THE CAMBRIDGE MISCELLANY

XV

THE PROBLEM OF NOISE
THE PROBLEM OF NOISE

by

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with a Preface by

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PREFACE

This little volume contains, in a somewhat expanded form, the two Heath Clark Lectures which Professor Bartlett delivered recently before a London audience at the invitation of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology. The subject which he chose is one of extreme interest at the moment: newspaper campaigns have been recently conducted and societies have been lately established in order that active measures may be speedily taken to deal with the problem of noise. Not only for reasons of popular interest, but also because of Professor Bartlett’s clear, dispassionate and scientific treatment of the matter, his lectures are unquestionably deserving of publication.

As a rule I look with disfavour on a preface written by any one other than the author. But in the present instance it is perhaps only natural that, as Principal of the Institute which arranged these lectures, I should consent to contribute a few introductory words to this helpful and attractive exposition of an important social problem by my former pupil and my successor at Cambridge.

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“Opinions” about unwanted sounds, as Professor Bartlett points out, “are rife and sweeping. Facts... are, alas, far more difficult to find.” It is facts, not opinions, that the more intelligent section of the community demands about such a debated and debatable subject as the distracting, irritating and harmful effects of noise. In this book the reader will find a concise account of the results of recent reliable investigations of the problem.

He who desires facts will first ask himself—what are we to understand by noise? Professor Bartlett replies, comprehensively enough, that noise may here be regarded as any sound which becomes a nuisance to us.

Next, he will inquire—why and when do sounds become nuisances, and under what conditions and by what mental processes do we become “adapted to” (i.e. are we able to neglect or even to banish from our consciousness) such nuisances?

Finally, he will want to know whether noises have any harmful effect on hearing, under what conditions they produce the greatest distraction and irritation, and whether such distraction, irritation or ultimate “adaptation” affects mental health and mental efficiency, both in
normal persons and in the mentally mal-adjusted or overstrained.

To all these questions Professor Bartlett attempts to reply, so far as our scientific knowledge at the present time permits him to do so. His answers and his attitude will probably satisfy the healthy mind, however unwelcome they may be to the less perfectly balanced.

But even if the ascertained effects of certain noises on the efficiency of every-day work are small, Professor Bartlett wisely recognizes their social importance when they are multiplied by the millions of people who are affected by them. And even if “adaptation” to noise produces apparently no immediate adverse effects, he is careful not to deny the possibility that it may have a remoter influence in subsequent mentality and conduct.

Because the noises to which the average citizen is subjected are hardly ever loud enough even temporarily to impair his hearing; because the effects of an irritating noise on working efficiency are generally small; because we have no evidence that the healthy person suffers from overstrain directly attributable to noise—it does not follow that nothing should be done to reduce noise. A few industrial noises un-
doubtless cause deterioration in the operatives’ hearing: the ill-effects of unexpected or irregularly recurring noises on highly complex mental work are, admittedly, by no means negligible: not many of us are absolutely free from mental disturbances which in their more pronounced form are termed “psycho-neurotic”, and, even when slight, may, sometimes at least, make certain noises distressing.

Professor Bartlett describes in his concluding chapter what can be done to reduce noises and their consequences. As he points out, some noises, e.g. warning noises, are inevitable; but that even warning noises may be needlessly sounded is shown by the striking reduction in the frequency of the hoot of the motor-car horn during the day, which has spontaneously followed its recently enforced abolition at night.

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