

1 Alien nation

People throughout the world experience daily the impact of powerful economic and technological forces on their lives. The intensity and speed of change is unprecedented. Societies, communities and individuals are continuously buffeted by the globalisation whirlwind. Urban and rural areas have changed beyond recognition inside a generation while people's emotions and thoughts have been shaken to the core.

At a personal level, some groups in society have achieved better standards of living at the high price of a deepening sense of alienation, of powerlessness. This can take the form of drug and alcohol abuse, high levels of debt and stress. In richer nations, consumer capitalism is supported by the misery and low pay of desperately poor and super-exploited workers. Just surviving on means-tested state benefits and repaying debts dominates the lives of many, especially mothers, students, single parents, pensioners and young people.

At a social and international level, global market forces have transformed the lives of countless millions. Many toil for transnational corporations, often in appalling conditions. Some are driven to take desperate measures to escape poverty by trying to gain entry into the more affluent countries. Famine stalks Africa in the midst of over-production. Aids and other diseases kill vast numbers while the pharmaceuticals overprice life-saving medicines. In the world of nature, plants and animal life are enduring a thousand "silent springs" from global warming and

ecological degradation. Further climatic disaster looms as the polar ice caps melt.

American writer William Greider, in *One World Ready or Not*, which described the manic logic of global capitalism, foresaw “a series of terrible events – wrenching calamities that are economic, social or environmental in nature”. Abstracted from human reality, he remarked, the absolute rule of the global market had become an article of faith into which many people have put their trust.

The key words here are “human reality”. Hidden behind the technical relations of production and exchange, even behind obscure financial terms like “junk bonds”, “hedge funds” and “supermontage” are real living and breathing men, women and children and the bonds between them of social class, of nationality, ethnic group and family. But the vast global market place and the corporate interests that dominate it seem distant and impenetrable to most people and the lives of ordinary human beings seem to be on another planet.

Someone once compared the activities of speculators in the global money-markets to B52 bomber pilots, floating in the stratosphere oblivious to any “collateral damage”. And yet, as even the metaphor indicates, there is a connection between the one and the other. In this epoch, it is the distance and complexity of the process that baffles people. It means that the way in which it affects people is unexpected and apparently random, contributing to a deepening sense of alienation.

Alienation demystified

Alienation describes a general condition which is not simply a result of today’s society. Human beings arise out of and live within nature. We are part of the natural world, and yet we are forced to struggle with it in order to live at all. In doing this, humans distinguish themselves from other people and from the natural world. For example, building a house shields you from the elements. This is already an alienated relationship because we have to refashion the very forces that provide us with life. In this particular case, we have successfully realised our aim and established a closer relationship with the world around us.

The *Collins English Dictionary* defines alienation as: “1. a turning away; estrangement. 2. the state of being an outsider or the feeling of being isolated, as from society. 3. *Psychiatry*, a state in which a person’s feelings are inhibited so that eventually both the self and the external world seem unreal. 4. *Law*, the transfer into the ownership of another.”

The fourth, apparently legal, definition, provides the contemporary context for alienation. It is the transferring of ownership of our labour, the result and distribution of it, that is the material basis for powerful feelings of dislocation. It happens in everyone’s lives, every day in the process of capitalist production. Every worker is forced to sell her or his labour power to an employer. In exchange she or he receives a wage or salary. But the product or service which the worker’s labour creates or operates and the profit accruing from this, is “transferred into the ownership of another”.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says alienation is “the state of feeling estranged or separated from one’s milieu, work, products of work, or self. The concept... is most famously associated with Karl Marx, who spoke of workers being alienated from their work and its products under capitalism. In other contexts the term alienation, like anomie, can suggest a sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, or cultural- or self-estrangement brought on by the lack of fit between individual needs or expectations and the social order”. Marx explained how our social connection with other people is turned into a social relation between things. “Our connection with other human beings now appears as something alien to us, autonomous, as a thing, an object with a price on it.” The end result is that as workers we create an alien power over ourselves.

Gradually the pervasive human condition of alienation entered into art and literature as a major theme, especially in the haunting work of central-European poets and writers like Rainer Maria Rilke and Franz Kafka early in the 20th century. Later on, philosophers such as the Hungarian Gyorgy Lukacs and Spaniard Ortega y Gasset provided a new analysis of contemporary alienation. During the 1970s, sociologists analysed high levels of political alienation, especially in US

society. In different ways, cultural and political alienation was shown to be a changing condition of society as the imperialist form of capitalism lurched through major economic crises and wars in the 20th century.

Science fiction TV series such as *Alien Nation* and its Internet spin-off have certainly shaped the popular conception of alienation. And the reason they are so gripping is because of their connections to real life. In *Alien Nation*, the incomers marooned on earth struggle to overcome racism and to make a new life for themselves, just like the millions of migrants who are on the move today.

In the *Alien* blockbuster film series, where a deadly parasitic creature threatens humanity, it is the greed of an interstellar corporation that unleashes the danger.

In *The Matrix*, alienation is portrayed in an even more sophisticated form. The humans have been reduced to an energy source, and are made docile by the provision of a dream “virtual” life. Alienated from themselves and their own real lives they have been unknowingly enslaved by the machine empire which is the “real world” – a powerful reflection on the effect of the continuous marketing of virtual “lifestyles”, which will always remain unreal for the majority.

Alienation as a state of mind is not due to a “mistaken”, “defective”, or “overly emotional” reaction to the world. Rather it is the expression of the fact that people, both individually and socially, are deprived of the result of their own labour and the wealth produced by society as a whole, which also confronts them in a hostile way, especially through state institutions and bureaucracies. The contradiction is that work is what makes us human, and yet because we do not control the process as a whole, it dehumanises us. There is an ever-widening gulf: between things as they are and as people know or feel that they could be; between reality, and our individual and collective expectations and aspirations.

The true relations in our lives are turned upside down, so that the most entirely “human” or “social” aspects of what we do as producers and consumers are turned into “something alien and objective”, as Marx wrote, “confronting the individuals, not as

their relation to one another, but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them, and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals”. Thus in today’s world we speak on the phone to a man in India. We ask him about the train times from Nottingham to London. He is paid less than a quarter of what we earn. We buy a pair of trainers made by a woman in the South China seas – she is not allowed to go to the toilet during her working day. We would never impose such conditions on them. But the connection between us is dehumanised and appropriated by powers that we do not control.

More than ever today this takes a highly personal form, destructive of the individual. We frequently feel “not ourselves”. We experience problems communicating and relating to others, at work and in our personal lives. People wake up in the morning worried about whether they will make it through the day, and feel that what they are doing is pointless and they should be doing something else. They are unhappy with themselves and the people around them, but they can’t find the person that will make them happy. They go through experiences at work and at home which are deeply frustrating and make them feel terrible.

People try to resolve this alienation in a variety of ways. Some work longer and longer hours, others may turn to heavy drinking or recreational drugs, over-eating or under-eating, in order to postpone or mask these feelings. The most acute effects are felt by young people. There is a yawning gap between the products and lifestyles marketed to them, not only in advertising but in the increasingly corporate education system, and the lives they and their families lead.

The transformation of the human into the inhuman dominates in a new and suffocating way. Globalisation has dissolved hundreds of social bonds which, for a significant part of the 20th century in the developed countries, softened the harshness of exploitation and alienation. The erosion has included:

- ▶ rights protected by trade union membership
- ▶ longer-term employment
- ▶ respect for skills, experience and knowledge

- ▶ working in a publicly-owned industry
- ▶ public funding of valued services
- ▶ healthcare that included older age
- ▶ a supply of decent council housing.

Late 20th century Britain saw the creation of a different kind of workforce and the decimation of the old. And it is not only skilled and unskilled manual labour that has been transformed as a result of the closure of older industries and the collapse of manufacturing. All workers, including white collar, nurses, civil servants and firefighters are subject to the same pressures.

Workers are constantly told by governments and employers that they should become more “flexible and dynamic”. “Flexibility” means accepting lower pay, “dynamic” means travelling long distances to work. Getting rid of “rigidities” means allowing companies to become more competitive at the expense of the workers. “Facing new global challenges”, means “if you don’t like it, there are plenty of people in low-wage countries willing to take your job”, according to Larry Elliott, the economics editor of *The Guardian* (22 March 2004).

These changes began in the Thatcher era with the deregulation of the economy and the mass closure of older industries. Under New Labour, the process has intensified with the blurring of the line between the commercial and non-commercial worlds in the shape of private-public partnerships, charging fees to university students and bringing private companies in to run or sponsor schools. Every single area of life has been made subject to the world of profit. As Madeleine Bunting noted:

Rising mental illness seems an inescapable consequence of the kind of rapid, disruptive change driven by market capitalism. It’s not that people have gone soft so much as that they are profoundly disorientated by the ceaseless discontinuity of change. Experience becomes utterly random and meaningless. You were doing really well in your job but you still got fired; you thought your relationship was strong but your partner has fallen out of love with you. Appalling images of suffering in the world are interrupted by advertisements for car insurance: barbarism and banality, cheek by

jowl. What lies behind the escalating weight of emotional distress is that awful struggle to make meaning, that instinct that our lives should have a narrative and a purpose and should make some sense. Whereas previous generations had a very strong grasp of the meaning of their lives (whatever the catastrophes which befell them), of their own identity and where they belonged, we are living out Marx's prediction that "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned". Meaning inspires resilience: if you have some explanation for what happens, it gives strength. That's what past generations drew comfort from. It is the sheer meaninglessness of the chaotic instability of our experiences which exposes us to despair. We have no answer to "why me?" We have no account for the suffering which is the inevitable lot of human beings – death, disease, betrayal, frustration – other than to employ desperate strategies to avoid them. (*The Guardian*, 1 March 2004)

Alienation is deepened by the intense and continuous pressure from marketing, which contributes to people's sense of powerlessness. It shapes their aspirations and urges them not only to acquire a product, but along with it a so-called lifestyle – generally one that only a tiny minority can in reality enjoy.

Celebrities are used to sell products, many of them produced by super cheap labour on the other side of the planet, because people aspire to be like them. It is not the product people are buying but a share of the celebrity's charisma. Talented personalities, who are role models for millions – like David Beckham – turn themselves into brands. Individual personality, the thing that makes us different from objects that are bought and sold, is now the most marketable and saleable commodity of all. We are told that we create ourselves, our personality and worth through the acquisition of products. Perfumes, cars, ringtones are all now billed as "forms of self-expression" – "because you're worth it", you can "be yourself", you can "express yourself".

And it is impossible to escape from the constant stream of advertising pushing products at every "consumer". Every surface we see – from cinema screen to table top, billboard to T-shirt – is covered in product placement. This has a particularly powerful

impact on young people who are in the course of shaping their lives and consciousness and looking to understand the world and to find role models. Their father's redundant out-dated job may offer them little to relate to – may indeed seem less stable and less real than the life of a rap star or footballer.

Feeling the pressure

There are those who dismiss symptoms of a deeply-divided and alienated society, saying that people have simply become too soft and pampered. All we need, they say, is some good old-fashioned discipline and the stiff upper lip that existed in the 1950s. Evidence of how people react to the intensified pressures they face from having to live and work under the conditions just outlined, tells its own story, however.

The fastest growing cause of absence from work according to the BBC's *Money Programme* is stress. More than 13 million working days were lost in 2003 as a result of stress-related illnesses. While employers' organisations like the Confederation of British Industry insist the problem was just whinging workers who "are now describing a normal day's period in the office as stressful", the reality is that psychological pressures at work do make people ill. The London *Evening Standard* (14 August 2003) reported that one insurance firm, Unum Provident, concluded that the last ten years had seen an explosion in employee claims for "mental and psychological problems", rare a generation ago. Every year around three in ten employees will have a mental health problem, according to the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

Towards the end of 2003, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimated that the number of people suffering from anxiety, depression or bad nerves had risen to almost four million. This is an increase of 62% over the past decade, even though Britain as a whole has become healthier and wealthier. HSE commissioned research has indicated that:

- ▶ about half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill
- ▶ up to 5 million people in the UK feel "very" or "extremely"

stressed by their work

- ▶ work-related stress costs society about £3.7 billion every year.

Workers, especially in the public sector, are destabilised by constant changes imposed by managers who are in turn under pressure to deliver “targets”.

Not only workers’ organisations like the Trades Union Congress (TUC), but also the HSE have pointed to how the way people are treated at work affects them. And, as one senior nurse put it, “the way an organisation is run”, is what causes stress. In Europe’s biggest employer, the National Health Service (NHS), stress levels run at extremely high levels. The West Dorset Hospital NHS Trust, for example, was one of the first to be put on notice by the HSE to reduce stress levels among its staff. A study into the impact of restructuring in the NHS in *Stress News*, reported:

Hospitals, like many other organisations, are also being forced to cut back due to a shortage of funding. Thousands of hospital workers have lost their jobs and many others experience job insecurity. Since nurses are the largest group employed by hospitals, their jobs are very much affected by hospital downsizing and closures. As a result of seeing others lose their jobs, nurses experience job insecurity to various degrees. Restructuring and its changes can result not only in lower job satisfaction, but also in job insecurity. And not only common sense, but a great deal of research points to how job insecurity has been associated with psychological distress and poor health.

The *British Social Attitudes Survey 2003* found that what it called the increasing “marketisation” of economic and social life had taken its toll. Three-quarters of managerial and professional employees found their jobs stressful (as compared to just under half of routine and manual workers. “The longer reported hours of work of professional and managerial respondents are an important factor contributing to their reported levels of work-life stress. These longer hours no doubt reflect the greater workplace pressures to be found in these kinds of jobs, but will also be a

consequence of individual aspirations.”

“Downsizing”, management-speak for sacking workers, can actually cause death. The *British Medical Journal* reported that “employees who had experienced major downsizing were also twice as likely to die from cardiovascular disease, particularly during the first four years after the job cuts”. Not only “restructuring” and “downsizing” but the way that new technologies are introduced and the lack of privacy rights at work seriously affect workers’ health. The TUC-backed *Hazards* magazine, which monitors workplace health, drew on a US study showing that closely monitored staff suffered more work dissatisfaction, depression, extreme anxiety, exhaustion, strain injuries and neck problems than unmonitored workers. It also included research showing that a lack of autonomy at work is a major cause of work-related stress and strains, heart diseases and sickness.

Two case histories

The case of Doctor Stephen Farley, “loved by his patients and respected by his peers” but who committed suicide (3 February 2004, report in *The Independent*) showed in the sharpest way how individual despair was brought on by the conflict between the desire to do a job well and the demands made by the increasingly marketised health system. The secretary of the local medical committee in Leicestershire concluded that Dr Farley “was an old-style doctor who was operating in the new-style, Blairite system”. Colleagues claimed that he killed himself “when depression set in after being hounded by NHS managers for referring too many patients to hospital”.

A few months later, another family doctor working in Lancashire, Dawn Harris, described as an angel by her patients, hanged herself. The coroner described her as “a perfectionist in an inadequate and imperfect system”. The inquest heard that Dr Harris loved caring for her NHS patients, “but was worried about the increasing governmental red tape and demands to meet an escalating number of targets”. (*The Independent*, 14 May 2004)

In both cases, a simple commitment to patients and profession caused an intolerable stress.

Despite all the economic growth in Britain, the number of people of working age who are economically inactive is at its highest in history. In May 2004, according to the Department of Work and Pensions, it stood at 7.8 million, up a quarter of a million since New Labour came to power. The largest yearly increase for any age group was among 18-24 year olds. Due in part to stress, more than a million moved on to incapacity benefit as a result of mental and behavioural disorders between 1999 and 2004. In August 2004, it was reported that those who are paid incapacity benefit for at least five years account for more than 50% of the total. This took the total of long-term claims by those judged by doctors to be unfit for work to 2.7 million. Official figures indicate that many have dropped out of claiming Jobseekers' Allowance and become seriously depressed.

Drugs and alcohol

Not surprisingly, high levels of stress make people seek ways to relieve their anxieties in life. This is revealed in the patterns of drug-taking and the use of alcohol.

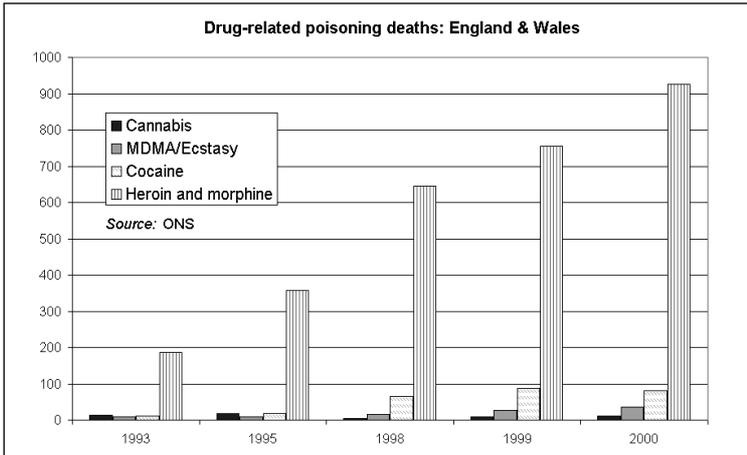
Drug use

- ▶ between 1991 and 2001 the number of prescription items for anti-depressant drugs dispensed in England more than doubled, from 9 million items in 1991 to 24 million in 2001
- ▶ between 1993 and 2000 the number of drug-related poisoning deaths in England and Wales increased by a third to 3,000
- ▶ in 1999, England and Wales and the Irish Republic had the highest proportions of young people using cannabis, amphetamines and cocaine in the EU.

Social Trends 34, ONS

Dependence on a large variety of mind and mood-altering drugs in recent years has led to forms of the type of mass-control described in *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley's vision of the future written in 1932. Johann Hari, writing in *The Independent* (14 August 2003), went so far as to make the link between mass voluntary drug-taking and the effects of free market capitalism:

“If human beings cannot change harsh market processes, we will have to alter our brains chemically. If what exists today is the only possible way that society can be, it is easier and better to dull the painful sides through mind-changing chemicals.”



The Home Office’s *British Crime Survey* for 2002/3 found there were around four million illicit drug users and around one million Class A (heroin, cocaine, ecstasy) drug users, with around three million 16-59 year-olds having used cannabis. The falling price of cocaine (which dropped to £40 a gram in 2004 compared to £70 a few years ago) has gone side-by-side with a tripling in the number of people using it since 1997.

The survey indicated that young people are more likely to use drugs than older people. The most commonly used drug in 2001/02 by 16 to 24 year olds was cannabis, which had been used by 33% of men and 21% of women in the previous year. Ecstasy was the most commonly used Class A drug, with higher

Drug taking rose from under 10% in the group born in 1946 to 60% for men and 40% of women in the 1970 group. In the five years running up to 2003, ecstasy use exploded in the UK, with double the number of people using the drug.

Changing Britain, Changing Lives, Institute of Education

use among the 16 to 24 year olds than those aged 25 to 59. In 2001/02, 9% of men and 4% of women aged 16 to 24 had used ecstasy in the previous year.

Deaths related to alcohol consumption have been rising in England and Wales for many years from just under 2,600 in 1980 to just over 5,500 in 2000, according to the Office for National Statistics. Between 1980 and 2000 deaths from alcohol-related diseases among males more than doubled from 6 to 13 per 100,000. Among males, there was an upward trend in alcohol-related death rates in all age groups above 15 to 24. The most marked increase occurred among those aged 25 to 44, with the rate increasing from 4 per 100,000 in 1980 to a peak of 10 per 100,000 in 1998.

Teenagers and young adults are particularly susceptible to problems of alcohol and drugs abuse as well as suicide. A World Health Organisation (WHO) study in 2004 found that the physical and mental health of UK teenagers was “more like that of poverty-stricken former communist nations than our western European neighbours”. In the largest international study of adolescent attitudes it found that only Russian 11-year-olds and Czech 15-year-olds had a lower opinion of their generation than the same age groups in England. English and Welsh teenagers had the highest rates of drinking and got drunk at a younger age than children from most other countries. Going to school without breakfast was normal for a third of 11-year-old children in England, compared with 90% of Portuguese children who

Britain has one of the highest suicide rates in Europe. Each year in the UK over 5000 people take their lives. The suicide rate for young men has increased considerably since the mid-1970s. The suicide rate for 18-24-year-old males jumped from 58 deaths per million of population in 1974 to 170 deaths per million in 1997. In inner city areas, over 43% of children have considered suicide and one in six children under the age of 11 have attempted suicide. Common causes cited include bullying, abuse, poverty, homelessness, and alcohol abuse.

Bully OnLine

start the day with a morning meal. English children watched television for much greater periods of time than the average. The study found that British children in general were “the unhealthiest and unhappiest in the world”. Another indication of the scale of social alienation amongst young people are findings by the Policy Exchange think tank, which estimates that 1.2 million people aged 18-24 are not in work, nor in full-time education, nor registered as unemployed. *Left Out, Left Behind* characterised these youth as “Generation X”, saying “We know surprisingly little about what they are or what they are doing.”

A 2003 Home Office report, *Hidden Harm*, calculated that as many as 300,000 children in England and Wales have at least one parent who is a drug addict. At the same time, nearly half of all social services departments have been found to be failing to adequately safeguard vulnerable children and in some inner city areas vacancy rates for social workers are running at 40-50%.

An indication of extreme levels of personal crisis was revealed by the drugs and treatment assessment body, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). In July 2004, figures revealed that more than 170,000 people a year, most of them young, sought hospital treatment after “deliberately hurting themselves in apparent expressions of despair”. It was the first time that such figures had been compiled. Mental health experts such as Dr Tim Kendall, co-director of the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, believe that the true picture is much worse since many more people do not seek treatment, and thus do not enter into the statistics. Marjorie Wallace, head of the mental health charity Sane, considered that self-harm has reached epidemic proportions and that “these people who are pushed to the bottom of the treatment queue are made to feel it is their own fault and denied any real understanding of their condition”.

How do people deal with the extreme differences in social class and wealth which mean that the things they need and want are often beyond their means? The answer is simple – debt. While debt has haunted the poor and dispossessed for centuries, it has

acquired new dimensions in the present economic order. Far from being sent to a debtor's prison as in the 18th century, people are encouraged to take on more and more debt.

People who are financially and/or psychologically vulnerable are easy meat for a myriad of lending institutions. This happens at many levels of the social scale. At the bottom are the doorstep lenders and loan sharks. At the level of mortgage lending, some of Britain's biggest estate agencies and financial advice groups, it emerged in 2004, encourage customers to break the law by lying about their earnings to secure higher mortgages than they could otherwise obtain. Banks, building societies, credit card companies and even supermarkets engage in aggressive tactics, bombarding homes with mail shots and emails. There are now 1,500 different credit card companies, as well as agencies ("debt management companies") who buy up debts from lenders who have been unable to recover them.

Over the past decade total consumer debt has risen steadily and dramatically. Mortgage lending was still rising at the fastest rate on record in the summer of 2004. Consumer borrowing reached £1 trillion (£1,000 billion) in the second half of 2004, despite four interest rate rises over nine months. Britain now has more debt as a proportion of its income than any other major country except Japan.

The level of indebtedness today is not simply due to indulging in "luxury" items. Mortgage borrowing made up £8.8 billion of the total £10.7 billion lent during September 2003. The basic need to have a roof over one's head continues to force millions of people to borrow at a time when property prices have risen beyond their means. When social housing is unavailable, there are few options other than buy. Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) found that one in every five people use credit cards to pay their household bills. This pushes them deeper and deeper into a spiral of debt.

In Too Deep – CAB clients' experience of debt, a report by Sue Edwards written in May 2003, makes chilling reading. Those suffering the most are the poor who resort to "doorstep lenders" charging the highest rates of interest – as high as 177%. Loan sharks can obtain a consumer credit licence with few questions

asked. Research carried out by the National Consumer Council in September 2003 denounced government and regulators for failing to protect those on low incomes, the elderly, those with large personal debts and people in the countryside from rising prices and having energy supplies cut off. Over three million people found it difficult to pay energy bills, over a million had their telephones cut off and 4.7m were in debt to the water companies.

Women are particularly vulnerable to forms of stress. The Health and Safety Executive reported in August 2004 that severe stress could be a disproportionately female affliction, since most caring public sector jobs are filled by women. Women with little worktime control are not only much more likely to suffer from psychological distress, but have “a 50% higher risk of medically certified sickness absences than women with a high level of worktime control”, according to *Occupation and Environmental Medicine Journal*.

A new illness has recently been identified by the medical profession – panic attacks. In the United States, studies have found that 35% of people had experienced at least one panic attack. There is a “new breed of sufferers” who are young, educated, successful and predominantly women, *The Independent* reported on 26 July 2004. A doctor who founded The Panic Disorders Institute in California, Stuart Shipko, has found that drugs are not the best treatment for this problem, which is more often than not the result of months and years of stress.

There is a gender-related twist to the drinking problem. Women in high-ranking jobs, for example, are far more likely to drink too much than men in the same position and more than women in more humble jobs. Dr Stephen Stansfield of the Institute of Community Health Sciences in London thought that women “may have to work harder and sustain more stress than men to attain a similar success”. The Alliance for a Caring Economy founded by Riane Eisler in 1998, reporting to a corporate advice consultancy in California, notes:

Present economic models and rules fail to recognise the economic

value of the socially and environmentally essential work of caring and caretaking. Marx wrote about the alienation of labour. I have in the course of my research come to see that the alienation of caring and caretaking labour is the hidden mass of the iceberg of which many of our problems are only the tip. This alienation of caring and caretaking labour has always had extremely negative effects... Because caring work is often valued at zero by the economy, with the growing emphasis on ‘economic efficiency’ we are today getting less and less of it. Health care, child care, elder care, even the sense of caring and community that we used to associate with going to the corner store or coffee shop, are systematically being squeezed out of our lives so they can be provided in the most efficient, antiseptic, functional way possible – at least until the social costs grow so high that they spill over and force their way into the economy, in the form of delinquency, crime, homelessness, mental illness, and social malaise.

A survey by the Trade Union Congress (March 2004) pointed out that on average women’s retirement income from all sources is only 53% of men’s. Only 30% of women receive a private pension in their own right. “Women pensioners are particularly affected – single women pensioners are half as likely again to be poor as single male pensioners, and women pensioners in couples have the least financial independence of any group in society, with disposable individual incomes of just a third of those of a male in a pensioner couple”. In addition, a separate investigation noted big differences among women in terms of ethnic origin and social background. Only 3% of Pakistani women have an occupational pension, it found.

Political alienation

Photo-journalist Nick Danziger provided a sobering picture of Britain after living among the homeless and unemployed in many of the ruined manufacturing and so-called “no-go” areas of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland during the last year of Tory rule before the election of New Labour. He described inner city areas as well as towns throughout the country, including Brixton, Leicester, Halifax, Newcastle,

Glasgow, Blackpool, Barrow-in-Furness, Liverpool, Salford, Brighton, Suffolk, Cornwall, South Wales and Belfast. He shows how globalisation has affected large parts of the country:

In my rare spells in Britain during the past few years, I had noticed that the British are in flux, perhaps more than any other nation. They are trying to make sense of their identity... In the Midlands and North of Great Britain I found myself witnessing a destruction of the industrial and social fabric not experienced since the great crisis of the 1930s. Britain today might not be the class-ridden society it was then, but it is the working classes who still bear the brunt of unemployment.

Even while old industries were disappearing, he noticed that the class divide deepened rather than disappeared: "... Between my local council estate and the private housing 200 yards away there is an invisible Berlin Wall, separating the haves from the have nots... In Britain today I found a world of increased polarisation where both ends of the spectrum of material wealth lead to spiritual deprivation." He added:

Real change could be effected by the political system, but instead there's a lot of shouting and screaming going on. The way I saw it, it wasn't just Nikes and crack that Britain had inherited from the United States; it had now also inherited its two-party political system, with neither side representing the downtrodden, the tens of thousands of impoverished residents of council estates and hardscrabble rural areas. They are potentially an explosive force, but an unpredictable one because they are as disorganised as they are poor.

One courageous journalist, Nick Ryan, spent six years as an undercover reporter investigating racist and neo-Nazi groups in Britain such as Combat 18 and the British National Party (BNP). Over the last few years, they evolved in response to the loss of credibility and legitimacy of traditional political parties, in Britain and elsewhere. He documented how BNP leader Nick Griffin poses as an anti-corporate campaigner, denouncing "the

government, the agro-chemical industries... the big landowners who control the NFU, and the European Union”.

Ryan shows how far-right organisations can cash in on the way in which large sections of the population have been abandoned by successive governments, especially New Labour.