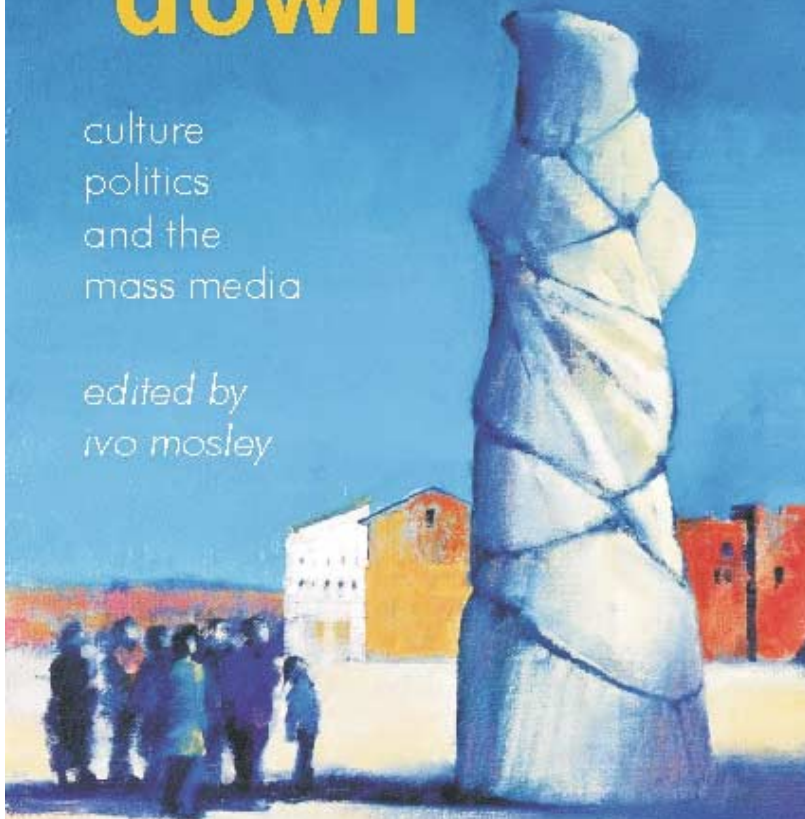


Dumbing down

culture
politics
and the
mass media

*edited by
ivo mosley*



'Bold, straight-talking polemic ...'
Marina Warner

IMPRINT ACADEMIC

P.O. Box 1, Thorverton EX5 5YX, UK

Tel: +44 1392 841600 Fax: 841478 sandra@imprint.co.uk

www.imprint.co.uk/dd

Ivo Mosley

Introduction

The intellectual leaders of the peoples have produced and propagated the fallacies which are destroying liberty and Western civilization. The intellectuals alone are responsible for the mass slaughters which are the characteristic mark of our century. They alone can reverse the trend and pave the way for a resurrection of freedom.

Ludwig von Mises, 1947

Never before in human history has so much cleverness been used to such stupid ends. The cleverness is in the creation and manipulation of markets, media and power; the stupid ends are in the destruction of community, responsibility, morality, art, religion and the natural world.

As a result, a kind of numbness has taken over. In the face of an uncertain and alarming future, which holds little inspiration for present living, people fight off gloom and stupefaction by withdrawing into trivia, sensation-seeking or addictions to money, drugs, or power.

Both the process and its results are to be seen in Dumbing Down, a phenomenon observable in almost all walks of life; politics, culture, civil administration, the media, science, education, even the law. It is so widespread that a new term has been coined: dumbocracy.

Dumbocracy is the rule of cleverness without wisdom. It looks always for the short-term gain, forgetting that we could be around on this planet for a long time – provided dumbocracy does not get out of hand.

Some insist that dumbing-down does not exist; it is an illusion created by an elite to shore up its own waning power. My own opinion is that elites are a necessity in the human affairs

of any great civilization. We should try to get the best elites we can, for when one elite is got rid of, another – often worse – takes its place; those who promise to rid us of one elite are bent on replacing it with themselves. As Franz Kafka wrote, ‘Every revolution evaporates, leaving nothing behind it but the slime of a new bureaucracy.’

Dumbocracy in Government

The subject of dumbocracy in government is in the air, as argument rages over whether the ‘Third Way’ constitutes a new vision of democracy or an encroaching totalitarianism. The attempt by one party to be the voice of the people, regulating all our activities in the name of the people, disempowering traditional institutions and other pockets of self-government including the family, is not a new kind of manoeuvre, but something that has been tried many times. The outcome is never fruitful. There is an expression, ‘Those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it’; but sometimes a good deal worse than repetition lies in wait.

At the heart of the democratic debate is whether the sentence ‘Give us your vote and we’ll take care of everything’ is an adequate expression of democracy. The idea that casting a single vote every five years can ensure that everything is taken care of – from the buses, to art funding, to defence spending, the health service and the safeguarding of basic freedoms – is far-fetched.

Those who have thought profoundly about democracy realize it is best achieved through a diversity of democratic institutions, as well as by voting politicians in and out of office. Civil associations, of which there are thousands in any civilized country, are places where people may participate in democracy directly. Their actions and participation actually make a difference and the choice of who rises in the hierarchy is decided by merit, by choice among those who know, rather than by whoever offers the most effective spin to a remote electorate.

A more long-standing conflict over democracy concerns, to quote from **Demelza Spargo**’s essay, ‘whether we elect representatives for their wisdom, honesty, devoutness and foresightedness; or whether we elect them because they promise

to give us what we want.’ As the parties increase their hold on who is made available to ‘represent’ the people, so true democracy recedes into a dim and hazy distance; our representatives are only human in default; in action, they are loyal party units.

Dumbing-down democracy is perhaps the most shameful of the many dumbings-down that are taking place, for it opens the way to totalitarian government. Few would argue with the proposition that democracy represents the most ambitious and hopeful programme for managing human affairs. Indeed, in a complex modern society it is the only conceivable way.

In the essays in this section, **Tam Dalyell** views with despair the decline of intelligent government in Westminster, as the art of conversation is replaced by spin. **Ivo Mosley** looks at how perversions in democratic thought and practice are pushing us into a new kind of pseudo-liberal totalitarianism. **Michael Oakeshott**’s classic essay looks at history since the Middle Ages as a struggle between individualism and those who have found individualistic society a burden. **Michael Johnson** describes the long process of change and modernization in the British Civil Service since the War, and how this process now links with the new political culture to undermine the service’s capacity for independent thought and policy advice. **Redmond Mullin** emphasizes the importance of other areas of democratic activity outside the executive machine, and how we must resist the efforts of government to extend control. **Dominic Hobson** looks at the state’s efforts to run or regulate business—and now to even transform itself into a business—with a jaundiced eye.

Dumbocracy and Culture

As democracy widened its constituency in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the race was on in the West to absorb the newly-enfranchised classes into high culture, with its sense of responsibilities and its high calling for the human race.

However, over the following century high culture changed more than the newly-enfranchised classes. It became, **Philip Rieff** argues, more concerned with flouting than with maintaining its traditions, and therefore an anti-culture - not much high about it but the smell.

Meanwhile, a new form of high culture emerged (in music) from one of the Earth's most disadvantaged nations: Black America.

As we enter a new millennium, the effort to interest the majority in traditional high culture has run out of steam. Populists discredit the word 'high' by calling it elitist, and re-define the word 'culture' as 'what you choose to get up to'.

Ravi Shankar regrets that commercial interests have overtaken the interests of civilization in bringing up our young people. He also presents a very positive picture of cultural diversity, of tradition, and of cross-cultural fertilization; how rich the world can be when we all get on. **Robert Brustein** presents a quite different picture, of cultures at war with each other, with all the suppressions of truth, the ugly struggles for power and the loss to the world of what might be, which war entails.

Anne Glyn-Jones sees parallels in earlier declines of civilization. Finding practical lessons from the past is difficult, but she argues that the bad effects of minimalizing censorship outweigh the bad effects of unbridled commercialism.

With the advent in Britain of the lottery, huge amounts of money are extracted from the populace by means of a state-licensed monopoly on gambling. They are disbursed by state *apparatchiks* to various so-called 'cultural' activities, with results ranging from dubious to outright banditry. **Roger Deakin** examines the process and asks if living culture, in contrast to the preservation of dead culture, is properly an object of charitable subsidy. **Mark Ryan** writes on efforts to make high culture accessible by turning it into a branch of the entertainment industry.

Dumbocracy and the Media

It is convenient to blame the media for almost everything. In reality, of course, we can switch off, we can not-buy, we can avert our eyes; or we could all vote for censorship. The one thing it's entirely unreasonable to do is expect businessmen not to chase a lucrative market.

When every programme, article or book has to seek the widest possible audience, the 'lowest common denominator' effect kicks in. No media provider who wants to maximize

profits will take on difficult and demanding material. A background of jolly-seeming nonsense takes over, interrupted by sensationalism or extreme forms of 'entertainment' that test the boundaries of what's acceptable, in order to excite ever more jaded taste buds.

The power of the mass media is one of the phenomena that are really new to the human race, and it is clear that the tenor of society is overwhelmingly affected by the constant stream of pandering which pours into our brains from TV screens, newspapers and magazines. Abstinence may be recommended, but people are hardly going to leave the comforts of being pandered to unless they sense a greater gain somewhere else. What greater gain is on offer?

Oliver O'Donovan examines one of the narcissistic corruptions that have invested the media and through them our lives, drawing general observations upon how the media have affected the way we experience the world and calling for a recovery of authority in religion.

Adam Boulton puts up a heroic defence of the soundbite, often associated with dumbing-down. The soundbite, he says, symbolizes the pledges of politicians in a form they can actually be held to.

Dumbocracy and the Visual Arts

The visual arts present a very special case. When sliced-up cows and unmade beds are celebrated as the epitome of contemporary visual art in Britain, almost everyone senses something is—well, at the very least missing. **David Lee** argues that this is structural; the state, corporations and individuals with financial rather than cultural interests have combined in using public money to corrupt the arts.

There is, however, one way in which the state constructively and indiscriminately supports the arts: the dole.

Laura Gascoigne is intrigued by the infatuation of the *haute bourgeoisie* with the peculiar brand of nihilism that calls itself 'cutting edge'. **Peter Randall-Page**, after giving a more positive view of what art can be about, reflects on some of the reasons why the current state of affairs has come about.

Bill Hare presents a hopeful picture of the potential for art to reflect the interests of people at large, and of the importance that art can have in giving a community a sense of identity.

Dumbocracy in Education

As early as 1794, Prussian law recognized the principle of state supremacy in education. Almost a century later, when the state in Britain decided education should be state-funded, a decision was made not to fund the numerous schools that existed already to serve the poor, but to start up brand new schools under state control.

Meanwhile, as other states decided compulsory education was needed to compete in the modern world, they mostly came to similar conclusions; the rich and powerful could be left to educate their children in any manner they saw fit, but the education of the rest must be managed from the state.

The result has been the disempowering of parents and a permanent revolution in education, as political parties change their minds about the kind of results they want to achieve and how best to achieve them – whether those results are nationalism, equalization, civilization, technical excellence, development of the individual, or just keeping young people off the streets.

In Britain, it was James Callaghan who declared that the curriculum was a ‘secret garden’ which should be opened up to government inspection and supervision. Since then, political power over what teachers teach has spread by direct and indirect means. In primary and secondary education the means are direct; in higher education it is indirect, as funding is conditional to approval by the state. Pupils can now pass through the whole education system without even encountering one of the central principles of Western civilization; that every increase of state power pushes a free citizenry towards passive serfdom.

Michael Polanyi, in a classic essay written before political correctness spread its influence, examines how a materialist conception of man, denying higher spiritual ideals, led to totalitarianism in thought and then in politics.

Claire Fox observes higher education being used as a tool for social inclusion, and laments the loss of respect for higher

knowledge that this entails. **Andrew Williams** laments the disappointing results of a century of compulsory education in introducing young people to a higher culture.

Dumbocracy and Science

For scientists, dumbing down has a single and particular meaning; that is, pressure upon them to make their work comprehensible to badly-educated or unintelligent audiences. For the rest of us, other worries are more pressing. One is the way multitudes of 'experts' overrule tradition and common sense and spread about all kinds of baloney. Another is the stupid uses to which genuine science is put.

'Popular science' can consist of perfectly respectable attempts to explain scientific concepts and development in lay terms. Just as often, it seems to consist of what the poet Auden called 'resonant lies'; that is, hocus-pocus masquerading as serious thought, designed to justify some cherished but shameful social behaviour. Thus, soon after Darwin explained his theory of natural selection, Spencer coined the phrase 'the survival of the fittest' and the Social Darwinists were using this soundbite to argue that charity was a bad idea; 'The law of the survival of the fittest was not made by man. We can only, by interfering with it, produce the survival of the unfittest.'¹

Soon, popular corruptions of scientific theory were in overdrive. In the 1920s, psychomorphic interpretations of relativity theory became all the rage among intellectuals and barber-shop philosophers, in support of anything from atheism to adultery to self-pitying despair. In the thirties, bogus racial theories were used to justify anti-Semitism. In the 1960s, the sexual revolution was 'scientifically' justified by mistaken observations of sexual life in Samoa. In the '80s, a culture of selfish individualism was justified by Richard Dawkins' 'The Selfish Gene'.

The phenomenal public and commercial success of simplified and corrupted scientific ideas feeds back into serious science. Difficult, subtle and complex ideas are left unex-



[1] W.G. Sumner, 1885, quoted in Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*.

plored, while simple and ‘successful’² ideas gain ground.

A greater worry is the stupid uses to which genuine science is put. The dangers of scientific weapons creation is obvious enough. It is rapidly becoming obvious, also, that the vast industries surrounding industrial food production and scientific medicine create new problems as they solve old ones. In this context, it is worth noting that the science industries profit twice from every destruction of the natural world; once during the destruction itself, and again when they are called in to clear things up.

As the problems (environmental changes, iatrogenic disease, weaponry) pile up, it seems science has become another model dumbocracy; very clever people doing very stupid things that jeopardise our well-being. The problem is, how can science be properly regulated? This subject is explored by **Joan Leach**, **Shaun Mosley** and **Ivo Mosley**.

Do we expect too much from science? **John Ziman** explains the stupidity of looking to science to provide for all our needs. His essay is that of a scientist speaking to the public, arguing that we should not listen to science as if it were one voice promising us the answer to all our ills. **Walter Freeman** laments the stupidity of seeking happiness out of bottles and looks for a more sociable and human understanding of how to achieve that lofty goal. **Jaron Lanier** argues that certain developments in information technology ‘make people redefine themselves into lesser beings’. A pioneer in the field, he speaks with authority on a brand-new problem that can only grow in importance.

Dumbocracy and Religion

When we lose religion, it is not just our sense of guilt that goes astray. We also lose a sense of meaning and significance in what we do. We lose the confidence of a shared moral framework; we lose the teaching embedded in religious stories. Gone from our lives are rites of celebration and passage, the rituals that make a community out of individuals. We also lose our sense that, living in an enterprise not of our making, we

[2] ‘It is not truth but opinion, that can travel the world without a passport’ — Sir Walter Raleigh, *History of the World*, (preface) 1612.

may live in some fulfilling relationship with the higher power that made it. People forget that atheism is the most illogical of all creeds – a belief in something out of nothing.

For many centuries, religion pitted itself against science; now science is being blamed for the demise of religion, because its emphasis on literal truth has undermined belief. If religious devotees must view their stories as metaphors, does not scientific truth, literal and powerful though it be, seem paradoxically trivial? Is there no higher truth than the laws governing the behaviour of particles? God forbid such boredom!

Many essays in this book lament the departure of religion as an active force in our lives. What else can provide the kind of absolute horror that we need, to restrain us from certain kinds of behaviour? Some power of the taboo, which in certain societies can kill stone dead with the mere uttering of a curse, is sorely needed among us so-called ‘civilized’ people; otherwise, the host of dreary evils that fall outside the law cannot be fought. When people can betray their families, sell arms or drugs, devote their ingenuities to peddling entertainments that are nothing but mental poison, all without a seeming twinge of conscience or a flicker of social rebuke, then it’s clear that religion is defunct – and sorely needed.

Meanwhile, complaints about life’s dissatisfactions, which used to be part of the dialogue between man and God, are laid at society’s door, and society has its work cut out to deal with them. The state has taken on many of the functions that religion used to provide. Charity, community, patronage of the arts, rites of passage; it is now proposing to take on moral teaching (‘citizenship’). Without the transcendent teachings of religion, our concept of freedom is belittled and our concern for the future cannot find expression.

Helen Oppenheimer deals in her essay with the importance of truth. With the relativization of everything, even historians have taken on the fashionable notion that there is no such thing as truth. **Nicholas Mosley** deals with the erosion of mystery in religion, as banality is introduced into the one human sphere that can best do without it.

A mention should be made here of **Oliver O’Donovan’s** essay, for though it is included in the section on media, and its



insights into the nature of publicity are general, it is written by a theologian from a specifically religious point of view.

Dumbocracy and the Environment

The word 'environment' implies that all of nature just exists for us to live and cavort about in. Even if we accept this desiccated philosophy, we presumably want the 'environment' to stay nice and healthy. Human stupidity vis-à-vis the natural world has had a lot written about it, much of it hysterically biassed, from both sides of the debate.³ Whatever the case, two facts at least are undeniable. The first is that people in the past have frequently rendered their environment uninhabitable to themselves and have had to move on. The second is that our ability to degrade our environment grows with our command of, and our skill at using, technology. Countering these is the hopeful possibility that, with wisdom and forethought, the same technology and the scientific understanding behind it will enable us to restrain ourselves before it's too late. The outcome of this struggle may be the primary factor in determining how long our civilization lasts.

The essays in this section are firstly a historical overview of the problem from **C.D. Darlington**, an outspoken botanist, geneticist and historian; then an impassioned and very contemporary plea for changes in agricultural practice from **Demelza Spargo**.

[3] My own contributions to this debate (their bias declared in their titles) are the anthologies *The Green Book of Poetry* (Frontier Publishing) and *Earth Poems* (HarperSanFrancisco).