not good? Okay —

BIRZER: It's really more of an essay, just kind of an afterword, what could happen, not a sequel.

WOODS: All right, so fair enough. But I'm interested, though, in what your opinion is on the relevance, let's say, of this novel. I mean, not that we're actually living the exact scenario he's describing, but is there some broader message that we can take away, particularly from a libertarian standpoint, that we can draw out of this?

BIRZER: Oh yeah, it's such a libertarian novel. It would be impossible for it to be anything else, I think, just reading it and knowing what happens in the story. It really is this very fearful kind of look at what could happen if we allowed science to rule all things. And it's not real science; it's more scientism. But a lot of this does come form his grandfather, from Huxley's grandfather, from some of the debates that were going on among sociologists during the Progressive Era. So there were people like Frank Lester Ward, one of the most prominent sociologists, who was arguing that government should be run by a sociocracy; that is, we should be run by sociologists who have these kind of laboratories and they watch how families work.

And the idea at the time, which was often called Reform Darwinism, was this belief that if you could trap Darwinism in a scientific study — that is, if you could actually parse it, understand how it was working, we could track how evolution works and we could stop or hone evolution towards a certain direction. So if we wanted, for example, to have only blue-eyed babies, we could probably do that at some point. If we wanted to make sure that we had a group in *Brave New World* where you have the Alpha Pluses who are the intelligentsia, and then we have the Alphas who are the smart people but not quite the intelligentsia, and the Betas and so forth.

These we could have at all of these varying levels, and the idea of what Huxley says is that the moment that we start controlling generations — that is, the moment that we take one generation and proclaim it to be the superiors either of the past or the future — we're creating a form of chronological tyranny. That is, we're not allowing free will to reign in future generations. So we may have the freedom now to mess with those kinds of things, but by doing so, we're denying the free will of future humanity in persons to make the very same decisions that we see as important. This same element, this'll be brought up in C.S. Lewis' *Abolition of Man*, one of the great books that he wrote during World War II coming out of the speeches that he gave for the British people during World War II, trying to explain why the British were not fascist and why they were not communist. So I think Huxley is making a very interesting point about the nature of free will throughout the whole book.

WOODS: I can't remember if that book is really suitable — is there anything in that book that would be unsuitable for, let's say, an early teen?

BIRZER: Well, it is deeply sexual. But in a very —

WOODS: Yeah, maybe that's what I'm remembering [laughing].

BIRZER: But in a very clinical way, Tom. At the very beginning, there's a really, really weird scene where all of the little boys and little girls are to stand naked with one another. And of course, symbolically this is to show that they've returned to a pre-Eden innocence, but it's definitely creepy. And they're supposed to figure each other out and understand one another. And the whole book, everything is based on having free love and having access to free love at any moment.

WOODS: You know, I can't help mentioning, by the way, I love the fact — You know the expression about, It's better to — What's that expression? Asking permission rather than — ?

BIRZER: [laughing] Yeah, right.

WOODS: Do you know the expression?

BIRZER: It's better to beg forgiveness than ask permission.

WOODS: That's what it is. That's what it is. That's what you did by putting music in this course [laughing]. It's not like I wasn't going to let you do it, but I have to say I was shocked to see, okay, Eurhythmics in here, to see Pink Floyd, and to see Glass Hammer. Now, to see Glass Hammer is almost a step too far, because —

BIRZER: [laughing]

WOODS: I mean, I like Glass Hammer, but this is like one of your side interests — you're trying to be a proselytizer on my website.

BIRZER: [laughing] I was trying to give a multimedia experience, Tom.

WOODS: And that you did, that you did.

BIRZER: In between the readings, yeah.

WOODS: Yeah, I mean, really, you're getting music, you're getting Brad doing dramatic readings from the texts, and you're getting his analysis, and you're still — ?

BIRZER: [laughing] If I'm going too far, Tom, you let me know. I will go back to strict academic lecture.

WOODS: I cannot imagine that happening, but that, I just thought, That guy — and I bet he thought, Well, I'll just do it, and then what's he going to do [laughing]?

BIRZER: No, that's not true, Tom —

WOODS: No, no, you're much too good of a guy, but all the same, it was a big surprise.

BIRZER: Yeah, it was probably more of me just really getting into it and having fun.

WOODS: Well, in particular, though, of course Eurhythmics did the soundtrack for the movie version of *1984*, so that one you can legitimately say, Come on, people, this really is drawn right from the thing.

BIRZER: That's right.

WOODS: By the way, just because I mentioned that, we'll just skip ahead just quickly to Orwell. I just want to know what you thought of the movie version of *1984*, and then we'll get back and go to C.S. Lewis.

BIRZER: Yeah, well, it's just such a deeply depressing story. It's just suffocating. And I think the movie from 1984 with John Hurt, I think it was extremely well done, because

it really got into the grittiness of what this socialism would look like, that it's not going to be glittering and shiny like *Brave New World*, which is really more of kind of a crony capitalism/socialism than it is I think actual socialism. But certainly I think Orwell does an amazing job of showing just how gritty and nasty the society would be. That movie, you just want to take several showers after watching that movie, but it is very well done.

WOODS: I remember seeing it so long ago, but I just didn't remember the details. All right, let's talk about C.S. Lewis.

BIRZER: Sure.

WOODS: He's extremely prolific. His nonfiction is very compelling. Obviously the *Narnia* series, which didn't, at least the way they did it, translate all that well into the big screen. And of course it was partly because it looked like they were trying to downplay or remove the Christian themes from it so that *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* just seemed like a pointless thing. We're just on a mission for nothing. It was just odd. It just didn't quite work.

But anyway, I genuinely want you to shame me for not having read *The Space Trilogy*. Tell people the three titles in that trilogy and what's great about it.

BIRZER: Yeah, so the three titles are *Perelandra* — I'm sorry; the first one is *Out of the Silent Planet*, and then *Perelandra*, and then *That Hideous Strength*. And the best way to think of them, Tom, is that they're explorations of Mars, Venus, and then Earth. And you shouldn't be shamed necessarily for not having read it. I think part of it — and I know you didn't — did you grow up Catholic, Tom?

WOODS: No, I didn't.

BIRZER: You converted, yeah. So I found generally that this isn't as true for our students today, but for people my age, and I know you're a little bit younger. But for people my age especially, it was — Lewis was pretty much only introduced in Protestant families. Tolkien was introduced in Catholic families, so I have found generally that Catholic kids who grew up in the '60s, '70s, and '80s were often introduced to Tolkien and not Lewis and that vice versa was true especially for evangelical families.

And so I didn't come to Lewis either until I was in college and I was taking — It was my junior year of college, and I took a course on the philosophy — it was a philosophy course, but it was looking at philosophical issues in fantasy literature taught by a pretty well known Platonist at Notre Dame, a really interesting guy. But it was in that class that I first encountered C.S. Lewis. I had known, other than the fact he was Tolkien's best friend, I had not read him either. And we read *The Space Trilogy* in college, so I didn't have that childhood experience, and I didn't read *Narnia* until I had kids. So that was all new for me; that's all been in the last 20 years, then, that I've read *Narnia*.

So but what I found and what's really interesting to me as an adult going back and looking at this is that Lewis was absolutely critical in mainstreaming science fiction — that is, in making it a legitimate genre. So again, when he wrote *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*, there was really nothing out there. And again, we've gone almost a full decade, 15 years since Huxley had written, so there's a huge gap in between Huxley and Lewis.

But Lewis very intentionally, he and Tolkien sat down one day probably in 1937 and challenged each other to write the kinds of stories that they thought should be written but were not taken seriously. So out of that, Tolkien decided to write a time-travel story, which became essentially the middle section of the Middle Earth stories. It became the stories about Númenor in *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales*. But Lewis then was much more successful at that point and wrote the three stories of what we call *The Space Trilogy* or the Ransom trilogy.

WOODS: All right, now, I really don't know anything about, other than the late Ralph Raico kept telling me to read them —

BIRZER: Oh, that's great. I didn't know he liked them.

WOODS: Oh, he was a big C.S. Lewis fan, and he always told me that he — the way he put it was, I have not been given the gift of faith, and he said, There have been times that I have considered converting to Christianity or Catholicism just to spite the modern world, but I felt like I should have a better reason than that.

BIRZER: [laughing] Oh, Raico was great. Ah, man.

WOODS: I'm glad; I didn't know you knew him.

BIRZER: I only met him a couple of times, but he was so kind to me and just so helpful and very — he's just such a great mentor in those few times I met him.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah, that's how I felt.

BIRZER: Through IHS, I met him.

WOODS: Yeah, that's how I met him. I met him through IHS back around 1992. It was a long time ago. Look, we've got to get back to the show [laughing]. I keep forgetting we're not just talking on the phone. We actually have to do the show. All right, get back to *The Space Trilogy*, will you?

BIRZER: Sure. So one of the things that Lewis was trying to do was he was making an argument against imperialism. So he is looking at really two things, Tom. When he starts the trilogy, of course, there is fascism and communism, and Lewis is one of the single greatest opponents of each of those ideologies. And so he wanted to look like Huxley at what would happen if we had this scientism that started ruling government and tried to denude us of free will. But then of course, during writing the second story, World War II breaks out, so the theme changes a little bit by the time we get to the final book.

So really there are two themes: one, he's looking at this kind of scientism and what it would do to free will. But number two, he also starts looking then at what happens if — and it's a very Hayekian theme — what happens if in fighting the Nazis we become the Nazis — that is, if we have used wartime measures that are no better than the Nazis to fight them, have we really won?

And Lewis is just incredible, Tom. I think libertarians should take him more seriously. At the very end of his life, he embraced some of the welfare state, but up to that point, really up until he was about 60, he would have been not quite an anarchist but pretty darn close. He certainly would be a hardcore libertarian, even though he wouldn't have used that title for himself. Towards the end of his life, because of what he saw with his wife, he became pretty taken with the National Health Service and regretted at least privately some of the anti-welfare things he had written as a younger man. But certainly up until he was about 60, he just adamantly hated all forms of welfare. He just thought that they were terrible for the human condition. And really, I think *That Hideous Strength*, it should be better known because in some ways it's better than *1984*, but it also is almost exactly *The Road to Serfdom* but in fantasy form.

WOODS: You know, I could go on. We could definitely do an episode on C.S. Lewis, and yet I feel like I've got just so much time with you —

BIRZER: Sure.

WOODS: — and I do want to talk about Orwell, whom you just mentioned. And we'll skip over *Animal Farm*, because a lot of people have read it, but man, I read that, I think I was in the fourth grade and I appreciated it on the level that fourth grader would appreciate it. And then later on, I saw the deeper significance of it, and it really is quite chilling. It doesn't come across as quite as chilling to a nine- or ten-year-old, and then you see, oh my goodness.

But so let's talk about *1984*. This is a book that a lot of people I think reference and haven't read, because they know the idea is that it's a big-brother government and this and that. But really struck me in it were the way they would make somebody disappear from the past. If there was an enemy of the regime, they would go back and laboriously remove that person from all newspapers and everything. Or they would reduce the chocolate ration, but the media would just emphasize that the chocolate ration has been increased. But it's been decreased, but they just emphasize it and people are going, Isn't it wonderful that the chocolate ration has been increased?

But now, of course, we don't do precisely those things today, but there are things — we don't go back and remove somebody from old newspapers, but there are things people can do that can get them pretty much removed from polite society and never be heard from again.

BIRZER: Oh, absolutely. You make one offhand comment somewhere, and your reputation is done, yeah.

WOODS: And of course the idea of the regime always having an enemy to concentrate people's hatred on. There are a lot of themes that are eerily familiar. I would like to hear the Brad Birzer take on *1984*.

BIRZER: Oh sure. Well, just to warn your listeners, it is — if you haven't read it or you haven't read it in a while, be prepared to be utterly depressed. It is, the whole novel — and I think it's both its strength and its weakness — the whole novel is written to be as though you're drowning, so you just can't come up for air. There's no redeeming moment in the novel, ever.

You have the rebellion at the very beginning. The first act of rebellion is where our hero, Winston Smith — and of course he's not really a hero, but he's the only character who even comes close to heroism. Winston Smith writes down the date, 1984, and by doing so, he is actually rebelling against the regime, because that regime — we don't know exactly what year it is. It could be 1982; it could be 2000; it could be 2015. We don't know, because they stopped time, essentially, and they don't keep calendars anymore, and there's only one kind of bell in London that still kind of rings at all.

And Huxley — and so were Orwell; they were both extremely fascinated with time and what happens to time after corporations and railroads standardize us. And of course, we just had — you and I are recording this on the Monday after our whole change of Daylight Saving, and these guys were fascinated by that because that only started in the late 1800s. To have kind of a standardized time is relatively new, as opposed to liturgical or church time. So Orwell and Huxley were both very concerned with that.

So that first act of disobedience is really writing down the date, because he's claiming something. As a human, he's actually saying, I can determine what time it is. I'm not told what to do.

But the novel itself is just so brutal. As you said, we have all of these cases of disappearing. And in many ways, that's the theme of the whole story. It is the disappearance of everything. It's the disappearance of heroism. It's the disappearance of virtue. It's the disappearance of a good standard of living. It's the disappearance of truth. All of these things are being put aside all for the sake of power.

Orwell was — people always call him — they tend to remember him as a socialist, which is absolutely not true.

WOODS: Yeah, I was interested to learn this in your course, actually.

BIRZER: It is not true at all. He was not a fan of capitalism, but his definition of capitalism was essentially large corporations that were in league with the government. So that's what he was opposed to. And I wouldn't call him a libertarian, though certainly he was a civil libertarian. But he towards the end of his life, after he had fought with the socialists during the Spanish Civil War, he was so horrified by what the socialists had done that he proclaimed himself a full-blown anarchist after the Spanish Civil War. And so much of *Animal Farm*, of course — Interestingly enough, *1984* is not based on communism as much. We could talk about that, Tom. But *Animal*

Farm is. *Animal Farm* is based on the idea of what's actually happened in real communism and how the equality is nothing but a sham and it's all about power.

1984 was actually based on James Burnham's work on the managerial revolution, and what Orwell was trying to attack in *1984* was not socialism per se, but the idea of a managerial state, whether it was fascist or capitalist — not in our term, Tom, but in the more Marxian sense — or communist. So in James Burnham's work on the managerial state, he said that basically during the 20th century, whatever you wanted to call yourself ideologically, we were all moving towards a combination of power that was both economic and political, and it would use the press and it would use education to make us malleable.

And he thought just because of the limitations of geography and of resources in the world, that there would always be three competing powers, that you would never have two. And I think Burnham, we could debate whether he was right or not, but that we would have these three competing powers and they would essentially be all exactly the same, but none of them would ever have the resources to best — they could influence, but they could never best one of the other two. So it would be this constant shifting of these three different powers over time. And that's of course exactly what happens in Orwell's *1984.*

WOODS: It's kind of obvious what the libertarian theme in *1984* is, because of course the person is living under an impossibly oppressive regime —

BIRZER: Yeah, purely suffocating, the whole time.

WOODS: And it's not even that the regime doesn't hesitate to use brute force; the regime is more subtle than that. It really wants to manipulate you into believing what it wants you to believe. And so of course there's that final moment where he's forced to say that 2+2=5, sort of thing, and it's just —

BIRZER: And he believes it.

WOODS: Yeah, and it's just overwhelming. But is there anything more subtle about *1984* that libertarians might appreciate, other than, "Big government is bad?"

BIRZER: Yeah, well, one of the great themes of it, Tom — and this is where I think Orwell was just a genius. And of course he died so young, which, I mean, part of that is going to help is reputation. Who knows what would have happened if he had continued on? So he's — I think it's always good for a writer or artist to die young, at least for their reputation; not for them personally or their family, but certainly for their reputation.

And because he was so well known, had been so influential in literary circles as well as political circles, it's really worth noting that there probably was nobody better in that day and age except for J.R.R. Tolkien in looking at how language was being used as a form of manipulation. So Orwell is always very interested in propaganda and what propaganda does, and I think one of the great points that Orwell makes is that

propaganda is a habit. That is, nobody starts off with propaganda believing anyone's going to believe it in the short run. It's always a long-run game.

And so it's not that you could convince this current generation that the propaganda is right, but instead, you just start saying things so often, you repeat them so often, that what you're actually doing is you're not forcing someone to think a certain way; you're limiting the very way they even think at all. And that's a huge part of Orwell: that propaganda and government don't often blatantly say, Oh, you can't do that or you can't think that. What they do is they create a whole series of alternatives that take us down a path that doesn't allow us to really flourish as human beings.

And this is exactly what de Tocqueville had said would happen all the way back in *Democracy in America*, so these themes have been there, but this is where I think Orwell really shows his genius in showing the subtlety of changes in language and how over time we lose definition, we lose meaning. Sentences — we can suddenly say, "Tom, you have your ideology and I have my ideology." Well, that's the perfect kind of trick of the propagandist, because now at this point, well, anything goes. I can just define things any way I want, so we lose any objective standard of argumentation and debate. And we don't even know we're losing it, because we've become so used to not knowing what a word means; we just accept it.

WOODS: Let's say, Brad — well, first of all, the first thing people are going to do after listening to this episode is they're going to go over to LibertyClassroom.com; they're going to join just so they can get this one course. Forget everything else we've done; they're going to get this one course.

BIRZER: Hey, they get a Pink Floyd song, so come on.

WOODS: They get so — [laughing] it's totally crazy what you're doing in that course. So they're going to do that. But then let's say they have time to read one of the books that we've talked about today. Just one that we've talked about today. Which one would you direct them to?

BIRZER: I would definitely say *That Hideous Strength*.

WOODS: Really? Okay.

BIRZER: Yes, because I think it's the best, in terms of literature, of the ones we've talked about. I think it's Lewis at his best. But I also think for anyone in 2017, especially anyone who is libertarian or even somewhat libertarian, Lewis just does such a good job of showing every single ideological permutation of the left, and he's so good at making a mockery of them. After showing their genius, he then takes them down. And he doesn't make caricatures of them. They're very real. But then you realize that because they've been conned by an idea, they are actually far less than human, and that's their downfall. So when you actually challenge them, free person against them, they have no response because they've locked themselves in their own prison.

WOODS: Ooh, "Locked themselves in their own prison." Ooh.

BIRZER: Oh, yeah, yeah.

WOODS: Man, all right. So you can read the books in *The Space Trilogy* independently of each other?

BIRZER: Yeah, you can, and a lot of people — You know, it just depends. The first one is just kind of an adventure story. It's clearly a first try, a first novel. And then the second one is a very deeply theological, philosophical look at the Fall and what the Fall means. So the whole story is basically Adam and Eve but now in Venus, and would it happen again if you could prevent it? And then the last one is really far more political, cultural, and of course it takes place in a small English college, so the whole thing is rooted on Earth. It's science fiction but it's not, and I think it would appeal to a lot more people than the first two novels.

WOODS: Okay, all right. Well, I'm going to try to — All I can is — because I'm doing a lot of — I have a lot of projects going on in the next few months, but by the summertime I will have read this book and —

BIRZER: Tom, I would also — I don't know what your feelings are about this, but the Audible version is incredible, and if you don't have time to read but you're out on your walk or doing exercise, I'm a huge fan of Audible.

WOODS: Yeah, you know, I hadn't thought of that actually, because I've used Audible for nonfiction and I just think of it as a way of briefing myself on information. I'm just not in the mode of thinking of Audible as a source of entertainment, so I hadn't thought of that. I have heard *The Screwtape Letters*, simply because John Cleese read it, and I just thought, I have to hear this.

BIRZER: Oh, I didn't know that.

WOODS: Oh yeah.

BIRZER: I'll have to check that out.

WOODS: And he is so good. He's so good.

BIRZER: Whoever does the reading for *That Hideous Strength* is excellent. I'm sure he's not at the John Cleese level, but he's excellent, so it's very well done.

WOODS: All right, well, thanks, Brad, for talking to us about this.

BIRZER: Oh, Tom, my pleasure.

WOODS: And of course, the course is up to the usual Brad Birzer quality, so LibertyClassroom.com is where to go. You do have a personal website where you blog. Tell us what that is.

BIRZER: Oh, thanks. Yeah, most of my writings are at TheImaginitiveConservative.org, and then I have my own private blog, just BradBirzer.com. But yeah, I'm always — yeah, thanks, Tom.

WOODS: All right, so we'll link to those and we're going to link to all of the books we mentioned at TomWoods.com/868. All right, one of these days we'll have you back for music. I just have had time finally to listen to *Blackfield V*. Have you listened to that?

BIRZER: Oh, no, no, I haven't.

WOODS: Because the physical CD is not out in North America yet, but the mp3 download is. It has been for weeks, so I went and got it.

BIRZER: Oh, okay.

WOODS: Now, they say it's their best partnership ever. I'm not totally convinced, but I like "How Was Your Ride?", "Family Man," and "Lately."

BIRZER: Are those all the Wilson tracks?

WOODS: I can't — I don't — They may be. The one I know is a Wilson track — and by the way, everybody, just stay with me for one more second. This is a great group called Blackfield. You've got to get into them. But the last one, "From 44 to 48," that's classic Wilson. It starts off from, you know, till I was such and such age, I had all of these ambitions for my life; I was going to do this and that. And then as the song goes on, he gets older, and well, now I have a child; I have all these responsibilities. So by the time he gets to 44 to 48, he looks back and realizes none of it came true [laughing]. It's like the boot stamping the human face forever. That's Steven Wilson musically, right? It's that George Orwell quotation applied to music —

BIRZER: [laughing] Oh, yes.

WOODS: Because you know that boot is coming by the end of the song. It starts off optimistic, and you say to yourself, All right, where's the boot?

BIRZER: [laughing] Oh, man. Okay.

WOODS: Yeah, so go check it —

BIRZER: My copy — I mean, I've ordered it from Amazon, so I don't know when it will be coming. I think it's still a while. But yeah, I'll look forward to that.

WOODS: Okay, yeah, it's definitely great. All right, I appreciate everybody being indulgent and listening to us talk about that for just a minute. That's just a sneak preview of what Brad and I are going to be imposing on you one of these days soon. After you've heard that, then how about we do the music episode?

BIRZER: That sounds great. And anytime you want to do C.S. Lewis, let me know. You know that. I'm up for anything, so —

WOODS: Oh, you're a good man, Brad. All right, thanks again.

BIRZER: Oh, thank you so much, Tom.