

AMERICAN IDEOLOGY

By Howard Zinn

The idea, which entered Western consciousness several centuries ago, that black people are less than human, made possible the Atlantic slave trade, during which perhaps 40 million people died. Beliefs about racial inferiority, whether applied to blacks or Jews or Arabs or Orientals, have led to mass murder.

The idea, presented by political leaders and accepted by the American public in 1964, that communism in Vietnam was a threat to our “national security” led to policies that cost a million lives, including those of 55,000 young Americans.

The belief, fostered in the Soviet Union, that “socialism” required a ruthless policy of farm collectivization, as well as the control of dissent, brought about the deaths of countless peasants and large numbers of political prisoners.

Other ideas—leave the poor on their own (“laissez-faire”) and help the rich (“economic growth”)—have led the U.S. government for most of its history to subsidize corporations while neglecting the poor, thus permitting terrible living and working conditions and incalculable suffering and death. In the years of the Reagan presidency, “laissez-faire” meant budget cutting for family car, which led to high rates of infant mortality in city ghettos.

We can reasonably conclude that how we *think* is not just mildly interesting, not just a subject for intellectual debate, but a matter of life and death.

If those in charge of our society—politicians, corporate executives, and owners of press and television—can dominate our ideas, they will be secure in their power. They will not need soldiers patrolling the streets. We will control ourselves, instead of one, three branches of government instead of one-man rule, and various options in the press instead of one official line.²

Because force is held in reserve and the control is not complete, we can call ourselves a “democracy.” True, the openings and the flexibility make such a society a more desirable place to live. But they also create a more effective form of control. We are less likely to object if we can feel that we have a “pluralist” society, with two parties.

A close look at this pluralism shows that it is very limited. We have the kinds of choices that are given in multiple-choice tests, where you can choose *a*, *b*, *c*, or *d*. But *e*, *f*, *g*, and *h* are not even listed.

And so we have the Democratic and Republican parties (choose *a* or *b*), but no others are really tolerated or encouraged or financed. Indeed, there is a law limiting the nationally televised presidential debates to the two major parties.

We have a “free press,” but big money dominates it; you can choose among *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. On television, you can choose among NBC, CBS, and ABC. There is a dissident press, but it does not have the capital of the great media chains and cannot get the rich corporate advertising, and so it must strain to reach small numbers of people. There is public television, which is occasionally daring, but also impoverished and most often cautious.

We have three branches of government, with “checks and balances,” as we were taught in junior high school. But one branch of government (the presidency) gets us into wars and the other two (Congress and the Supreme Court) go sheepishly along.

There is the same limited choice in public policy. During the Vietnam War, the argument for a long time was between those who wanted a total bombing of Indochina and those who wanted a limited bombing. The choice of withdrawing from Vietnam altogether was not offered. Daniel Ellsberg, working for Henry Kissinger in 1969, was given the job of drawing a list of alternative policies on Vietnam. As one possibility on his long list he suggested total withdrawal from the war. Kissinger looked at the possibilities and crossed that one off before giving the list to President Richard Nixon.

In debates on the military budget there are heated arguments about whether to spend \$300 billion or \$290 billion. A proposal to spend \$100 billion (thus making \$200 billion available for human needs) is like the *e* or *f* in a multiple-choice test – it is missing. To propose zero billion makes you a candidate for a mental institution.

On the question of prisons there is debate on how many prisons we should have. But the idea of *abolishing* prisons is too outrageous even to be discussed.

We hear argument about *how much* the elderly should have to pay for health care, but the idea that they should not have to pay *anything*, indeed, that no one should have to pay for health care, is not up for debate.

Thus we grow up in a society where our choice of ideas is limited and where certain ideas dominate: We hear them from our parents, in the schools, in the churches, in the newspapers, and on radio and television. They have been in the air ever since we learned to walk and talk. They constitute an American *ideology* – that is, a dominant pattern of ideas. Most people accept them, and if we do, too, we are less likely to get into trouble.

The dominance of these ideas is not the product of a conspiratorial group that has devilishly plotted to implant on society a particular point of view. Nor is it an accident, an innocent result of people thinking freely. There is a process of natural (or, rather *unnatural*) selection, in which certain orthodox ideas are encouraged, financed, and pushed forward by the most powerful mechanisms of culture. These ideas are preferred because they are safe; they don't threaten established wealth or power.

For instance:

“Be realistic; this is the way things *are*; there’s no point thinking about how things *should be*.”

“People who teach or write or report the news should be *objective*; they should not try to advance their own opinions.”

“There are unjust wars, but also just wars.”

“If you disobey the law, even for a good cause, you should accept your punishment.”

“If you work hard enough, you’ll make a good living. If you are poor, you have only yourself to blame.”

“Freedom of speech is desirable, but not when it threatens national security.”

“Racial equality is desirable, but we’ve gone far enough in that direction.”

“Our Constitution is our greatest guarantee of liberty and justice.”

“The United States must intervene from time to time in various parts of the world with military power to stop communism and promote democracy.”

“If you want to get things changed, the only way is to go through the proper channels.”

“We need nuclear weapons to prevent war.”

“There is much injustice in the world but there is nothing that ordinary people, without wealth or power, can do about it.”

These ideas are not accepted by all Americans. But they are believed widely enough and strongly enough to dominate our thinking. And as long as they do, those who hold wealth and power in our society will remain secure in their control.

In the year 1984, *Forbes* magazine, a leading periodical for high finance and big business, drew up a list of the wealthiest individuals in the United States. The top 400 people had assets totaling \$60 billion. At the bottom of the population there were 60 million people who had *no* assets at all.

Around the same time, the economist Lester Thurow estimated that 482 very wealthy individuals controlled (without necessarily owning) over \$2,000 billion (\$2 trillion).

Consider the influence of such a very rich class—with its inevitable control of press, radio, television, and education—on the thinking of the nation.³

Dissident ideas can still exist in such a situation, but they will be drowned in criticism and made disreputable, because they are outside the acceptable choices. Or they may be allowed to survive in the corners of the culture – emaciated, but alive – and presented as evidence of our democracy, our tolerance, and our pluralism.

A sophisticated system of control that is confident of its power can permit a measure of dissidence. However, it watches its critics carefully, should they ever seriously threaten the system, or should the establishment, in a state of paranoia, *think* they do. If readers think I am exaggerating with words such as “*watching . . . overwhelm . . . suppress . . . paranoia*,” they should read the volumes of reports on the FBI and the CIA published in 1975 by the Senate Select Committee on Government Operations.

However, government surveillance and threats are the exception. What normally operates day by day is the quiet dominance of certain ideas, the ideas we are expected to hold by our neighbors, our employers, and our political leaders; the ones we quickly learn are the most acceptable. The result is an obedient, acquiescent, passive citizenry – a situation that is deadly to democracy.

If one day we decide to reexamine these beliefs and realize they do not come naturally out of our innermost feelings or our spontaneous desires, are not the result of independent thought on our part, and, indeed, do not match the real world as we experience it, then we have come to an important turning point in life. Then we find ourselves examining, and confronting, American ideology.

That is what I want to do in this book.

I will be dealing with political ideas. When political ideas are analyzed – issues like violence in human nature, realism and idealism, the best forms of government or whether there should be government at all, a citizen’s obligation to the state, and the proper distribution of wealth in society – we are in the area of political theory, or political philosophy. There is a list of famous political thinkers who are traditionally used to initiate discussion on these long-term problems, including Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Madison, Rousseau, Marx, and Freud.

There are endless arguments that go on in academic circles about what Plato or Machiavelli or Rousseau or Marx *really* meant. Although I taught political theory for twenty years, I don’t really care about that. I am interested in these thinkers when it seems to me their ideas are still alive in our time and can be used to illuminate a problem. Readers wanting to know more about some of these writers and the literature will find references in the endnotes of this book. I will assume that our job is not to interpret the great theorists, but to think for ourselves.

I will go back and forth from theory to historical fact (including very recent events), hoping to clarify issues of urgent concern to our time. I will not be too respectful of chronology, but will wander back and forth across the centuries, from Machiavelli to Kissinger, from Socrates in an Athenian prison to a Catholic priest in a Connecticut jail, making whatever connections I find useful.

There is in orthodox thinking a great dependence on experts. Because modern technological society has produced a breed of experts who understand technical matters that bewilder the rest of us, we think that in matters of social conflict, which require *moral* judgments, we must also turn to experts.⁴

There are two false assumptions about experts. One is that they see more clearly and think more intelligently than ordinary citizens. Sometimes they do, sometimes not. The other assumption is that these experts have the same *interests* as ordinary citizens, want the same things, hold the same values, and, therefore, can be trusted to make decisions for all of us.

To depend on great thinkers, authorities, and experts is, it seems to me, a violation of the spirit of democracy. Democracy rests on the idea that, except for technical details for which experts may be useful, the important decisions of society are within the capability of ordinary citizens. Not only *can* ordinary people make decisions about these issues, but they *ought* to, because citizens understand their own interests more clearly than any expert.

In John Le Carré's novel *The Russia House*, a dissident Russian scientist is assured that his secret document has been entrusted "to the authorities. People of discretion. Experts." He becomes angry:

I do not *like* experts. They are our jailers. I despise experts more than anyone on earth. . . . They solve nothing! They are servants of whatever system hires them. They perpetuate it. When we are tortured, we shall be tortured by experts. When we are hanged, experts will hang us. . . . When the world is destroyed, it will be destroyed not by its madmen but by the sanity of its experts and the superior ignorance of its bureaucrats.⁵

We are expected to believe that great thinkers – experts – are *objective*, that they have no axes to grind and no biases, and that they make pure intellectual judgments. However, the minds of all human beings are powerfully influenced (though not totally bound) by their backgrounds, by whether they are rich or poor, male or female, black or white or Asian, in positions of power, or in lowly circumstances. Even scientists making "scientific" observations know that what they see will be affected by their *position*.⁶

Why should we cherish "objectivity," as if ideas were innocent, as if they don't serve one interest or another? Surely, we want to be objective if that means telling the truth as we see it, not concealing information that may be embarrassing to our point of view. But we don't want to be objective if it means pretending that ideas don't play a part in the social struggles of our time, that we don't take sides in those struggles.

Indeed, it is impossible to be neutral. In a world already moving in certain directions, where wealth and power are already moving in certain directions, where wealth and power are already distributed in certain ways, neutrality means accepting the way things are now. It is a world of clashing interests – war against peace, nationalism against internationalism, equality against greed, and democracy against elitism – and it seems to me both impossible and undesirable to be neutral in those conflicts.

Writing this book, I do not claim to be neutral, nor do I want to be. There are things I value, and things I don't. I am not going to present ideas objectively if that means I don't have strong opinions on which ideas are right and which are wrong. I will try to be fair to opposing ideas by accurately representing them. But the reader should know that what appear here are my own views of the world as it is and as it should be.

In my years of teaching, I never listened to the advice of people who said that a teacher should be objective, neutral, and professional. All the experiences of my life, growing up on the streets of New York, becoming a shipyard worker at the age of eighteen, enlisting in the Air Force in World War II, participating in the civil rights movement in the Deep South, cried out against that.

It seems to me that we should make the most of the fact that we live in a country that, although controlled by wealth and power, has openings and possibilities missing in many other places. The controllers are gambling that those opening will pacify us, that we will not really use them to make the bold changes that are needed if we are to create a decent society. We should take that gamble.

We are not starting from scratch. There is a long history in this country of rebellion against the establishment, of resistance to orthodoxy. There has always been a commonsense perception that there are things seriously wrong and that we can't really depend on those in charge to set them right.

This perception has led Americans to protest and rebel. I think of the Boston Bread Rioters and Carolina antitax farmers of the eighteenth century; the black and white abolitionists of slavery days; the working people of the railroads, mines, textile mills, steel mills, and auto plants who went on strike, facing the clubs of policemen and the machine guns of soldiers to get an eight-hour workday and a living wage; the women who refused to stay in the kitchen and marched and went to jail for equal rights; the black protesters and antiwar activists of the 1960s; and the protesters against industrial pollution and war preparations in the 1980s.

In the heat of such movements brains are set stirring with new ideas, which live on through quieter times, waiting for another opportunity to ignite into action and change the world around us.

Dissenters, I am aware, can create their own orthodoxy. So we need a constant reexamination of our thinking, using the evidence of our eyes and ears and the realities of our experience to think freshly. We need declarations of independence from all nations, parties, and programs – all rigid dogmas.

The experience of our century tell us that the old orthodoxies, the traditional ideologies, the neatly tied bundles of ideas—capitalism, socialism, democracy—need to be untied, so that we can play and experiment with all the ingredients, add others, and create new combinations in looser bundles. We know as we come to the twenty-first century that we desperately need to develop new, imaginative approaches to the human problems of our time.

For citizens to do this on their own, to listen with some skepticism to the great thinkers and the experts, and to think for themselves about the great issues of today's world, is to make democracy come alive.

We might begin by confronting one of those great thinkers, Niccolò Machiavelli, and examining the connection between him and the makers of foreign policy in the United States.

NOTES

2. When Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union, he clearly grasped this idea, one that the giant American corporations had learned long ago; one did not have to monopolize the field to maintain control and allowing for a bit of competition was the most ingenious way to dominate. And so he initiated some socialist “pluralism.”

3. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, in their book *Manufacturing Consent* (South End Press, 1989) argue powerfully that the function of the media in the United States (and, of course, not *only* in the United States) “is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state.” They document this with examples of how the press treated certain historical events: the Tet offensive during the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandals of the Nixon era, and the Iran-Contra affair of the Reagan years.

4. Ched Noble, in a remarkable essay, “Ethics and Experts,” *Working Papers* (July-Aug. 1980), rebels against the field in which she received her Ph.D. (philosophy), as she finds it a “new philosophical sub-discipline, applied ethics.” She challenges the assumption she finds in this new area, that “in order to think properly about moral issues . . . one needs a background in classical moral theories and modern theory of value.” While she does not believe common sense alone can solve the profound moral problems, she insists that “contemporary theoretical ethics cannot supply the deficiencies of common sense.” She resents the arrogance of philosophers “who believe that philosophy is the proper academic discipline to assume responsibility for solving today's moral problems.”

A similar view is expressed by a veteran philosopher, Bernard Williams, in his book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1986), who argues that philosophy cannot do much to guide ethical actions.

5. John Le Carré, *The Russia House* (Knopf, 1989), 207.

6. The German scientist Werner Heisenberg became famous for, among other things, his “principle of uncertainty,” which makes this point. Heisenberg, in his book *From Plato to Planck*, said that “in science we are not dealing with nature itself but with the science of nature – that is, with nature which has been thought through and described by man.” Quoted in Paul Mattick, “Marxism and the New Physics,” *Philosophy of Science* (Oct. 1962): 360.

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