

BRAINWASHED



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# BRAINWASHED

A NEW HISTORY OF THOUGHT CONTROL

DANIEL PICK

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To Isobel

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## A NOTE TO THE READER

This book was written in another epoch, before Russia invaded Ukraine, claiming that the war was a ‘special operation’ to ‘denazify’ its neighbour. On 14 March 2022, a TV editor, Marina Ovsyannikova, interrupted a live news transmission on the Russian station Channel One, bearing a poster that said, ‘Stop the war, don’t believe the propaganda, here you are being lied to. Russians against war.’

The horrific scenes that dominated the news throughout that month seemed to many observers uncanny – tanks rolling across a European state’s borders; cities pulverised; citizens killed in their thousands and displaced in their millions. As this book went to press, NATO was reinforcing Eastern European states with the aim of deterring the Russian leadership from enlarging the conflict. Inside the Kremlin, apparently mired in conspiracy theories, Putin put his nuclear weapons crews on high alert, reviving our collective sense of existential dread. His allies, meanwhile, mooted the possibility of a Korean-style division of Ukraine in future. These dire and potentially apocalyptic military events provide a new context in which to revisit the Cold War era, those decades, after 1945, when new ideas about captive minds, disinformation, propaganda, groupthink and brain-washing gained such prominence.

## PREFACE

I have a distant memory from my school days: an interesting lesson, in which a teacher invited us to consider how the media might skew our perceptions. He set our class to work, monitoring the daily news. In one exercise we were required to scan newspapers and magazines, tasked with identifying emotive phrases, noting the slants of editorials, gauging the intended impact of headlines and recognising the hierarchical placement of certain more-or-less 'important' articles on the front or inside pages. We duly cut out snippets, and stuck them into exercise books, with our accompanying critical notes.

Some years later, around the mid-1980s, as a research student, I began wondering about the acres of coverage devoted in the media to a new market measure, the FTSE 100. This is shorthand for the Financial Times Stock Exchange Index of the hundred largest companies by capital value listed on the London Stock Exchange. Reports of the shifting fortunes of that index arrived with the regularity of tides; expert opinion was always on hand about how to construe the outlook, in light of that figure: has the number edged up, slid, plummeted or not budged at all? Are things looking bullish or bearish? Is all well with the world?

Whether you were interested or not, invested or not, I came to realise, this regular flow of information about the FTSE Index was exhibited centre stage in the news, simply part and parcel of the media-driven theatre of modern life.<sup>1</sup> Today, the 'Footsie' still just sits there, as though an incontrovertible barometer of collective health and well-being. That diet of information was and still is regularly fed to us with the same sense of inevitability as are the weather reports. In fact, the two bulletins – the temperature of the air and of the stock market – are frequently announced adjacently. What of all the other stats, I mused, after that first realisation, which might complement, complicate or even substitute the news about the FTSE 100, Nikkei or Dow Jones?

As a university student, first of literature, then of history, I had

become steeped in ideas about ideology, social construction, false consciousness, paradigms, mythologies, linguistic turns and discourse analysis. We were taught to be alert to the language we use, the presumptions that we make, the stories we internalise and, as George Lakoff and others put it, the ‘metaphors we live by’.<sup>2</sup> The writing of history, we gleaned, was also shaped by a variety of cultural conventions and story-telling techniques. It was a time when the work of Michel Foucault loomed large over our studies in the humanities: so much we had previously taken for granted about the self and society, madness and sanity, normality and perversion, life and death, health and illness, productivity and idleness, crime and punishment was cast into question.

It was in the context of my attempt to grapple with such issues – during an epoch when the benefits of markets in all spheres of life were being heavily promoted, the gross domestic products of nations apprehensively compared, and neoliberal policies developed on both sides of the Atlantic – that I found the media’s constant declaration of the singular stock market number increasingly curious, or even suspicious.

What words and models, I wondered, best capture this process of information flow into our lives? Are we educated, accosted, informed, accustomed, acclimatised, habituated, normalised, familiarised, influenced, nudged, conditioned, shaped, manipulated, programmed or maybe even ... *brainwashed*, so that we treat the City of London’s or Wall Street’s dominant position without question, and with all reverence? Inspired by what I’d been taught and read, I found myself thinking harder about those questions and these ‘natural’ news updates, and how they might relate to a larger package of claims about meaning, value and truth.

But when I expressed this concern to another student, with a different political outlook to mine, he questioned my and others’ supposedly ‘radical’ views, asking if we were the ones who had been conditioned, by books and charismatic teachers. He pointed out that I might be too utopian and/or too cynical in casting doubt on this crucial index; either way, to dispute the automatic newsworthiness of the Footsie, he felt, risked ignoring the importance of business and commerce, and thus of national prosperity and growth; the bread-and-butter concerns (jobs, livelihoods, pensions, etc.) on which we depend.

Lately, I’ve been reminded of those heated discussions about the

conditioning we endure, the influences we succumb to, the measures we use and the ways we then frame them. While I was researching this subject, for example, it was commonplace for critics of the Democrat Obama and the Republican Trump presidencies alike to decry the privileging of Wall Street over Main Street. Commentators denounced Trump's obsessive tweeting of each passing uptick in the value of stocks, warned against the ever more arcane instruments and arrangements of the vast banks and hedge funds (despite the previous near total meltdown of the system), and drew a sharp contrast between the fantastical world of high finance and the 'real economy'. Trump managed to speak to large numbers within an aggrieved, white, 'dispossessed' class of people, who felt ignored by a liberal establishment, even as he catered to the wealthy, offering tax cuts and talking up the Dow, whenever it suited him.<sup>3</sup>

But this kind of debate over the prominence given to such daily news updates – crucial information or mode of conditioning? – is just a skirmish in a much older battle of ideas about religious and secular forms of indoctrination, and the way a vision of reality may envelop us. Over the centuries, many efforts have been made to disenchant communities; to disillusion adherents of religions, as well as to disabuse proponents of, or fellow travellers with, particular ideologies. So much that we may assume as a given fact of nature, or 'plain reality', after all, is the product of a culture and value system. Nietzsche, by offering a genealogy of morals, invited the reader to question, perhaps even transform, their own basic values. Marx talked of religion as the opium of the people, and Freud also speculated about organised faith, under the heading 'the future of an illusion' – which is not to say any of those thinkers had the full measure of religions or were free of illusions themselves. But they were all brilliant analysts, seeking to confront readers with their guiding assumptions or unexamined symptoms.

Marx aspired to awaken the workers from their slumbers and to free them from chains; he claimed that they might have nothing to lose, and he pointed out the potentially deceptive nature of their everyday notions of reality or justice; for instance, the illusion that they entered into a fair trade with employers in 'contracting' their labour in factories, unaware that a surplus was extracted by the capitalist. A system and way of life, Marx and Engels pointed out, might appear solid and then 'melt into air'.

A neurosis too, Freud added, may seem to the sufferer entirely unremarkable; worse, that symptom can be treated as though indispensable for a time, perhaps even a lifetime. He looked at the repressed thoughts and conflicted feelings that might lie behind certain symptoms, for example in cases of hysteria; and he also suggested that everybody is prone to succumb to fantastical wishes and beliefs. Freud once remarked that an aim of psychoanalysis was to help patients to work and to love; on another occasion he expressed the hope that this treatment might assist people to give up hysterical misery and in return accept ordinary, everyday unhappiness. We can tell ourselves all manner of stories about our own minds and the world around us; remain committed, unconsciously, to our neuroses, for fear, rightly or wrongly, of suffering worse fates without them. People may rely unconsciously, he showed, on knotted-up disabling narratives, repetitive mechanisms or what psychoanalysts in more recent times have called 'pathological organisations' and 'psychic retreats' inside the mind. Yet such organisations and retreats, however restrictive and distorting, may harbour us from total chaos.

Moving out of a settled system, or sheltering world of illusions, even delusions, carries risks; perhaps of feeling ashamed, exposed, disorientated or terrified, as the psychoanalyst John Steiner has finely observed.<sup>4</sup> If we are fortunate, we find help from others in navigating difficult impasses and making changes, tolerating the movements that take place in our minds and facing painful disenchantments of one kind or another without getting stuck in a state of apathy, mania or melancholia. To lose former creeds, or idols, can also leave one bereft, as though God has failed, or as though life itself is devoid of meaning. Times of change can be bracing, creative and also bewildering, as imagined solidities melt, and as we try to find new bearings, individually or collectively. We live, the late social theorist Zygmunt Bauman has observed, in an epoch when certain former anchor points have gone – an age, he said, offering us yet one more metaphor, of 'liquid modernity'.<sup>5</sup>

How beliefs mediate people's interpretations of events in the world, and how the environment shapes popular beliefs, has been disputed for centuries. Critique of our former mass political and economic conditioning – critique that had come to my attention, as I have mentioned, during the era of Reagan and Thatcher – is now roaring back into public view, if it ever really went away. For example,

compelling new work has appeared by economists which probes the ossified thinking that has too often governed their discipline. They insist we must analyse afresh, and with open minds, basic tenets; look again at what is most valued *and* devalued by policy analysts, law makers and electorates too.<sup>6</sup> Once again the call goes out that we need to be freed from former illusions that once passed as virtually incontestable truths.

Certain assumptions about the world, Kate Raworth remarks in her illuminating 2017 book *Doughnut Economics*, ‘slip swiftly into the back of our head, wordlessly whispering the deepest assumptions of economic theory that need never be put into words because they have been inscribed in the mind’s eye’. Such images, she suggests, may linger ‘like graffiti on the mind’; so much ‘intellectual baggage’ that comes to be:

lodged in your visual cortex without you even realising it is there. And – just like graffiti – it is very hard to remove. So if a picture is worth a thousand words then, in economics at least, we should pay a great deal more attention to the pictures that we teach, draw and learn.<sup>7</sup>

In modern society, she shows, selected images, graphs and nuggets of data are illuminated in the media headlights, on a rolling twenty-four-hour news cycle, reflecting and reinforcing a particular way of seeing the world.<sup>8</sup>

A few years after I first began teaching at a college of the University of London, and while I was also training to be a psychoanalyst, a sceptical academic colleague declared to me, ‘Ah, so you’ve been brainwashed to believe in the so-called “talking cure”’. He made clear he had never had psychoanalysis, and that he assumed those who did, let alone those who trained in the practice, gave up their critical faculties and bought into the process blindly. Perhaps these risks do exist in any psychotherapy; a procedure supposed to provide an open-minded exploration can be commandeered, in exploitative ways, of course. For example, instead of analysing the unconscious feelings stirred up by the process, the analyst (as Freud had duly warned his colleagues) might misunderstand, or worse, exploit, the patient’s transferred passions and apparent ‘love’.<sup>9</sup> The patient is, after all, in a vulnerable

position, and may well idealise, at least for a time, the clinician, the treatment or the theories on which it is based.

A 'talking cure' can exert its own seductive appeal, arouse myriad unconscious ideas and feelings and impose coercive pressures. At worst, such treatment may be co-opted for the analyst's selfish needs, or adapted explicitly in the name of a state, commercial enterprise or political ideology; therapy can morph into a sinister project of conversion and thought control. Freud's method during the twentieth century was appropriated for multiple purposes; the same goes for other modes of therapy and 'psy' disciplines. A peculiar and bowdlerised version of a talking cure had endured even in the Third Reich, and was used in methods of 'group re-education' in the communist world. So, my colleague's fear that a supposed mental health treatment can become a form of 'mental hygiene', an instrument of conditioning, or even might end up as tantamount to brainwashing, has a long and significant history; it is a concern that needs to be taken seriously. And yet despite that warning, I still maintain that psychoanalysis need not be like that; it can be a place of safety and of trust; it has a different, therapeutic potential. The practice can be genuinely exploratory, radically challenging, open-ended; it may well prove supportive, as well as disturbing. Indeed, it offers a unique place to encounter more of ourselves, free of other pressures, providing a means to cast light on our unconscious identifications and idealisations, perhaps even our penchant for zealotry, rather than serve to reinforce them.

Some years after my colleague made that remark, I set myself the task of reading a now largely forgotten literature in the West; a literature that explored the concept of brainwashing, along with others such as 'conditioning', 'groupthink', the 'captive mind', 'hidden persuasion', 're-education', 'mind control' and 'thought reform'. I wanted to understand better what 'brainwashing' really consists in, how the idea arose, and how far it can be of use in understanding the interlocking crises we face in present dark times, when the minimum that is required for creating a viable, sustainable, planetary future for humanity is so much more than the maximum that appears to be deliverable within prevailing economic models and electoral systems. This book is an attempt to think about the past and to see what this language of thought control might tell us as we struggle to respond to the dire state that we are in.

Ideas about brainwashing were explored intensively in the period following the Second World War. Many commentators used this vocabulary in the decades after 1945 because they wanted to open up a new set of questions in political psychology and to issue urgent warnings; to show that modern citizens are at grave risk – through government, commerce, social pressure, cults, modern science, medicine, advertising or secret security services – of warping or losing their minds. *Brainwashed* takes up such ideas and phrases; it shows how they were explored and developed; and it discusses why they still resonate today in a new age of hot and cold wars, and in a maelstrom of discourse about fake news, conspiracy, big tech, populism, radicalisation and paranoid political thought.

As I found in researching this topic, brainwashing is a slippery concept, hard to pin down and often contentious. Is the narrative of inevitability implicit in the routine attention paid to the FTSE 100 by assorted anchors, financial analysts, newscasters, hosts and pundits best viewed strictly as brainwashing? Or is that word appropriately reserved for more extreme practices, including those so hideously ‘perfected’ inside closed societies, cults and compounds? If one wants to be critical of such customary news coverage, then normalising or habituating might perhaps be the more fitting labels. On the other hand, the question of brainwashing is certainly worth considering even in relatively open political systems or institutional settings, in which people can be fed deceptive stories, fantastical promises and false reassurances.

This book not only stakes out positions on brainwashing, but also explores a history of discussions about its provenance, reach and effects. I want to consider this controversial idea and its applications, showing how the problem of brainwashing has been diversely scrutinised or even exploited (one person’s brainwasher, another’s freedom fighter), and how the notion is often diffuse and difficult to define exactly. My aim is to provide an historical framework for assessing how and why this key word arose, alongside a cluster of associated terms; to investigate how this notion has been used to enhance (or hinder) our capacity to analyse modern societies and psyches; to assess the role played by psychology in contemporary life; and to think about the hazards of thinking itself.

*Brainwashed* thus places the idea in context and reflects upon its continuing significance, how it might be most usefully located, and

where it has previously been most powerfully portrayed. I contend it is worth our investigating how commentary on brainwashing first arose, and how the subject was then shaped, nuanced, challenged and sensationalised. This study invites the reader to look afresh at brainwashing and related conceptions of mind control, influence, pressure and manipulation. It excavates how such ideas have been deployed in the past in many contrasting settings and asks how they might serve to investigate contemporary lived experiences of commerce and culture, society and politics.

'Brainwashing' is a component of a psychological and political language we now seem to assume. It is built into how we might routinely think about minds and societies, and what imperils them. The language we inherit can affect how we view ourselves and other people; perhaps a particular vocabulary proves useful in sharpening understanding. However, it might also work to reorganise or even dull it. Since the dawn of philosophy, groups have met to converse and grapple with the problem of what it means to think logically, or at least what is required to think seriously. In modern times, psychology too has occupied a central role in considering healthy and pathological thought processes, in different phases of life. The psychological professions have played an important part in fashioning how we understand mental conflict and pain, or even how we evaluate a life well or badly lived; they offer many accounts of what it is to be human, perspectives on the way people struggle, for better or worse, with various developmental challenges during what came to be called the 'life cycle'. Through the optic of these 'psy' disciplines, we have inherited numerous theories and thick descriptions about mental health and pathology, hypotheses that may guide how we think about ourselves and feel about others or imagine we once thought and felt long ago. Psychoanalysts, for example, have done a good deal to investigate and consider the minds of babies, and sought moreover to explore the factors that may foster or thwart an infant's capacities to play, think and explore, to love and be loved, to recognise feelings of rage or envy, and to cope with a dread of being hated (or even annihilated). Such clinicians and theorists have written extensively about what factors might enable some people better than others to forgo simplistic views, recognise complexities or allow their own doubts to exist, without being crushed. To tolerate the frustrations of not-knowing, after all, is a prerequisite for learning; or to put

it the other way around, if we are to sustain our curiosity, we may well have to bear painful uncertainty.

Historians, philosophers and social scientists, pursuing other methods, have written about the conditions that may make it more-or-less possible for groups and communities to question received assumptions, and to assemble together and freely deliberate, reorganise to meet a new crisis or respond imaginatively to new opportunities. A people may be helped or hampered from even wondering about other ways of organising life, let alone about deciding between different options. Researchers have also charted the development of a host of modern techniques of incarceration, interrogation, propaganda, hidden persuasion, mind control and brainwashing. Each section in the book weaves between such disparate literatures and moves across a variety of modern discussions of 'inner' and 'outer' worlds of human experience. Most especially this study explores a now largely forgotten set of debates, from the Cold War period, about the social, cultural and political forces around us, the agencies and procedures that can hijack and then redirect our own minds. I contend that revisiting the past might assist us in examining new kinds of hidden persuasion and brainwashing in future. In short, this history invites further consideration of the processes that can facilitate or deform our capacities to think for ourselves.

## PART 1

### BRAINWASHING

Sometimes, a new word emerges that expresses a concept already well understood. A word might bring new ideas to public consciousness, combine notions previously kept apart, describe a thing that nobody had really apprehended before or that everyone knew previously under some other name. Designations may disappear, move to the margins or be redeployed in new contexts, as when we talk of a computer virus or mouse. Old words sometimes become obsolete, or acquire notable new significance and meanings, as we can see, for instance, with a word such as 'queer'. Words may, in some cases, have relatively consistent and stable meanings over long durations; they can also be problematised, reclaimed and re-inflected with each passing year. We make micro-adjustments, as listeners and speakers, attentive to shifting contemporary idioms and slang – noticing, for example, whether the word 'sick', in a certain context, means unwell or amazing.

A word, in other words, may redescribe something already well known, an old wine in a new bottle; or signify an unprecedented phenomenon. It would be inaccurate to think of the internet as just a new expression for an abstract idea that people had already apprehended hundreds of years earlier, even if you might find glimmerings of this proposition in science fiction or technological speculation before our digital age. Yet the concept of poorly paid or repetitive employment existed long before 'McJob' entered the English language (in 1986, to be precise). Words can have multiple meanings, and they may also be weighted with all kinds of distinct nuances, assumptions or moral implications. So, 'McJob' might have quite different resonances when used in, say, a trade union campaign, a stand-up comedy routine, a suicide letter or a snobbish magazine airily describing the lives of the poor. And then again, two people may hear the same word very differently, when uttered by the same speaker.

Whether the word ‘brainwashing’, first used in English around five years after the end of the Second World War, ushered in a novel way to understand an older reality was itself soon cast into question: pundits argued about whether it was a mere restatement of something that had been fully perceived by previous generations, or a description of an emerging phenomenon that had no prior equivalent in history and public consciousness. Opinions differed about its reality, location and urgency, and its exploitation to generate alarm.

Some commentators suggested that the term captured a distinct and nefarious combination of power and knowledge at work here and now. They warned of a terrifying form of state that had already arrived, at least somewhere abroad. It was, after all, a time when the superpowers were deploying an arsenal of psychological sciences. Others argued that the term merely referred to practices already well rehearsed, and widely understood, long ago. Sceptics also pointed out that the notion might be heavily spun to serve different interests; a rhetorical vehicle for conjuring up a host of imaginary threats, a means of generating panic about fragile minds in modern times.

In September 1950, during the first year of the Korean War, Edward Hunter, an American journalist who had worked in wartime intelligence, and post-war with the CIA, coined (or, more accurately, first popularised) the term brainwashing, and left no doubt for his readers that the problem was important and real.<sup>1</sup> He suggested a profound shift had occurred; new historical conditions existed for governing the mind.<sup>2</sup> In using the term, first in a piece for the *Miami News* and then in other writings and books, he was pointing to what he claimed to be a frightening and rising danger. Hunter described a form of psychological intervention that was being perfected by certain enemy states. This involved a veritable onslaught upon people’s minds. Though he recognised some precursors, he would elaborate during the 1950s upon how the brainwashing threat had truly come of age; a deadly *new* amalgam of ideology, technology, medicine and psychological sciences that was now transforming social reality in certain foreign places, but potentially in any state.

Hunter’s first article, “‘Brain-Washing’ Tactics Force Chinese into Ranks of the Communist Party’, adapted a commonplace Chinese phrase, ‘xǐ nǎo’, meaning to wash the brain. That was a euphemism; it was not about cleansing, literally, but rather destroying and substituting. The word’s Chinese provenance was highlighted, and this gave

more than a clue to the American's most obvious concerns: Mao and his communist revolution.

The warnings from Hunter and his fellow 1950s writers about brainwashing found a willing audience, perhaps primed by earlier dystopian scenarios explored in literature – all those compelling accounts of a supine society, terrorised by omnipotent masters, and/or fed by modern equivalents of ancient 'bread and circuses'. Some writers, such as Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932), had pictured a future of captivity through anodyne entertainment, sexual so-called liberation and drugs; others, including George Orwell, whose *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in 1949, depicted a world where people are broken and held in a state of permanent totalitarian subjection.

By that time much had already been written in the West about both Nazi and Soviet propaganda warfare. During the First and Second World Wars, substantial efforts were made by both sides to target propaganda efforts more efficiently, and, increasingly, to monitor shifts in morale and public opinion. Clinical expertise was sought, and deployed, in the efforts during the 1940s, to analyse and redress the deep psychological and social consequences of Nazism. The Nazis after all had sought to recast the population; they used the term *Gleichschaltung* (translated variously as coordination, synchronisation or consolidation) to convey the ambition to refashion society across the board.

The aim of the Nazi Party was to shape profoundly not only politics, but also every facet of society, and, ideally, to end all opposition in the minds of the people: in sum, to achieve a total harmonisation. It was never fully realised, but the German people lived for twelve years under the Führer; millions had voted for him, fought for him, agreed with his aims, loved him and accepted his world view, even in the face of impending calamity. During the Second World War, psychological and anthropological researchers, including psychoanalysts, worked for the Allies in the army and intelligence services. They attempted to understand the mass appeal of fascism and the psychological consequences of living under such modern forms of tyranny; they would also help with assessing the testimony of POWs, refining propaganda, mounting 'dirty tricks' operations, seeking to decipher the deeper intent and impact of enemy broadcasts, and, after victory in 1945, assisting the victors' efforts to 'denazify' a defeated German

population. That terrible history continued to shadow Cold War debate on brainwashing.

At the same time there were dramatic developments in neuroscience and the elaboration of 'psycho-surgery'. Some pundits heralded the great advances made in mental health treatment for all, thanks to the advent of electric shock therapy and new techniques of brain surgery. By the 1950s and 60s, some surgeons, including prominent figures notably in the United States and Britain, would make grandiose claims that they could cure or tame those who were presumed to be suffering severe and chronic mental disorders by conducting lobotomies. But if medicine and science might claim jurisdiction and have a key role in fixing pathological conditions in brains, from cancerous tumours to schizophrenia, others feared that drugs, shocks and surgery could also facilitate new modes of social control, including the pacification of the troublesome, unhappy, disturbed and eccentric inside a supposedly liberal society.<sup>3</sup> Such debate about the advances and potential dangers in science, medicine and technology also profoundly shaped the language of brainwashing.

Post-war movies updated older conceits in the mode of Frankenstein, featuring white-coated technicians who invade brains even, perhaps entirely rejuvenating and controlling minds and bodies. At the same time, some analyses of totalitarianism focused on the potential role of medicine and psychology in helping the state to ensure compliant or enthusiastic states of mind in a captive population, be it for fascism or communism. Hunter was one of the pundits who set the scene for a vast array of new explorations of mind control, suggesting that the techniques of thought interference exploited by contemporary foes of Western liberal democracy, like the Chinese state, had to be revealed in all their horror, and then fought with all possible means. Brainwashing, he declared, was the current experience – and the terrible plight – of the Chinese population and all those who had the misfortune to fall into the clutches of their 're-educators', foreign prisoners included. Left unchecked the dangers would spread.<sup>4</sup>

The process was akin to a new and total form of psychological enslavement, Hunter and many other Western critics of China warned; it was responsible for the extraordinary sufferings and political illusions, even delusions, of countless men and women who were now at the mercy of the Communist Party. Mao's unleashing of a

Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, where students and others in their hundreds of thousands became Red Guards, gave new momentum to such perceptions of a vast population of brainwashed foot soldiers, fanatical comrades, or even mindless automata.<sup>5</sup>

Given what came to be known about Mao's thought-reform programmes or, later, the Cultural Revolution, such fears of mass indoctrination expressed by Hunter were not completely absurd, but the language that he used to characterise 'brainwashing' was obviously biased, polarised and sensationalistic. Those in power both in China and elsewhere, he suggested dramatically, had a large range of secret tools available to snatch away not only freedom of movement, expression and assembly, but also freedom of thought *entirely*, and to impose an absolute will on captive subjects, en masse. In the most severe cases, he warned in his 1956 book *Brainwashing: The Story of Men Who Defied It*, victims were utterly changed; they could find themselves transformed after being imprisoned and '[p]ut under a terrifying combination of subtle and crude mental and physical pressures and tortures'.<sup>6</sup> All this, he believed, required urgent research; dealing with the crisis brought about by an array of modern mind-control techniques necessitated extreme political vigilance and a battery of practical countermeasures.

Hunter and other commentators writing of brainwashing at around the same time feared that a systematic policy of psychological conversion was being rolled out on a scale the world had not previously witnessed. It was no good simply to equate this phenomenon to prior procedures, they claimed; nor was it right to imagine that the brainwashing happening in China was tantamount to old-fashioned authoritarian diktats, propaganda campaigns or heavy-handed education under the banner of nationalism. Nor was the crisis just a secular version of old and familiar religious forms of indoctrination. At the very least, indoctrination, if such it could still be called, had reached an extraordinary, clinical level of precision, they argued. These writers pointed to how some new combination of surgery, pharmaceuticals, hypnotism, psychological experiments in animal conditioning (most famously associated with the work of the Russian physiologist Pavlov) and group shaming might be used to cement absolute political allegiance to the cause of communism.

'Brainwashing', Hunter insisted, is 'similar in many peculiar ways to a medical treatment'<sup>7</sup> that might well be conducted upon a subject,

indeed millions of subjects, without their informed consent. Lurking in the background of this argument about communism's mastery over the mind was the earlier realisation that medicine, and the people who practised it, could be perverted and co-opted by a monstrous state. After all, evidence had just emerged about the crimes of the Nazi doctors, some of whom were put on trial at Nuremberg alongside the major war criminals; men who had experimented mercilessly upon helpless victims in concentration camps, in grotesque violation of the Hippocratic Oath.<sup>8</sup>

Hunter wanted Americans to know that brainwashing threatened them too. He offered readers anxious glimpses of how in this new epoch, medico-psychiatric programmes could be unleashed with alarming rapidity. The methods might be overt or practically invisible. He saw links to the past but also differentiated this emerging period of history sharply from earlier ages, when other varied techniques exerted by political movements, religions, parties or states won hearts and minds. The question for Hunter was whether the prisoner/patient in latter-day regimes such as Stalin's or Mao's could ever resist, and what tools could be offered to make people more wary, critical and resilient.

Hunter recognised the possibility of psychological resistance, and explored more gradations than these simple absolutes. Whatever the rhetoric, his accounts begged more questions than they answered, not only about how best to meet the challenge, but also about how brainwashing could be isolated conceptually from other ideas about education, persuasion and influence. His writings suggest the modern origins of the word; the mixture of fascination and fear the process evoked; the dramatic pictures so often painted, and yet also the blurred edges of that Cold War debate. Was the procedure so total and indelible? Where and how might people hold out? What about partial brainwashing, split convictions, half-hearted conversions and milder forms of pressure and cajoling? His role as a journalist and pundit on brainwashing was also significant, for much of this debate would be conducted not in seminar rooms or in parliaments, but across the airwaves, in popular magazines, newspapers, on TV and in the cinema. People had to evaluate the stories they were being told and assess the authority of the columnists and opinion-makers who told them what to think, where the dangers were coming from, whom to fear or how to resist.