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The Not-So-Comfortable Concentration Camp

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Feature

The following is excerpted from the upcoming book All These Serious Faces Will Only Drive You Mad [1]. This is the second excerpt to appear on Reality Sandwich. Read Part 1 here [2].

The twentieth century was littered with warnings about the rise of technology and machinery in society. This became the general context for how we thought about "dehumanization," whether we were talking about manufacturing cars by robot instead of manpower, creating music with synthesizers instead of traditional instruments, or communicating by text message instead of talking face-to-face. But discussing whether these phenomena are "good" or "bad" won't be of much use without a proper understanding of how the *human being* has been "dehumanized." To find that, we need only look at the supposed epitome of post-modern life in the West, the realm we call *suburbia*.

Suburbia is merely one arm of a machine -- one part of a bigger process, from which all other parts (e.g., pollution, deforestation, Third World plundering, etc.) are largely invisible. In that way, the suburbs are like a veil drawn over the broader reality of the world we live in, contributing much to our feeling of "unreality" over the past seventy years. This low-density living arrangement appeared as an alternative to the hustle and bustle of the urban environment. But really the suburbs are built on the same principles of mechanization that exist in the city. This machine runs on an addiction, which is to say that humanity is addicted to a process of dehumanization. And since these detrimental aspects are so hidden from view, suburbia poses one of the greatest threats to our survival as a species.

We had hoped that this mechanized life would be better than the kind that came before it. Now we're forced to live with it no matter how we feel. After all, we have to *make a living*. And honestly, what would we all do if we didn't have jobs? We'd just be *bored* all day long,

wasting our time watching TV...right? Really? Or are we dependent on a system that demands our servitude in exchange for another day of life, so we tell ourselves it's a necessary system in order to evade the straight jacket?

The word "addiction" carries a connotation of narcotic drugs, but chemical addiction is only one type among many that proliferate today. Psychological addiction -- particularly the kind built on bio-survival anxiety -- may be an even more dangerous type, especially when it happens without the slightest bit of awareness on the part of the victim. Since all types of addiction share certain dynamics, it would be to our benefit to examine the case of "traditional" junkies.

William S. Burroughs, a founding writer of the Beat Generation, developed an opiate addiction (starting with morphine) by at least 1944. (1) In an introduction to his 1959 novel *Naked Lunch* included in the "Restored Text" edition, Burroughs gives a brief rundown of the "junk" system -- the illicit opiate market, including heroin, morphine, and other drugs of that class -- to help explain his intentions for writing such a gritty book. Though he sticks to a discussion about drugs, one can't help but wonder if he intended it to be a microcosmic view of capitalism itself. Burroughs writes, "Junk is the mold of monopoly and possession," (2) and he marks three principles of the business:

1. Never give anything for nothing.
2. Never give more than you have to give (always catch the buyer hungry and always make him wait).
3. Always take everything back if you possibly can. (3)

All it takes is a perceptive eye to see junky behavior in any shopping mall in America. We could even call the shopping mall the dominant paradigm of suburbia, where people try to *buy* a sense of personal worth -- a temporary "fix" that only lasts so long. The utmost example is likely that gross display of consumer frenzy we call Black Friday, when people trample each other to get the best holiday deals after eating obscene amounts of food. More generally, a good shopping find momentarily cures that ailment of feeling *incomplete* or *unclean*. One gains a sense of pride over a smart purchase, whether it's a stereo system on sale, groceries discounted with coupon clippings, or even second-hand clothes at the local thrift store.

While the popular image of an "addict" or "junky" prevailing since the 1950s has been one of a wraith-like creature wasting away physically, the factors behind junk really correspond to a more universal economic system. Because of that, Burroughs seems to have predicted our mega-mart culture of endless price cuts and absent salesmen. "Junk is the ideal product... the ultimate merchandise. No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy... The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product. He does not improve and simplify his merchandise. He degrades and simplifies the client." (4)

Of course, Burroughs didn't *actually* predict today's consumer culture in the industrialized Western world, for this system was already well established by the time he wrote his novels. Edward Bernays, widely considered the father of the public relations industry, explains these exact sort of tactics in his 1928 book *Propaganda*. Before World War I, most advertising carried a tone of marketplace bartering in which the marketing team used

a fairly direct approach to highlight the benefits of a product or service. Bernays's "new propaganda," on the other hand, employed knowledge of group psychology and the hidden workings of society to navigate a more sneaky route to the customer's wallet. "Instead of assaulting sales resistance by direct attack," writes Bernays, the public relations counsel "is interested in removing sales resistance. He creates circumstances which will swing emotional currents so as to make for purchaser demand." (5)

In an introduction to *Propaganda*, Mark Crispin Miller explains that the word "propaganda" only took on a negative connotation after WWI, because the British and American governments used it in heavy doses to maintain the appeal of Western democracy in opposition to the rising fascist and communist governments. The fact that we now think of propaganda as a despicable activity is "a paradoxical result of the war propagandists' winning enterprise: for the propagandists had themselves besmirched the word by using it always and only in dark reference to *the enemy*." (6) But originally it simply meant disseminating information in support of a cause.

Miller also points out that Bernays primarily lists examples from his own propaganda work for clients, while using passive verbs to bypass the reader's suspicion. To get the public to buy more bacon, Bernays hired doctors to promote it because of how dependent people are on the advice of physicians. For a piano manufacturer client, he suggested working with the real estate industry to put a music room in newly built homes. The public relations counsel "appeals perhaps to the home instinct which is fundamental. He will endeavor to develop public acceptance of the idea of a music room in the home. ...lifting the idea of the music room to a place in the public consciousness which it did not have before. [...] It will come to [the homeowner] as his own idea." (7)

Bernays was busy serving major clients throughout the 1920s, when companies such as General Motors, Procter & Gamble, John D. Rockefeller, and General Electric paid propagandists enormous sums of money to help turn public opinion in their favor. The "new propagandists" had a few advantages. One was that, as Bernays writes, "Men are rarely aware of the real reasons which motivate their actions." (8) At the same time, people *believe* that they know the reasons for certain -- the result of a self-deception faculty in the human psyche. Another advantage was that the new propaganda industry had worked the psychological concepts of Bernays's uncle, Sigmund Freud, into its arsenal. "It is chiefly the psychologists of the school of Freud who have pointed out that many of man's thoughts and actions are compensatory substitutes for desires which [he] has been obliged to suppress." (9)

Insights into group psychology proved the most rewarding for the fledgling public relations industry. "Trotter and Le Bon concluded that the group does not *think* in the strict sense of the word. In place of thoughts it has impulses, habits, and emotions. In making up its mind, its first impulse is usually to follow the example of a trusted leader." (10) The universality of such a phenomenon suggests that individual human beings tend to automatically surrender their own ability to make decisions -- what we'd call a rational thought process or problem-solving faculty -- and instead default to whatever leadership is in place.

Though the model was still relatively vague, Bernays understood that a group reacts most to clichés, symbols, and formulaic phrases. It didn't take long to turn this knowledge into standard practice. "So the question naturally arose: If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according

to our will without their knowing about it?" (11) Bernays had been influenced by the ideas of journalist Walter Lippmann, especially the notion that "the manufacture of consent" was required to keep a modern democracy in functioning order. (12)

The overarching point of Bernays's story is that, for almost 100 years now, an entire industry has devoted its energies to turning the consumers of a capitalist "democracy" into *addicts* who feel a psychological compulsion to spend money on products and services, regardless of actual necessity. Of course, because of the business interest at stake, it would have been dangerous for the public to know anything about these tactics. Propaganda formed a symbiotic relationship with any financially motivated organization that depended on public opinion, be it government, corporation, or church. What Bernays called "new propaganda" has now split into the roles of public relations, advertising, marketing -- even, to a certain extent, sociology and legislative lobbying. So it's no stretch to say that *psychological awareness among the public would have been a very direct threat to all parties involved.*

As a result, students today are lucky if they get to take a single psychology class in high school or college -- and even if they do, it's an almost useless kind of psychology with no real-life application whatsoever. That's evidenced by the fact that almost all people know of Freud is the "id, ego, superego" model of the human psyche -- or his "oral, anal, and genital stages" of development. On top of that, Freud's followers were a particularly dogmatic bunch who focused almost entirely on repression caused by denied sexual impulses, lowering the general appeal of psychoanalysis. Furthermore, most people haven't even heard of Carl Jung or other important psychologists.

Luckily books preserve the knowledge that we require to understand our predicament. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* appeared in 1963, serving as a major contribution to the civil rights movement that helped define the decade. Friedan noticed a strange paradox in which American women -- allowed for the first time in world history to vote, own property, attend college, pursue a career, and generally develop as full adult individuals -- were continually being pushed into a very narrow role, both in the family and in society as a whole. That role was essentially defined by a commercialized image. Friedan asks, "Does the image by which modern American women live also leave something out...? [...]" This image -- created by the women's magazines, by advertisements, television, movies, novels, columns and books by experts on marriage and the family, child psychology, sexual adjustment and by the popularizers of sociology and psychoanalysis -- shapes women's lives today and mirrors their dreams. It may give a clue to the problem that has no name, as a dream gives a clue to a wish unnamed by the dreamer." (13)

Friedan notes that the consumer culture was arranged in a way that not only made it difficult for a woman to achieve her true potential; it also made it *very easy* for her to drop out of college, marry a guy with a degree and job lined up, and start making babies. Yet at a time when everyone should have been showing concern about such matters, Friedan saw this as a nearly unspeakable topic. Friedan wonders, "Why is it never said that the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives is *to buy more things for the house.* ...the perpetuation of housewifery, the growth of the feminine mystique, makes sense (and dollars) when one realizes that women are the chief customers of American business." (14)

While Friedan sensed that "powerful forces" were engineering the mystique, she tried to remain pragmatic as evidence piled up suggesting some concerted capitalist scheme

against women everywhere. She imagines corporate executives and psychologists having a secret meeting and plotting to "stop this dangerous movement of women out of the home," but then writes it off as an impossible fiction. (15) Her opinion: "It was not an economic conspiracy directed against women. It was a byproduct of our general confusion lately of means with ends; just something that happened to women when the business of producing and selling and investing in business for profit...began to be confused with the purpose of our nation, the end of life itself." (16)

Friedan was correct about the misplaced priorities of consumerism, but to say that no secret meetings ever occurred might be too cautious. After all, in her imagined scenario she lists some of the very companies that Miller mentions in the introduction to *Propaganda* -- General Electric and General Motors in particular -- *who actually had been running campaigns for decades*, not only to turn people into sedated consumers, but into ones with preferences that fit their own specific business model. Since Friedan never once refers to Bernays, it seems that she wasn't fully aware of the historical prominence of the propaganda field. However, she did visit Dr. Ernest Dichter at the Institute for Motivational Research, her account of which practically contradicts what she said before about the unlikelihood of a conspiracy. She says Dichter, a man in possession of 300,000 studies of individual consumers, was "paid approximately a million dollars a year for his professional services in manipulating the emotions of American women to serve the needs of business." (17) (At the time of my writing, that would be the equivalent of slightly more than \$7 million.) (18)

Dichter built his business on the finding that American women influenced about three-quarters of decisions on how to spend household money. His job was to maintain that figure by creating the circumstances for women to feel fulfilled in their position as housewives, whether it was a part- or full-time role. While he didn't actively campaign against their efforts to seek work outside the home, he could heavily sway their behavior inside of it. Primarily this was done by making home upkeep activities dependent on buyable goods. "Properly manipulated...American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack -- by the buying of things." (19) As one of Dichter's reports says, "The feeling of creativeness...is an outlet for the liberated talents, the better taste, the freer imagination, the greater initiative of the modern woman. It permits her to use at home *all the faculties that she would display in an outside career.*" (20) At the time, the desire for liberation in life and work was flaring up among all groups who had been historically oppressed. So a correlative goal was to make the housewife feel like a professional, as opposed to a servant in her own home.

This propaganda of the 1940s and '50s was really hinged on the need for security -- or, to put it another way, on the *anxiety* aroused when a feeling of security was not obtainable. The manipulators took this knowledge and directed their efforts at younger and younger cohorts. "It was discovered that young wives, who had only been to high school and had never worked, were more 'insecure,' less independent, easier to sell. These young people could be told that, by buying the right things, they could achieve middle-class status, without work or study. [...] The main point now was to convince the teenagers that 'happiness through things' is no longer the prerogative of the rich or the talented; it can be enjoyed by all, if they learn 'the right way,' the way the others do it, if they learn the embarrassment of being different." (21) And the methods of reaching these young women were seemingly extracted right out of Bernays's handbook, with group leaders, school faculty (teachers and guidance counselors), and TV advertisements playing huge roles. "This is the big market of the future," as Dichter says, "and word-of-mouth advertising,

along with group pressure, is not only the most potent influence but in the absence of tradition, a most necessary one." (22)

While it may seem like an outdated example, the methods used to manipulate the post-war housewife are now employed to control every demographic. Television had pervaded America by the time Friedan published her book, making it possible to sway the perceptions of millions by appealing to the same "group leader" vulnerability. Soon it was possible for everyone to "learn the embarrassment of being different" by the time they got to kindergarten.

The most effective tactics are the most invasive -- that is, they dig deepest into one's bio-survival anxiety and territorial ego drive, but *without the target noticing*. The propaganda comes gift wrapped in a warm, fuzzy package -- and only later do we discover the anthrax inside. This public relations nightmare is a cannibalistic system that's eating away at our dreams of an egalitarian society, piling shit on top of shit on top of shit, selling souls to sell more souls to sell more souls. The difference between Friedan's time and our own is that the middle class is now dissolving. But given that the suburban middle class -- what Friedan called the "Comfortable Concentration Camp" -- depended on the arrested development of millions of human beings, that might not be such a bad thing.

Every new generation raised in this environment experiences a more "unreal" version of human life. Friedan notes this trend in her book: "I do not think it is a coincidence that the increasing passivity -- and dreamlike unreality -- of today's children has become so widespread in the same years that the feminine mystique encouraged the great majority of American women...to give up their own dreams, and even their own education, to live through their children." (23) This statement basically predicts the coming of my own ADD generation. We can't figure out how to turn off the machine, so it's only natural to want to flee. And since there's not much possibility of an outward escape, we're fleeing inward -- into our own subconscious minds. Bernays's progeny started catching up with that in the 1980s, prescribing Ritalin and, later, Adderall, in an increasingly desperate effort to keep us plugged into their machine.

When we look at the consumer system around us, it's tempting to think that it was once a healthy system, and that it suddenly got out of hand. But in reality that consumer system was based on manipulative psychological tactics from the very beginning -- equivalent to building a socio-economic system out of a "junk" addiction. As we evolve, we'll have to figure out how to outlaw the sort of propaganda activities that turn us into dehumanized consumer-automatons -- that is, if we want to remain human at all.

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NOTES:

1. Charters, Ann. *Kerouac: A Biography*. 1973. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987. pp. 55-56.

2. Burroughs, William S. "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness." *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*. New York: Grove Press, 2004. pp. 199-206.
 3. Burroughs, W.S. Ibid.
 4. Burroughs, W.S. Ibid.
 5. Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*. 1928. New York: Ig Publishing, 2005. p. 77.
 6. Bernays, E. Ibid. From the introduction by Mark Crispin Miller. p. 14.
 7. Bernays, E. Ibid. pp. 77-78.
 8. Bernays, E. Ibid. p. 74.
 9. Bernays, E. Ibid. p. 75.
 10. Bernays, E. Ibid. p. 73.
 11. Bernays, E. Ibid. p. 71.
 12. Bernays, E. Ibid. From the introduction by Mark Crispin Miller. p. 13.
 13. Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. 1963. New York: Dell Publishing, 1984. p. 34.
 14. Friedan, B. Ibid. pp. 206-207. Italics hers.
 15. Friedan, B. Ibid. p. 207.
 16. Friedan, B. Ibid. p. 207.
 17. Friedan, B. Ibid. p. 208. I found the names of both Dichter and the institute in the footnote on p. 429.
 18. "CPI Inflation Calculator." *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Accessed on 2/21/2011. http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm ^[3]
 19. Friedan, B. Ibid. p. 208.
 20. Friedan, B. Ibid. p. 214. Italics from original report.
 21. Friedan, B. Ibid. p. 219.
 22. Friedan, B. Ibid. pp. 220-221.
 23. Friedan, B. Ibid. p. 288.
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