

Books Reconsidered

Battle for the Mind – A Physiology of Conversion and Brain-Washing: William Sargant

In 1907, two remarkable men were born: John Bowlby and William Sargant. Both went to Cambridge and then to London medical schools, both became eminent, London-based psychiatrists and eventually Honorary Fellows of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and both lived to be over 80 yet, so far as I know, their paths never crossed. Both came into prominence in 1944, with the publication of Bowlby's *Forty-four Juvenile Thieves* and Sargant and Slater's *Introduction to Physical Methods of Treatment in Psychiatry*. As a medical student in the 1950s, I did not get to hear of them until Bowlby's *Child Care and the Growth of Love* and Sargant's *Battle For the Mind* hit the bookstands. Whereas Bowlby's book became the launch-pad for a whole series of studies on mother–child relationships, Sargant's was something of a one-off, his subsequent reputation resting on his development of practical, medical approaches to the treatment of depression.

Battle for the Mind was written over six months in 1954, although Sargant had been accumulating material for it over the previous ten years. A month after he started it, he became ill with tuberculosis and much of it was spoken into a dictaphone from his bed. When he had finished it he went to Majorca for three months to recuperate. There he showed it to Robert Graves, the Greek scholar and poet, who offered to revise and edit it and to add a short chapter of his own. Sargant had had fears that its publication might spell his professional ruin, but, with Graves' involvement, he felt he could not back out. In fact it was an immediate success. It was translated into numerous languages and sold over 200 000 copies. The secret of its success lies in the way that Sargant has woven a series of apparently disconnected themes into a coherent whole. By so doing, he has given added significance to each of them. It is an example of what Herman Nunberg, the psychoanalyst, once called the synthetic function of the ego.

It may come as a surprise to some that, like Bowlby, Sargant was preoccupied with the application of observations made on animals to the understanding of human behaviour. Whereas what interested Bowlby was the attachment of the young animal to its parent, what interested Sargant was the effects of

stress upon an animal's conditionability. He had been an avid reader of Pavlov and saw in the reactions of Pavlov's dogs a theoretical basis for the behavioural sciences. Sargant reports upon a number of observations made by Pavlov, and, throughout the book, he draws parallels between these and the responses of humans to various external pressures. He makes the important point that humans, like dogs, respond to these differently according to their temperaments.

During World War II, Sargant, unlike Bowlby, did not serve in the armed forces. Instead he worked in Sutton Emergency Hospital (later to become Belmont Hospital) where he treated many military and civilian casualties. It was here that he first began to make connections between the responses of humans to the atrocious conditions of modern warfare and the reactions of Pavlov's dogs to experimentally induced stresses. While the average combat soldier is probably more stable than the average civilian, it appeared, as with Pavlov's dogs, that even the most stable of soldiers would become severely neurotic when continuously exposed to battle conditions over a prolonged period, and this Sargant attributed to the overwhelming effect of the fear of death.

He meticulously documented the various symptom patterns of his patients and drew parallels with equivalent states observed in Pavlov's dogs. Pavlov had observed that when a dog's nervous system is strained beyond the limits of normal response, it assumes a condition called transmarginal inhibition. This has three distinct and progressive phases called the equivalent phase, the paradoxical phase and the phase of protective inhibition, and Sargant claimed to be able to demonstrate examples of all three in his battle and blitz victims. He observed that the condition could be much improved by inducing the patient to relive the original traumatic events, with the release of pent-up strong emotion, under the influence of intravenous barbiturates and other drugs. He linked this to abreaction under hypnosis used in World War I, and to Breuer and Freud's abreactive treatment of hysteria in Vienna in the 19th century. Why, I wonder, have these treatments not been used in subsequent wars, or with rape victims?

From this point, the book takes on a new original twist, and it was this twist which caused Sargant to fear that publication of the book might spell his professional ruin. Pavlov observed that when trans-marginal inhibition began to supervene in a dog, it entered a kind of hypnotic state and became abnormally suggestible to environmental influences. During the phase of protective inhibition, positive conditioned responses suddenly switched to negative ones, and negative responses switched to positive ones. The dog could be conditioned to hate what it previously loved and to love what it previously hated. It could attach itself to a laboratory attendant it previously disliked, and attack one it previously liked. At this stage, Sargant's ideas were not all that far removed from Bowlby's, in that both were concerned with applying animal models of relating to the relating behaviour of humans; but where Bowlby was interested in love, Sargant was interested in power. What obsessed Sargant was how one individual controls and influences another, and, for the rest of the book, he explores this in a variety of settings. His first objective was to investigate methods of religious conversion, and this has obvious connections with his own early experiences.

He came from a highly religious background. His maternal grandfather managed a prosperous brewery, which, after a sudden conversion, he abandoned to become a humble Methodist preacher. Five of his maternal uncles also became preachers. His father, initially a wealthy business man, was an ardent Methodist who made him attend the Archway Methodist Church in London, sometimes three times on a Sunday. His experiences at Sutton somehow evoked memories of his Methodist past. Perhaps the association was catharsis. He began to read the extensive literature on religious revivals, both those of John Wesley in 18th-century Britain and those which took place in the southern states of America in the 19th century. In 1947, he spent a year at Duke University, North Carolina, set in the so-called Bible-belt. There he attended Sunday evening services at a small Negro church and observed snake-handling cults. He took a university photographer with him and was allowed to witness and photograph close-up all of the trances, collapses, faintings, hypnotic states and sudden conversions of the snake-handling meetings and some of these photographs are reproduced in the book.

Sargant provides extensive accounts of Wesley's writings and practices. Wesley would create high emotional tension in his potential converts by warning them that failure to achieve salvation would condemn them to hellfire for ever. Sargant maintained that fear of everlasting hell affected the

nervous system of Wesley's audiences in the same way that fear of death affected his battle-weary soldiers. He argues that anger as well as fear could induce disturbances of brain function which would make a person highly suggestible and reverse previously conditioned behaviour patterns; so getting emotionally involved with Wesley's preaching, either positively or negatively, would increase the likelihood of being converted. A person who had been roused to the greatest pitch of indignation or anger by the proceedings could suddenly break down and accept every belief demanded of her/him. It was not enough, however, simply to disrupt previous behaviour patterns by emotional assaults on the brain. It was also necessary to provide an escape from the induced mental stress by the offer of eternal salvation. Wesley was convinced that the process of conversion had to occur in a state of highly emotional arousal and had to be both sudden and dramatic. Thus Sargant saw a similarity between conversion and the cathartic cure of war casualties.

In a further attempt to place conversion onto a physiological basis, Sargant points to the particular sensitivity of the human brain to rhythmic stimulation by percussion, bright lights and such like and draws attention to the potentiality of such stimulation for inducing epileptic fits in susceptible subjects. He observes that, in many religious ceremonies, dancing to rhythmic drumming is continued to the point of physical and emotional collapse. Alcohol and other drugs are sometimes used to heighten the excitement and hasten the breakdown. Compliance and suggestibility are increased by altering the loudness and the rhythm of the drumming and encouraging singing and hand clapping. Emotional disruption is finally effected by thrusting live, poisonous snakes in the hands of members of the congregation. Under such circumstances, belief in divine possession is common and feelings of being freed from sin and starting life anew occur. The similarity between this and the current craze for dancing through the night, to the sound of 'techno' music, under the influence of ecstasy, is only too apparent.

Sargant shifts his attention from religious to political indoctrination, observing that it is often difficult to distinguish the one from the other. He quotes Aldous Huxley as saying,

"Assemble a mob of men and women previously conditioned by a daily reading of newspapers; treat them to amplified band music, bright lights, and the oratory of a demagogue who (as demagogues always are) is simultaneously the exploiter and the victim of herd intoxication, and in next to no time you can reduce them to a state of almost mindless subhumanity."

He recalls how Jomo Kenyatta, the originator of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, never appealed to the intellect of his followers; instead he used an emotional, religious technique for political purposes. He points to the ease with which Hitler was able to persuade so many intelligent people in Germany to regard him as little short of a god. The organised excitement and repetitive chanting of his political rallies induced a kind of mass hypnotism. The methods of the Chinese communists came closest to those of the religious revivalists. Mass trials were carried out in the big cities in which, in an atmosphere of high emotional tension, victims were publicly denigrated and then shot. To make a new China overnight, emotional disruption was essential, and so effective were the methods used that thousands killed themselves in despair and in a sense of guilt which had been implanted in them by communist propaganda.

From here he moves on to the eliciting of false confessions, a topic of considerable current importance. In the witchcraft trials of the 16th and 17th centuries, much stress was placed upon obtaining confessions of guilt and, in Europe at that time, many thousands of women gave the most detailed confessions and were hanged or burned for their alleged sins. Often such confessions were exhorted during periods of prolonged torture in prison. By the 1920s, the principles which underlie today's more subtle approaches to interrogation already had become established, and these are described in great detail. Sargant considers that once breakdown under questioning begins, the normal brain exhibits changes similar to those obtained by group excitation. Either there is an increase in suggestibility, or the paradoxical phase of cortical activity supervenes such that the victim may completely reverse her/his former beliefs and patterns of behaviour. The interrogator, determined to get a confession, may easily create it by suggestion; by which time, Sargant maintains, it seems likely that the interrogator and the prisoner have built up between them a complete delusional system, such that the interrogator has come to believe what the prisoner has confessed.

This conveniently leads into Sargant's final pre-occupation: psychoanalytic psychotherapy. He considers that what psychoanalytic psychotherapists do, either wittingly or unwittingly, has much in common with religious or political conversion, brainwashing and the eliciting of false confessions. Just as Pavlov's dogs remained sensitive to the original cause of their mental disruption, so he claims, do psychoanalysts' patients become highly sensitised to those who cause them repeated emotional upheavals. Patients are

asked to go back over their past sexual peccadilloes and relive incidents which arouse intense anxiety, fear and guilt. As the analysis proceeds and emotional storms mount, patients become more and more sensitised to their analysts and this induces fatigue and debilitation. A stage is finally reached when resistance weakens to the therapist's interpretations and patients start to accept them much more readily. They believe and act upon theories about their nervous condition which, more often than not, contradict their former beliefs. Sargant refers to a Chinese brainwashing technique which involves gradually suggesting something by talking round it and getting a little nearer each time and just giving a fragment so that you build up the idea in your own mind. Then you say something and the interrogator says "But you said this, you produced this, we didn't" and you begin to say after a time, "My God, I did produce it. Where did I get it from?" He points to resemblance between this and some methods of psychotherapy.

On his return from Majorca, he resumed his position as Head of the Psychiatric Department of St Thomas' Hospital, London. It was as though he felt that he had to take time out of his professional duties to write this book and it is fortunate for us that tuberculosis struck at the time it did. Its sequel, *The Mind Possessed: A Physiology of Possession, Mysticism and Faith Healing*, did not appear until 1973. Perhaps he had needed to wait until his retirement before allowing himself the time to write it. It did not enjoy the same success. Bowlby also came to life in his later years, the second of three volumes on *Attachment and Loss* appearing in the same year. Sargant's book is as relevant today as it was the year it was written. Human behaviour has not changed one jot and the principles laid down by Sargant apply as much today as they did then. The book is well researched and well written and certainly deserves to be revisited.

Five years after it was first published I faced Sargant in my oral for Diploma in Psychological Medicine. "A 40-year-old man", he began, "with good previous personality, turns up in your out-patient clinic complaining of anxiety." "This could", I said, "be what you would call atypical depression." "Good", he responded, "how would you treat it?" "Nardil and Librium" (a combination much favoured by Sargant at that time). "Have you tried it?" "Yes." "Did it work?" "Yes." He was noticeably pleased. I passed. Brainwashing?

Reference

SARGANT, W. (1957) *Battle for the Mind – A Physiology of Conversion and Brain-Washing*. London: William Heinemann.

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