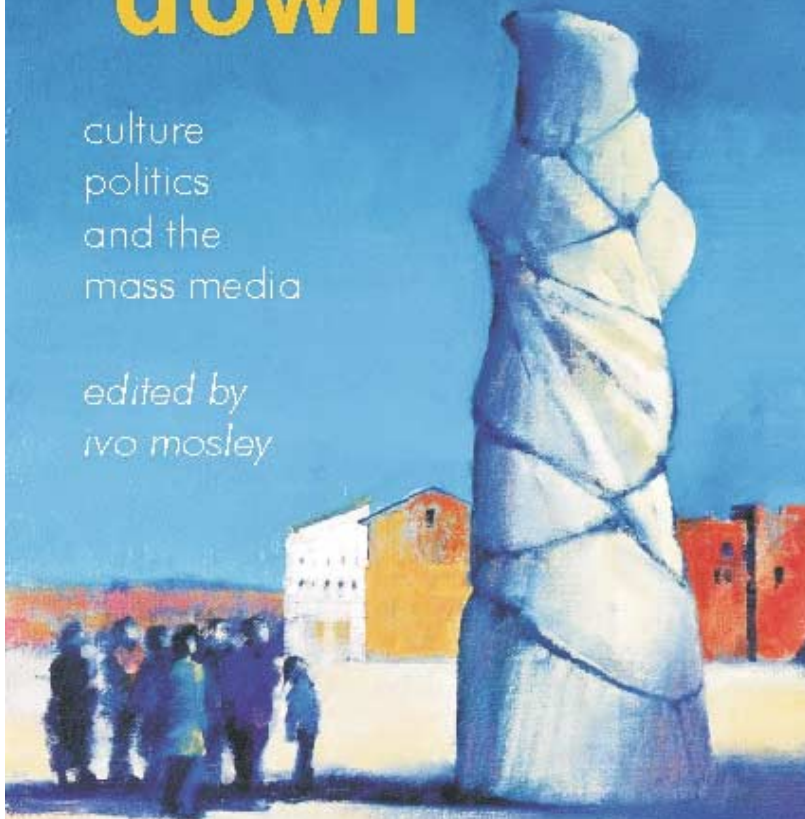


Dumbing down

culture
politics
and the
mass media

*edited by
ivo mosley*



'Bold, straight-talking polemic ...'
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Ivo Mosley

Dumbing Down Democracy

The wise ruler takes no action;
the people transform themselves.
The wise ruler is not meddlesome;
the people prosper by themselves¹

Lao Tzu

We are used to thinking of democracy and totalitarianism as opposites, so it comes as a surprise when, with grim regularity, totalitarian regimes emerge from democracies. But this surprise is misplaced, for in the liberal tradition of thought there are many warnings that a tendency towards loss of freedom is inherent in democracy itself.

Changes in the democratic cultures of Western countries have led to worries over whether some new kind of totalitarianism is creeping up on us. The cult of charisma, in the form of pop and film idols; the continual celebration of violence in the media; the cult of the body beautiful; the abolition of God; the division of society into middle-class and underclass — *ubermenschen* and *untermenschen*; more and more invasive state control over our lives, all remind us of well-documented totalitarian tendencies of the past.

Certain acts of government exacerbate these anxieties; the abolition of traditions and therefore the past; the creation of a new and ersatz national identity; the state's hijacking and corruption of art; ever-more pervasive state control in education;

[1] Lau Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, LVII.

the sidelining of parliament and civil institutions; an increasing use of propaganda to supersede the processes of debate.

Other developments send out warning signals. There has been a huge increase in the amount of control that political parties exercise over their members. The powers of the executive arm of government extend increasingly into the judiciary and over parliament, as the Government takes it upon itself to release convicted torturers and murderers for political reasons, as it involved us in a war in Kosovo that it never had any intention of declaring, and as it inflicts by *diktat* a myriad of petty regulations, many of which are never ratified by parliament.

Most recently, we have seen attempts at introducing the cult of the leader as representing all the people (except for the 'dark forces of conservatism'). This is what the Nazis called *Gleichshaltung*: 'coordination, streamlining, bringing into line'. By this means 'the fuehrer, representing the will of the people, directed the flow of policy through the institutions of state and party down to the people'.² This semi-mystical process justified bypassing all the normal checks on state activities; vested interests, institutions, traditional groupings, the conservative forces of law and religion. All such groups – if they resist – were cast as 'backward-looking', 'anti-progressive'; 'enemies of the people'.

The Nature of Modern Western Democracies

What we have come to call democracy in the West is not what the ancients meant by democracy. When Plato and Aristotle talked about democracy they were talking about a system in which those in authority were chosen by lot. This kind of extreme democracy is not even contemplated in today's world and is one reason why the ancient philosophers were less admiring of democracy than we might expect.

Aristotle described three forms of government. Each form – monarchy, aristocracy and democracy – had a good and a bad manifestation, depending on whether the rulers ruled for the benefit of all or in their own interest.

[2] Klaus P. Fischer, *Nazi Germany – A New History*, p. 278 (New York: Continuum, 1996).

‘The true forms of government’, he wrote, ‘are those in which the one, or the few, or the many, govern with a view to the common interest; but governments which rule with a view to the private interest—whether of the one, the few, or the many—are perversions.’³

Cicero, writing a few hundred years later, had this to say about government:

Of the three basic types of government, I regard monarchy as the best; but a moderate, mixed type of government, combining all three elements, is much better. There should be a monarchical element in the state. The leading citizens also ought to have some power. And the people themselves should have some say in running the affairs of the nation.⁴

More than a thousand years later Aquinas said much the same thing. ‘The best form of polity’, he wrote, ‘is partly kingdom, with one at the head of all; partly rule by the best, insofar as a number of persons are set in authority; partly democracy, that is, government by the people, insofar as the rulers can be chosen from the people, and the people have the right to chose their rulers.’⁵

It is evident that modern democracies are all of this mixed and complex type, whether the monarch is a President with great power or a hereditary monarch with little power. The elected representatives of the people hold the main power, but this is checked by the influence of autonomous institutions—composed of individuals who are held in respect and exert influence in society for reasons other than success in the struggle for power that is politics.

The complex structure of modern democracies is strong against some perversions, weak against others. I would argue that the push for more state power is the chief perversion to which democracy is vulnerable. Financial corruption and cronyism will always crop up, no doubt, but in open democracies they may be—and usually are—detected and dealt with. The desire of politicians for more power, however, is a force

[3] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279a.

[4] Cicero, *Republic*, 1, 44.

[5] St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1-2, 105,1.

that has been pushing democracy towards a new kind of pseudo-benevolent totalitarianism. The simplification, the dumbing-down of democracy to a simple formula of 'Cast your vote and we'll take care of you', is a process dangerous to civilization itself.

Democracy and 'The State'

'The State' takes on a kind of abstract reality in our minds, though in fact it just consists of those people and their power whom we agree to let rule over us. It is only natural that the bureaucrats and politicians who make up the state should seek to increase their power, against all wise advice from the tradition of democratic thought. Edmund Burke wrote:

'It ought to be the constant aim of every wise public counsel to find out with how little, not how much, restraining the community can subsist; for liberty is a good to be improved, not an evil to be lessened. It is not only a private blessing of the first order, but the vital spring and energy of the state itself, which has just so much vigor and life as there is liberty in it.'⁶

The danger of governments granting ever-increasing power to themselves was addressed by John Stuart Mill in his essay *On Liberty*, published in 1859:

The most cogent reason for restricting the interference of government is the great evil of adding unnecessarily to its power. Every function added to those already exercised by the government, causes its influence over hopes and fears to be more widely diffused, and converts, more and more, the active and ambitious part of the public into hangers-on of the government, or of some party which aims at becoming the government. If the roads, the railways, the banks, the insurance offices, the great joint-stock companies, the universities, and the public charities, were all of them branches of the government; if, in addition, the municipal corporations and

[6] Edmund Burke, *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol*, 3 April 1777.

local boards, with all that now devolves on them, became departments of the central administration; if the employees of all these different enterprises were appointed and paid by the government, and looked to the government for every rise in life; not all the freedom of the press and popular constitution of the legislature would make this, or any other country, free otherwise than in name. And the evil would be greater, the more efficiently and scientifically the administrative machinery was constructed.⁷

The scenario described by Mill is to some extent with us. The state has, by many methods, augmented its power since he wrote. One method it has used is to institute emergency provisions in war, then fail to revoke them when peace is restored. A recent instance of this in Britain was when the post-war Government of Clement Attlee declined to reverse the centralization of power that Churchill had instituted during the Second World War.

Another method the state has used is to promise to achieve, or impose, equality. State action to impose complete equality—in the sense of equal wealth for all—has to be so all-pervasive, so sapping of initiative, and so demanding of man-power, that the attempt can only succeed in reducing everyone to a condition of equal misery. This condition was often achieved in Communist countries, although—as Orwell pointed out in *Animal Farm*—some were always more equal than others. State officials were not immune from misery, however, for though they escaped economic misery, the spectre of a fall from grace, imprisonment or even death, dogged their waking and sleeping moments. The moral impulse towards equalization of wealth has been tempered by this experience, and now it generally aims at a moderate equalization by taxation.

Another way the state has increased its power is by convincing us that some things are too important to be left to private provision. Voters are keen that healthcare should be in the public domain; governments less so nowadays because, as

[7] J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, V.

healthcare gets more and more expensive, decisions as to who gets what are bound to be unpopular. Governments are keener on state control in education; by that means they may influence our notions of what it is to be a citizen.

But the most powerful way that states in the modern age have been able to increase their power is by offering to look after citizens from cradle to grave. This offer is attractive to anyone who dislikes the idea of human distress, and it is especially attractive to two sections of the population; those who want to be looked after and those who want to look after them.

Thus a yearning for Utopia on earth gives birth to a third form of totalitarianism, a liberal totalitarianism, popularly known as the Nanny State. As Nanny increases her power, she turns from a benevolent and magical Mary Poppins into an image of stifling manipulation.

There is an expression 'the worst is the corruption of the best'. The three forms of totalitarianism were all born in answer to fine wishes: communism (the wish for equality); fascism (the wish for order); the Nanny State (the wish that there should be as little suffering in the world as possible). History tells us how the first two wishes went wrong; what about the third?

Liberal Totalitarianism

The word 'liberal' has undergone a slow change in meaning over the last 150 years. It used to mean a belief that the state should not interfere in the fundamental liberties of individuals, except to prevent the activities of one individual injuring another. In the definition of John Stuart Mill: 'The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people.'⁸

This is not what liberalism has come to mean. It now has two meanings quite at odds with the traditional one.

One meaning signifies a sense of identification or sympathy with malefactors, who are no longer to be thought of as evil or abominable but as underdogs. Once we understand the harsh lives of those who do evil deeds we must forgive them, because the evil they do comes out of the evil done to them.

[8] Mill, *On Liberty*, III.

Kindness will interrupt the vicious circle and produce goodness. The other new meaning refers to the bossy interference that follows when liberals identify an evil and intrude with kindness to put it right.

The two meanings of the word share an economic as well as a political interest, as a great deal of employment arises from trying to put the world to rights.

This state of affairs was envisioned by Burkhardt towards the end of the nineteenth century:

The social impulse would assign to the state never-heard-of and outrageous tasks, which can be accomplished only by a mass of power which is also never-heard-of and outrageous. Careerists will want to take this omnipotent state in hand and guide it.⁹

The establishment of liberal totalitarianism depends on an illusion, that the state can achieve what civil society cannot – that it can forge a steady Utopia out of our base human natures. The failures of liberal totalitarianism are obvious. The streets are full of the homeless as they've never been before – and in an age of unparalleled wealth, at that. Drug abuse threatens children everywhere. The family is in dire straits. Moral and social order are in decay. The state whisks away forty-odd percent of people's hard-earned cash, much of which it spends on an enormous bureaucracy and putting right its own mistakes. Unemployment sits at high levels, and crime with it. Those in work work longer and longer hours, the wealth gap is growing once again, and corporate powers fill our world with pollution.

One of the reasons for all this is that people with little experience or competence are put in charge of making rules and overseeing their implementation. The state's appointees are chosen primarily for their obedience as political creatures, not for their acumen in business or administration. Incompetence, waste and inappropriate expenditure are the results.

Regulators, administrators and overseers spread a new culture in society; that of conformity to the political will. People

[9] From Jacob Burkhardt, 'The State in the Newer Sense', in *Judgments on History and Historians*.

are always looking over their shoulders. Politicization gathers momentum as more and more people need the approval of the state just to stay in work.

To further this process a game is played, stirring up mistrust among people; it has been much played by both Mrs Thatcher and Mr Blair.

The game goes like this: We are told that teachers are incompetent; they need government supervision. A cheer goes up from the rest of us; we can all remember at least one incompetent teacher. Builders are getting away with murder, we are told, and need government supervision; everyone who's been let down by a builder gives a cheer. The health service is corrupt and incompetent; they need bureaucrats to supervise them; anyone who's waited in a hospital queue gives a cheer. Lawyers, broadcasters, farmers, doctors...as each new group is invaded by government the rest all cheer, ignoring for the moment that they may be next in line (if they haven't been processed already).

The media love to play the same game. 'It's an outrage!' they shout. 'The Government should do something about it!' The fantasy of one power that can cure all ills sells to the outraged child in each of us.

But as the state's regulators take over, fundamental problems in society are created. Politics spreads into every area of life and creates the scenario described earlier by John Stuart Mill. Voluntary organizations and associations disappear, to be replaced by state apparatus. Suddenly we are all politicians, or in fear of politicians, and life has become a mild form of hell. Everything is done in the name of 'the people', but is in fact done to benefit the political machine.

Attitudes to 'The People'

Democracy is described as 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'.¹⁰ In reality, it means something less romantic; it means that every few years the people get to choose their rulers from a limited offer. And in practice, 'the people' have often been much abused by governments acting in their name.

[10] Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg address.

For Nazis and Communists—and, more recently, New Labour—‘the people’ is a magic invocation. If those who invoke the magic name really believed in ‘the people’ they would trust the people to get on with their lives and organize themselves. What such politicians are really interested in is power.

Political extremists are divided into two camps by their attitudes to ‘the people’. One camp, almost extinct in the modern world, makes no bones about its contempt; they believe that the people, alias the mob, are:

an unwieldy rabble, with no natural sense of what is right and fit. It rushes wildly into state affairs with all the fury of a swollen stream in the winter, and confuses everything!¹¹

The other camp—the revolutionaries—pretends in public to believe that the people are the source of all wisdom; but among themselves they say the people do not know what is best for themselves and need to have their interests interpreted for them.

Either way, the attitude of extremists towards the people is contemptuous. If we turn to the writings of democrats we find a more enlightening picture. For instance, Edmund Burke:

When popular discontents have been very prevalent, it may well be affirmed and supported, that there has generally been something found amiss in the constitution, or in the conduct of the government. The people have no interest in disorder. When they do wrong, it is their error, and not their crime. But with the governing part of the state, it is far otherwise. They may certainly act ill by design, as well as by mistake.¹²

Here we have a picture of the people as not malicious; but neither are they a fount of mystical wisdom. Gullibility is the worst the people stand accused of, but the price of gullibility can be high indeed. It was ‘the people’ who believed in the

[11] Otanes the Persian, as reported by Herodotus in the fifth century BC.

[12] Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Discontents* (1770).

promise of the Third Reich, 'the people' who went with Lenin's promises.

Gullibility is prey to flattery as well as to false promises. The danger of flattery was well known and well recognized in the courts of monarchs. In democracies it proceeds along similar lines, except 'the people' have to be flattered *en masse*. 'Equality' is the rallying cry of those who flatter the people. There is no need for elitism, they say; any of us could run the country. No need for a culture of thought and learning and self-restraint; all this can be replaced by self-belief. They point to the injustice of inherited elites and thereby hope to discredit all kinds of elitism.

When voters swallow this flattery they get charlatans, crafty charmers, unscrupulous manipulators to rule over them. A residue of instinctive deference prevents many from seeing the true nature of such politicians until much damage has been done. If the process goes too far a kind of hypnotized worship of the leader occurs, such as we have seen in countries headed by Hitler, Stalin and Saddam.

Yet people are reluctant to return to dependence on civil society, that mix of voluntary self-governing associations and interdependencies by which we took care of each other in the past. This is partly because we remember it as cruel, oppressive and arbitrary – so perhaps it must to some extent always be, since all human systems are fallible. But in looking back we sometimes forget one huge change that has occurred since the retreat of civil society; that is, the enormous increase in affluence that has been made available to us by advances in technology and science, and by mechanization.

This affluence, because of the high degree of cooperation required in extracting it from the natural world, is largely in the hands of corporations. Since the state needs large amounts of cash to finance its programmes, it must turn to them for the wealth it needs.

Democracy and the Corporations

Burckhardt wrote, in the late 1860s:

With all business swelling into big business, the views of the businessmen have taken the following line...the state should be no more than the protec-

tive guarantor of the businessman's interests, and of his type of intelligence, henceforth assumed to be the main purpose of the world.

There are now many corporations with internal economies larger than those of many small countries. Corporations, unlike small countries, do not have internal systems of justice or democracy; they are purely executive operations. In this respect they are like fascist states; and yet they are unlike fascist states in that they have to operate subject to control from outside sources. They are subject to control by international law, by the laws of the countries in which they operate, and by what consumers will put up with.

Because we all need the prosperity that corporations generate, all of us – governments, consumers and workforces alike – are prepared to give them a fairly free hand. To stay competitive, corporations must seek out the best locations and conditions to do business, and that may include – for instance – manufacturing in countries with lax environmental and employment laws, taking and giving bribes, and subsidising oppressive regimes.

Ultimately, directly through purchase or indirectly through political legislation, and sometimes even through the moral demands of shareholders, restraint over the activities of corporations belongs to the consumers and voters of the wealthy countries, which are also the democracies. The moral sentiments of consumers and voters determine how ruthlessly a corporation may behave. These moral sentiments, it turns out, are somewhat jaded or inert; they can cope with all kinds of slow outrages, such as the displacements of tribal peoples, the exploitation of workers abroad, the slow death of the natural world, the corruption of foreign governments, the trade in arms. Only on occasions of gross and sudden outrage, such as Shell were sponsoring a few years ago in Nigeria, does the consumer base make a show of resistance.

But when government makes too close an alliance with the interests of business, we should beware. We may be doubly stitched up, for both have tendencies to misbehave. In the words of Adam Smith:

The violence and injustice of the rulers of mankind is an ancient evil, for which, I am afraid, the nature

of human affairs can scarce admit of a remedy. But the mean rapacity, the monopolizing spirit of merchants and manufacturers, who neither are, nor ought to be, the rulers of mankind, though it cannot perhaps be corrected may very easily be prevented from disturbing the tranquillity of anybody but themselves.¹³

We should beware the false promises of government and corporate power to deliver happiness via affluence alone. At the moment, unfortunately, this promise seems to be the one promise that politicians are expected to keep. When it comes to elections there is one main requirement, easily identified; 'It's the economy, stupid!', as President Clinton said during his re-election campaign. In the run-up to the last election in Britain, prospective Members of Parliament were told not to express opinions on any of the most pertinent and acute forms of distress in society; drugs, unemployment, crime, the welfare trap, the destruction of the natural world. This was in response to a perception that the public did not want to hear any such debate. The moral weariness on the part of voters who can only vote on the amount of money in their pockets signifies almost complete defeat in the face of a numbing and misunderstood power.

The growth of state power is like boiling a lobster; the victim doesn't notice until it is dead. The victim in this case is the free society, in the higher sense of freedom by which we mean freedom to espouse ideals higher than mere expediency and comfort. This freedom may seem abstract, but it is the freedom upon which Western civilization is built.

A hundred and fifty years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville described the process by which this loss of freedom could occur. After writing Part One of his book *Democracy in America*, which he wrote in order to recommend democracy to his fellow Frenchmen, he found himself haunted by the spectre of what could go wrong in democracies; of how they were vulnerable to an entirely new kind of despotism. In Part Two of the book he included some chapters to describe this vision. Here are some excerpts:

[13] Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Modern Library Edition, p. 461.

Above (the people) stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications and watch over their fate.

It would be like the authority of a parent if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood.

It covers the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate.

It must not be forgotten that it is especially dangerous to enslave men in the minor details of life.

Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people.

It is in vain to summon a people who have been rendered so dependent on the central power to choose from time to time the representatives of that power; this rare and brief exercise of their free choice, no matter how important it may be, will not prevent them from gradually losing the faculties of thinking, feeling and acting for themselves.

Let us then look forward to the future with that salutary fear which makes men keep watch and ward for freedom, not with that faint and idle terror which depresses and enervates the heart.¹⁴

[14] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, from Part Two, Book IV, Chapters 6 & 7.