

# THE IDEAS BEHIND POLITICS

# DAVID BODANIS

Author of *The Secret House*

# **Web of Words**

**The Ideas behind Politics**

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David Bodanis

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PRESS

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# Introduction and Acknowledgments

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I got the idea for this book when I moved to London after a long period in an out-of-the-way little village in France. In the village everyone had been nosey, and the numbers were low enough that with a lot of diligent prying everyone could be watched almost all the time. But in London: I remember walking through a sports center my first day there, and being amazed that everyone stayed so neatly in order, even though most of them didn't know each other, and there were no central figures doing any prying.

There seemed to be invisible rules, patterns, which people in the city were willing to follow. No doubt it was happening in America, where I had grown up, and on the political level too. It would be immensely illuminating to pull these patterns out, and then use them to see clearly the bases of our personal thinking and even our political choices. But how?

My approach was to start by taking all the fancy tools I knew from logic and philosophy, and try to apply them to the real nitty-gritty of what people get interested in: television shows, astrology, exciting commandos, marriage, and, the subject of what became the longest chapter in the book, money, money, money. It might have been easier to stay on an abstract level, but how would you ever know if you were right if you did that? Also, I didn't just want to make fun of what other people think – that's a style of writing not too appealing to see – and so made a point of including plenty of subjects for which I personally cared too.

Gradually certain patterns did begin to come clear, and once that happened I was able to go on to try to work out what was going on in our psychology, or what had happened in our political history, to have made us accept these patterns rather than others. Indirectly there is an attempt to develop the tool of what might be called hierarchy or mimicry theory, which is the study of links between ideas or doings held on one level of understanding with those on another. It all took a lot of reading, but was a delightful few years.

How to write up the results? As a tool for social thought, ordinary English is much underrated. Enriched by a little Yiddish, for that language's justly lauded ability to reach the parts other languages can't, it is without peer. Only in a few cases where there were no well-

known terms around did I coin my own, whence the Blobs, Tarzan *vs* the Time Capsule, and other occasional oddities the reader might notice in the text.

I also left out footnotes. To some extent this was to make life easy for the printers; mostly, though, it was because recent social theorists – with a few delightful exceptions, such as Gellner, or Lévi-Strauss – haven't, unfortunately, had sufficient insight to come up with results worth quoting. It was tempting to source some of the arguments I used in the classical philosophers, but that is not the fashion any more.

The book itself ended up arranged like one of those musical pieces that keeps on developing a theme until you've gone in a full spiral, and are then looking down on where you started. So I start with just a little prologue, ostensibly comparing British and American English, but really bringing in that main point about there being a lot of ideas surrounding us, which we take for granted but which are important in shaping the way we think. That alone is of course not original – Aristotle and the Old Testament went on at length about our being blinded by preconceptions – and what counts is the particular way it's worked out. The prologue hints at something of an explanation, but sticking to the tinkle tinkle of little British/American curios it doesn't get very far. That's easy on the reader; also when I wrote it – it originally appeared in *New Society* magazine and was the grounds for a kind Macmillan editor, Tim Farmiloe, commissioning the whole book – I didn't know any more.

The book proper begins with a section on what I think are two of the most important invisible backings to our thought around now. Here I really do take the time to go into their sources and recent history.

The first chapter looks at the notion of infection, which has much to do with worry about our own body and its breakdown. Curiously enough, some reading up on Pasteur showed that it also has long tied in with attitudes towards subversion and industrial workers. In the essay there are particular applications to recent foreign policy, including an explanation of why Reagan and other apparently decent Americans have become so unreasonable about the Sandinistas. To go with it there's a little follow-up essay applying the idea to the particular case of Hitler and the Jews. It's an important subject; also a way of checking our findings.

The second basic idea is the excitement with commandos, and hi-tech gear generally. Here I try to show that underlying this fascination is a worry about the basic question of how to act in life –

how to know what to do. To understand it you need to delve into Augustine and Homer; only after that, I think, does it become clear why even if we're against big defense budgets we are still, unfortunately, likely to get a special sort of excitement from thinking about Star Wars and similar weapons.

The next section, Part Two, tries to reveal how these and other ideas are at work in America today. It's always tempting to want to explain everything, but as that's the direction in which megalomania lies, I've stuck to just a few domains. The first chapter in the section, through a look at the *New York Times*, discusses the overall stability of the country, and some of the lackings that two main personality types in it are likely to feel. After that there's a light essay comparing Mozart and Bruce Springsteen. The section finishes with a look at the mind of the American businessman, showing how certain fears and religiously based notions explain national respect for the free market, and for working together.

Part Three is the single behemoth on money, mentioned earlier. In a big historical sweep, concentrating on money all the way, it tries to look even more thoroughly at the underpinnings of our attitudes.

The book ends with a Part Four about our ultimate goals, and the consolations we end up demanding against the fact that all these goals will be limited in some way by our own mortality. It is a problem seen in miniature in England's difficulties with creating an entrepreneurial culture like America's.

There was no way I could have done the research for all this without the excellent resources of the London Library in St James's Square. There I was able to enjoy all the personal attention of my little French village but with surprisingly little of the nosiness. The British Museum Library, and to some extent the Science Museum's historical holdings, filled in the bits the London Library lacked. The Pasteur archives in Paris were comprehensive on the great biologist. Going back further, William McNeill of the University of Chicago was probably responsible for first showing me how one could take long historical sweeps without falling into vague thinking; Leonard Olsen was important in introducing me to Aristotle as a living tool.

Tim Radford offered the ideas that first started me out on the Pasteur essay, and also helped in the overall editing; Matthew Hoffman, by disagreeing strenuously and sometimes even with reason with most of the ideas I have suggested to him in the past few years, has helped to clarify my thinking throughout. And Kathleen again managed, amazingly, to put up with it all.





# Prologue



# Web of Words

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Why do English people get constipated? Because they queue for the bus, they wash their face with flannels, they enter their houses on the ground floor, and they eradicate pencil markings with rubbers; that's why.

For Americans, everything is different. The equivalent American ailment, the one of maximum personal worry and occasional intimate revelation, is concern about the heart. And of course Americans do everything else differently. They line up for buses, wash with washcloths, enter their homes by the first floor, and never, ever eradicate pencil marks with a rubber: they erase them with erasers.

The difference is not one of fact, of course, but just in the words that members of the two societies use. Yet these words regularly line up on opposite sides of a great divide, and the attitudes controlling each side will give us some hint of the different feelings about sensation, power, anxiety and nature that different humans are prone to fall into.

The key difference in the British-American case is the separation out of the individual. Take the simple statement, 'the football team is planning to go to New York.' For a British person this would be glaringly ungrammatical. The correct form would be: 'the football team *are* planning to go to New York.' The American 'is' pulls the individuals into the group. Their uniqueness is lost. What counts, what is referred to, is only the unitary team. The British 'are' keeps the idea of the individuals as separate beings. The team may be planning to go somewhere, but that's only because each constituent member of it is agreeing to go.

This fits in with a different notion of sensation. As an American in Chicago I washed in the morning with a washcloth – a device whose name describes what it does: it's a cloth that washes. As an American in Britain I have to perform the same morning ablutions with a 'flannel' – a device that looks the same, but is wholly different in its linguistic psychology. The name of this object reassures me of how this object feels and what its content is – to wit, flannel.

The soothing confirmation of touch crops up in school. British schoolchildren use a rubber to scrape away their unwanted pencil marks. American schoolchildren have an eraser. 'Rubber' describes

the dual sensation of holding this cool, non-rigid substance and rubbing away with it. 'Eraser' says nothing about how it feels but just states the result: the mark has been erased.

Even for items that you can't feel, the British language will try to bring individual sensation into account. Consider that often helical metal or plastic device which is popularly used as a female contraceptive. If it's properly inserted, there's no way of feeling it once it's inside. The uterus doesn't have the necessary ascending sensory nerves. The closest substitute to direct touch you could get would be to look at it.

In Britain, that second-best attempt to get tactile knowledge is encouraged. The device is given the trade name of 'coil'; a name that describes how it looks, and corresponds with the real visual image a woman will have when shown a sample in her gynaecologist's office. In America the same device is universally called an IUD – short for intra-uterine device. The American name has nothing to do with anything the woman would actually see or touch. It's just an impersonal re-statement of the object's geographical siting.

In British English, such individual awareness is all. When Londoners queue for a bus, each one is making an individual choice: to queue. But when New Yorkers assemble for a bus, they are said to form a line. A line is a geometrical construct that might be visible from a helicopter flying overhead, but is by no means dependent on the wishes of the individuals who compose it. There is a lack of individual volition about a 'line'. A cluster of soldiers bullied by their sergeant into forming a column on a parade ground might be described as forming a line. No one would say that they formed a queue.

British motorists have a chance to respond individually, too. In switching from a motorway outside London to another road you enter upon a roundabout. The name aptly describes the disorienting sensation, the mass of swirls, curves and turns that you get driving around one of those concrete objects. But in America a 'roundabout' is unheard of. Drivers call the equivalent structure a clover-leaf, or a clover-leaf junction. This describes how a highway designer would look at it. On the drawing board or in aerial photographs it does look somewhat like a leaf of clover. But the American term gives no feeling of what it is like for an individual to scoot along one.

The same goes for 'elevator', as opposed to 'lift'. The American 'elevator' sounds like something performing an impersonal ascension. The British equivalent describes a piece of machinery which gives you the feeling of undergoing a lift when you're in it. The fact

that only the British term describes a sensation is confirmed by usage in a different area. If an American child were playfully grasped and raised up by his father, he would never say that he had been 'elevated'. He would say, rightly, that he had been 'lifted'.

The terminology of train or jet travel follows the same rules. What counts to the individual traveller buying his ticket is the feeling that ultimately he will 'return', and that of course is the British ticket's name. In America you can only book that sort of journey by asking for a 'round-trip' ticket. This is an impersonal specification of a trajectory that could be charted on a map as a process of first going in one direction, and then in the other. There is no personal input into the exercise.

In all these cases, American English accepts that the individual will quite happily move about without caring how much attention the world immediately outside is giving him. In British English, that's impossible.

To get to an explanation it's useful to consider the utterance that's inescapable in large parts of the United States whenever you conclude a purchase or casual meeting: the exhortation to 'have a good day'. There is an awesome notion of an austere power somewhere that looks down and makes our days either good or bad. The stock phrase shows a belief in an organisation of human affairs where individual volition has no chance at all. Even the British formal equivalent – 'goodbye' – has a more individual sound: *I am personally* bidding farewell. The informal 'cheers' is even more clearly individualistic.

Why is all this? Are Americans colder, more impersonal, and concerned only with externals? Somehow that doesn't seem right for a country that produces jazz and rock music and the anything but impersonal paraphernalia of the Me Generation. What then?

I suspect it is because in America there's a feeling that the country was made by choice; it didn't just grow. If it grows, you are part of it and it will have been paying attention to you all the way along. But the state of being American is a matter of *joining* – of accepting a choice that someone else made.

Americans also will be conscious of living in a continent recently built up from scratch. That makes you used to thinking about the internal 'struts' of the world around you, and not so worried about how the end-products of those struts *feel*. The typical American city layout – that endless repetition of two-dimensional rectangular grids – both encourages and epitomises this impersonal thinking, the feeling of living within an X-ray.

A look at a few special fields might make all this clearer:

*Nature.* Walk though the front door of a British home and you emerge on the ground floor. To get to the first floor – the first one thought of as artificially constructed and imposed – you have to go one flight up. In America, the idea of the ground and all such intrusions of nature are banned from the house. Walk into a Texan's or any other home and you will be informed that already you're on the first floor. The host is reaffirming that he is no mere servant of nature, but its controller. The proud displays of plastic-wrapped vegetables in American stores, locking what once grew in dirt into safe plastic cells, make the same point.

*Manners.* Here it's curious that each country's best manners are quite neatly the other country's worst ones. An average American who doesn't know what to do at a party is likely to speak in a firm voice, and ask what profession the person he meets is in. This is violently unpleasant if it's a British person he meets. Similarly, the reserve and clipped phrases that a shy British person is likely to display at a party would be considered intolerably insulting behaviour by Americans he might meet there.

Now it is understandable that different national manners might offend. But it must be more than chance for them to offend so precisely. Our linguistic delvings show why. Americans at a party can do almost anything: to them the social system is given, and seems to exist independently. The British, however, must continually, by their actions and social references, re-create the social system they live in.

It's an exhausting obligation continually to have to prop up the world so. That's why British people are in constant terror of outstepping their place, doing something wrong, or just giving the wrong appearance. That would bring the whole precarious social world tumbling down. That's also why the postures and expressions of American tourists standing on the streets in London are so irritating to natives. The Americans are not terrified of outstepping their place. That ease, that independence from self and the self's willed position, undercuts the British approach to life and so is felt as an insult.

*Tools.* These provide a useful check on the argument that Americans generally speak as if the world is pre-set. A tool is, by definition, in the business of changing the external world. It is the one point where you can choose to break into and change your surrounding. This should

reverse everything, making American usage subjective and British usage more objective. It is a simple matter of contrapositional logic, and I think the evidence backs it.

When an American wants to shift gears in his sports car he can put his hand on the gear shift. But a British driver has no such device immediately expressive of his will or intention there: he has to manipulate his vehicle through a gear 'lever'. More directly, when a person takes a certain tooled metal object in his hand to fit around and loose an obstinate bolt, he is likely to have to give it a wrenching burst of effort to get it to work. This felt sensation is incorporated in the American word for the device. It's called a wrench. The British term 'spanner', however, is only an arbitrary noun, or at best one that hints at the external specification of spanning a gap. This is a complete switchover from lines, erasers and clover-leaves, where Americans came out the cold, impersonally descriptives ones.

Similarly, electrical circuits in Britain reach the surface of a house's wall at an impersonal 'point' – just what a wiring diagram might label them as. In the United States, the place where an electric line surfaces in a wall is called a 'plug'. That's a term which describes perfectly what the ordinary person experiences whenever he uses it. His sole interest is the putting of a plug in there. Here, building up his world, getting involved with the internal struts, his surroundings do speak kindly and personally.

*Body.* Here's where we came in. The prime medical topic in Britain for commiseration among family members and close friends, perhaps, is constipation. In America a similar volubility and commiseration is more likely to be granted to imagined ailments of the heart.

Speaking a bit whimsically, if anything is discrete, individual, and empirical, it is constipation. Something appears, or it doesn't. The heart, by contrast, would be ideal as the American popular ailment. Hearts are things which have a central organising and controlling role. They are the perfect bodily metaphor for analogous events in the realms of American urban geography, society or language.

Conclusion? Language is a guide to the rules, the reminders, the idea machines encouraging us to stay in the world of the particular society we're landed in. It gives some hint of the great unexplored world of social presuppositions around us. But it also is a crude tool, a microscope that somehow you can never get into sharp focus. With language alone there will always be counter-examples, and important

questions left hanging. How does a society 'know' to do all this? Can patterns this general explain our detailed politics today? Just what does it feel like for us to live inside these and other idea machines?

For that we need to start again.



# **Part One**

## **Two Themes**