

The End of Comfort

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Comfort is a relatively recent development in the lifestyle of most societies. Modern comfort, as Aldous Huxley calls it in his essay on the subject, is “a thing of recent growth, younger than steam, a child when telegraphy was born, only a generation older than radio” (CE, 2; 285). Although modern comfort has existed for only a short time historically, men have been quite comfortable in the past. The Romans had central heating and hot baths and comfortable furniture; the people of Knossos in ancient Crete had “sanitary plumbing” (ibid.). But three hundred years ago in Europe, things like the “padded chair, the well-sprung bed, the sofa, central heating and the regular hot bath” were “unknown to the greatest kings” (ibid.). What happened in the psychology of western man to cause him to forget comfort?

Huxley notes that the discomfort and filth that people lived in in the past were “largely voluntary” (ibid.); that men could have “made sofas...could have installed bathrooms and central heating and sanitary plumbing at any time....” (ibid.). Why didn’t they? As noted, some of the ancients did live quite comfortably. But Huxley suggests that the men of the Middle Ages and of the early modern epoch “chose to live in this way, because filth and discomfort fitted in with their principles and prejudices, political, moral, and religious” (CE, 2; 286). Perhaps here Huxley is looking for correspondences between physical and spiritual conditions that may not have existed among men of those days, but certainly there is some truth in the notion that those who live like pigs, often start to act rather porcine.

Perhaps before beginning a discussion of the essay, *Comfort*, an overview might be a good idea. The essay is divided into six sections, through which Huxley develops his argument: *Novelty of the Phenomenon*; *Comfort and the Spiritual Life*; *Central Heating and the Feudal System*; *Baths and Morals*; *Comfort and Medicine*; and *Comfort As An End In Itself*.

Huxley suggests that there exists the “closest connection between the recent growth of comfort and the recent history of ideas” (ibid.). He begins with two simple examples: armchairs and central heating. Huxley describes armchairs as ideal for “lolling”; in fact “they exist to be lolled in” (ibid.). The informality of modern life would have been little understood in the days of Louis the XIV of France. He explains that in the past “human society was a hierarchy in which every man was always engaged in being impressive towards his inferiors or respectful

to those above him” (ibid.). In the court of Louis, the King might at times sit, but he was always seated in a “dignified and upright position” (CE, 2; 287). The King did not loll in court; princes too sometimes sat, but “the great officers of the crown stood, and the smaller fry knelt” (ibid.). No lolling permitted. This pattern of formality was repeated throughout the various levels of society: in the noblemen’s households, in the relations of the squire to his dependents and the merchant with his apprentices and servants; even at the family level there was ritual and respect where “parents ruled like popes and princes, by divine right; the children were their subjects” (ibid.). Huxley gives the rather gruesome example of Vespasiano Gonzaga, a 16th century Italian nobleman who kicked his only son to death because the child neglected to touch his hat by way of greeting (ibid.). Huxley gives other examples of the severe treatment children used to receive at the hands of their parents in the early modern era, but suffice it to say they was harsh by today’s standards.

This emphasis on formality, and even some of the crudity of the society, comes through or is reflected in the furniture, for the “physical habits of the hierarchical society for which it was made” (ibid.) are expressed in the shape and nature of the furniture. In fact, it is notable that chairs did not even become common before the sixteenth century; he also that reminds us in most societies “a chair was a symbol of authority” (ibid.). Even today, as Huxley notes, authority still belongs to a Chairman. When important people in the Middle Ages traveled they took their chairs with with them so that they “might never be seen detached from the outward and visible sign of...authority” (CE, 2; 288). Chairs began to be more commonly used during the Renaissance, but people “sat with dignity and discomfort; for the chairs of the sixteenth century were still very throne-like, and imposed upon those who sat in them a painfully majestic attitude” (ibid.). However, by the eighteenth century, when “the old hierarchies were seriously breaking up” (ibid.) furniture began to be more comfortable, but it was still formal; Huxley emphasizes that “armchairs and sofas on which men (and, later, women) might indecorously sprawl, were not made until democracy was firmly established, the middle classes enlarged to gigantic proportions, good manners lost from out of the world, women emancipated, and family restraints dissolved” (ibid.).

In the third section, *Central Heating and the Feudal System*, Huxley comments that central heating was not possible under the political structure of pre-modern societies. This was mainly due to the size of the dwellings of the powerful; palaces are hard to heat, hovels easy. So, in actuality, poorer people who lived in modest houses were able to stay relatively warm while nobles in their spacious homes were always cold. Huxley describes their existence:

But the nobleman, the prince, the king, and the cardinal inhabited palaces of grandeur corresponding with their social position. In order to prove that they were greater than other men, they had to live in surroundings considerably more than life-size. They

received their guests in vast halls like roller-skating rinks; they marched in solemnity along galleries as long and as drafty as Alpine tunnels, up and down triumphal staircases that looked like the cataracts of the Nile frozen into marble.

(CE, 2; 288)

It was bleak for the nobility, but they had a place of refuge and warmth: most “old palaces contain a series of tiny apartments to which their owners retired when the charades of state were over” (CE, 2; 289). Huxley ends the section by recalling a visit to the house of a rich man in Chicago; how it had “perhaps fifteen or twenty smallish rooms” (ibid.) and how its owner had done well in not being socially obliged to spend his wealth on, or live his life in, a marble palace as big as a train station.

In the following section, *Baths and Morals*, the decay of Christian morals is seen as part of the cause of the increased popularity of bathing and a consequent improvement in the health of those who bathed regularly. There were never many bathers, especially during the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, when people “seem to have been almost as dirty as their barbarous ancestors” (ibid.). But Huxley admits there were “fluctuations” in the popularity of bathing, probably due to “medical theory and court fashions” (ibid.). Finally, he notes that “aesthetic tradition was always stongest where women were concerned” and that if men like Voltaire had not undermined the school convent tradition “our girls might still be as modest and dirty as their ancestresses” (ibid.).

In his own life Huxley experienced some harrowing sanitary conditions. Once when on a train in India, in second class, he and Maria had an experience that caused him to seriously reflect on “cleanliness dividing man from man” (AH, 1; 163). Into their compartment came “a holy man in yellow robes and his followers; at stations more followers crowded in to kiss his feet. The holy man hoicked and spat all over the compartment, he and his admirers exhaled the sour stink of garments long unwashed. The day was very hot” (ibid.). Aldous and Maria decided they could not stand this for the seven hours remaining in the trip, paid the extra money and moved their bags to first class. Clearly, on this journey Huxley had good reason to reflect on the custom of bathing, or on these who lack such a custom.

In the next section, *Comfort and Medicine*, Huxley explains that thanks to advances in medicine, especially where “the discovery of microbic infection has put a premium on cleanliness,” (CE, 2; 290) bathing has made great advances:

We wash now with religious fervor, like the Hindus. Our baths have become something like magic rites to protect us from the powers of evil, embodied in the dirt-loving germ. We may venture to prophesy that this medical religion will go still further in undermining the Christian aesthetic tradition. Since the discovery of the beneficial

effects of sunlight, too much clothing has become, medically speaking, a sin. Immodesty is now a virtue.

(ibid.)

Huxley predicts that doctors “will have us stark naked before very long” (ibid.). Though this is probably meant in a jocular way, there is in this notion some truth. Throughout this essay Huxley has exaggerated certain ideas and overlooked others that would cause most writers to qualify what they say; however, Huxley is using exaggeration to make his point: that social pressures often cause men to act against their ultimate best interests; that all physical comfort should have one aim: to facilitate thought and reflection, for, as Huxley notes, it is very difficult to think properly when one is cold, hungry or aching. Whatever his tone throughout the essay, his immediate point here is that “the decay of hierarchic formalism and of Christian morality” led to increasing informality in dress; and this to the point that clothes may be seen as an unnecessary burden; he perhaps forgets that women will always want fashion. Huxley further feels that “informality has reached an unprecedented pitch. On all but the most solemn occasions a man, whatever his rank or position, may wear what he finds comfortable” (CE, 2; 291)—and this essay was written in 1927.

The situation of women in relation to formality in clothing is a bit different from that of men. They were, until the recent past, more restricted morally by Christian values, but the First World War “liberated them from their bondage” to social strictures. War work was difficult in traditional dress, so they changed into more comfortable clothes. And having “discovered the advantages of immodesty, they have remained immodest ever since, to the great improvement of their health and increase of their personal comfort” (ibid.).

In the final section, *Comfort As an End in Itself*, Huxley notes that man has created a need he may not be able to meet. The whole section deserves quotation but here is the first paragraph:

Made possible by changes in the traditional philosophy of life, comfort is now one of the causes of its own further spread. For comfort has now become a physical habit, a fashion, an ideal to be pursued for its own sake. The more comfort is brought into the world, the more it is likely to be valued. To those who have known comfort, discomfort is a real torture. And the fashion which now decrees the worship of comfort is quite as imperious as any other fashion. Moreover, enormous material interests are bound up with the supply of the means of comfort. The manufacturers of furniture, of heating apparatus, of plumbing fixtures, cannot afford to let the love of comfort die.

(ibid.)

In addition to this economic imperative, there are other consequences; what we have gained by creating modern standards of comfort we may have lost in other things that have an equal, if not greater value than mere comfort. For example, Huxley suggests that rich men in earlier ages probably spent their wealth on creating impressive and magnificent homes (“beauty rather than comfort”), whereas the rich man of today will be more concerned with having a comfortable home, (comfort and beauty) ; he notes that “comfort is very expensive” (CE, 2; 292). While sixteenth-century popes “lived in a discomfort that a modern bank manager would consider unbearable...they had Raphael’s frescoes, they had the Sistine chapel, they had their galleries of ancient sculpture. Must we pity them for the absence from the Vatican of bathrooms, central heating, and smoking room chairs?” (ibid.).

Huxley declares himself old-fashioned enough to believe in higher and lower things---and he can see “no point in material progress except in so far as it subserves thought” (ibid.). This is perhaps the main idea of this essay and an opinion one would expect from someone like Huxley. He never overvalued comfort and was often placed in situations, especially when traveling, that would have appalled most travelers today. These discomforts he suffered with stoic calm. When travelling he was known to carry a volume of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. Perhaps this helped him to bear some unbearable discomforts. He probably would have appreciated modern jets; he was limited to taking (usually uncomfortable) trains everywhere, until the last decade of his life when he did fly quite a bit. When he and his wife Maria bought a car, Huxley saw it as a means to freedom : freedom of movement but also speed, for when Maria drove him “...speed was for Aldous’s pleasure, the only new one, he used to say, mankind had invented since the paleolithic age” (AH, 1: 146). However, he felt the greatest advantage of rapid and easy transport lay in the fact that it could take men’s minds further; air travel was of supreme use since “by enlarging the world in which men live it enlarges their minds” (CE, 2; 292). He extends this idea to comfort, which he sees as useful only when it “facilitates mental life” (ibid.). For he notes:

Discomfort handicaps thought; it is difficult when the body is cold and aching to use the mind. Comfort is a means to an end. The modern world seems to regard it as an end in itself, an absolute good. One day, perhaps, the earth will have been turned into one vast feather-bed, with man’s body dozing on top of it and his mind underneath, like Desdemona, smothered.

(ibid.)

So for Huxley the evolution of modern comfort becomes a paradox. To a certain extent he sees a minimum of comfort as necessary to the development of man’s mental capacities. This is even

seen as an evolutionary imperative because the mind is the only part of man that is open to important evolutionary change; man's body has not evolved much in the last few thousand years, but his mind has changed dramatically. So, comfort creates conditions where man's body is relieved of stress to the point that his mind can create, both functionally and aesthetically. But this leads to the further evolution of the genius of comfort, which by finding ever newer ways to make the physical body more and more comfortable, begins to opt the body out of its original uses. The image of the mind being smothered is perhaps an important one in Huxley's thought. His one great fear was stupidity, and this was not because he was, as some have charged, an elitist and a snob. His fear of "insensitive stupidity" originated in the notion that it "is the root of all other vices" (AH, 1; 324). Huxley saw the constant need for man to use his knowledge and intelligence, directed by a disinterested will, to make this world a better place, not just more comfortable. For the end of comfort should be to free the mind and spirit.

References

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