

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF HIGH-PRESSURE LIVING

In his recent provocative article on *Preventive Psychiatry: Is there such a thing?*¹ Carstairs reminded us of the pessimistic fantasy entitled 'Brave New World' which Aldous Huxley wrote over thirty years ago. In the synthetic, de-individualized society which he envisaged, all citizens were conditioned to share identical tastes and prejudices, and to live in a perpetual state of unreflective euphoria. If ever they were threatened with anxiety or distress, they would swallow a gramme of 'Soma' and euphoria would be restored.

This distressing and disconcerting prophecy is becoming realized today, all over the Western World, to a startling and alarming degree. Not only do the sales of the 'gramme of Soma' in the form of tranquillizers amount to very many millions of pounds a year, but it has been estimated that the number of narcotic addicts is greatly increasing. From 1946 to 1953, for instance, the number of narcotic offenders committed to city correctional institutions in the city of New York increased over 1,200%. A pound of heroin purchased abroad for \$500-\$1,000 costs the addicts in America about \$384,000 after dilution. The Federal Bureau of Narcotics of America has estimated that the underworld revenue from the sale of narcotic drugs to addicts amounts to \$275,000,000 yearly.²

In South Africa we have also had our ways and means of swallowing our 'gramme of Soma'. Every practitioner is acquainted with the great 'demand' for numerous new drugs which are credited with therapeutic effectiveness against all mental ills. Tranquillizers are bidding fair in this country to displace phenobarbitone as the commonest drug in use. And competent observers are of the opinion that alcoholism and narcotic addiction are increasing rapidly.³

Two possible explanations for this morbid need for artificial stimulation and sedation immediately spring to mind. Firstly, we are living through a period of rapid and fundamental socio-cultural change on a world-wide scale. On the one hand we have been seeing great shifts in the social, economic, political and cultural patterns in the community life of peoples on different levels of civilization. And on the other hand, peoples' material discontents, as pointed out by Carstairs, have been sharpened by the awareness that in the near future it will not only be technically possible, for the first time on earth, to eradicate hunger and want, but also to exterminate the human race.

Modern civilization, therefore, while having conquered many unfavourable living conditions and many diseases, has also been giving rise to stress diseases of a psychological nature for which no physical cause is apparent. These

diseases are usually characterized by such ill-defined symptoms as persistent headache, anxiety, fatigue, poor physical tone, sexual inadequacy, depression, lumbar pain, miscarriage, etc. etc.—a veritable pandemic of psychosomatic disorders.

The second possible explanation for this need for artificial stimulation and sedation can probably be related to the unparalleled high-pressure living on the professional and economic levels of our everyday existence—especially with reference to the ways and means which contemporary society has devised to fan the flames of competition. Packard's book, *The Hidden Persuaders*,⁴ which was published recently, is a fearsome revelation of how 'the use of mass psycho-analysis to guide campaigns of persuasion has become the basis of a multi-million dollar industry'.

This book is a survey of the ways in which, through so-called 'motivational research', advertising men probe the hidden fears, doubts, hopes, desires and interests which can be exploited to make sales for products. It shows how human emotions and desires are manipulated and how a need for goods with which the public has been unfamiliar, or even undesirous of purchasing, is developed. The author notes a shift in the pattern of the common man's life from 'inner-directedness'—whereby people were governed by goals implanted early in life by their elders—to 'other-directedness'—whereby people are governed in their behaviour by the expectancy of the crowd with which they associate, and by the desire to appear successful. The author also notes that, in pursuit of its new ideal, the business mind is not afraid to invade the supposed inviolability of the family. 'We control a man's environment in business and we lose it entirely when he crosses the threshold of his home. Management therefore has a challenge and an obligation deliberately to plan and create a favourable, constructive attitude on the part of the wife that will liberate her husband's total energies for the job.'

We are therefore back where we began—in Huxley's 'Brave New World'—a synthetic, de-individualized society in which citizens are conditioned to share identical tastes and prejudices, and to live in a perpetual state of unreflective euphoria. High-pressure living on the social, political and economical levels, with its concomitant psychological and psychiatric complications, has become the essential neurotic idiom of our times.

1. Carstairs, G. M. (1958): *J. Ment. Sci.*, **104**, 63.

2. Howe, H. S. (1955): *N.Y. St. J. Med.*, **55**, 341.

3. Personal communications: Secretary A.A. and Chief Regional Health Officer, Cape Town.

4. Packard, V. (1958): *The Hidden Persuaders*. London: Longmans.