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Mass Delusions and Hysterias



Highlights from the Past Millennium

Over the past millennium, mass delusions and hysterical outbreaks have taken many forms. Sociologists Robert Bartholomew and Erich Goode survey some of the more colorful cases.

Robert E. Bartholomew and Erich Goode

The turn of the second millennium has brought about, in the Western world at least, an outpouring of concern about cosmic matters. A major portion of this concern has taken a delusional, even hysterical turn, specifically in imagining an end-of-the-world scenario. "The end of the world is near," predicts Karl de Nostredame, supposedly the "last living descendent" of Nostradamus; "White House knows doomsday date!" he claims (Wolfe 1999, 8). Against this backdrop, it seems an appropriate time to survey a sample of social delusions and group hysterias from the past millennium. Given the enormous volume of literature, we will limit our list to the more colorful episodes.

The study of collective delusions most commonly falls within the domain of sociologists working in the sub-field of collective behavior, and psychologists specializing in social psychology. Collective delusions are typified as the spontaneous, rapid spread of false or exaggerated beliefs within a population at large, temporarily affecting a particular region, culture, or country. Mass hysteria is most commonly studied by psychiatrists and physicians. Episodes typically affect small, tightly knit groups in enclosed settings such as schools, factories, convents and orphanages (Calmeil 1845; Hirsch 1883; Sirois 1974).

Mass hysteria is characterized by the rapid spread of conversion disorder, a condition involving the appearance of bodily complaints for which there is no organic basis. In such episodes, psychological distress is converted or channeled into physical symptoms. There are two common types: anxiety hysteria and motor hysteria. The former is of shorter duration, usually lasting a day, and is triggered by the sudden perception of a threatening agent, most commonly a strange odor. Symptoms typically include headache, dizziness, nausea, breathlessness, and general weakness. Motor hysteria is prevalent in intolerable social situations such as strict school and religious settings where discipline is excessive. Symptoms include trance-like states, melodramatic acts of rebellion known as histrionics, and what physicians term "psychomotor agitation" (whereby pent-up anxiety built up over a long period results in disruptions to the nerves or neurons that send messages to the muscles, triggering temporary bouts of twitching, spasms, and shaking). Motor hysteria appears gradually over time and usually takes weeks or months to subside (Wessely 1987; Bartholomew and Sirois 1996). The term mass hysteria is often used inappropriately to describe collective delusions, as the overwhelming majority of participants are not exhibiting hysteria, except in extremely rare cases. In short, all mass hysterias are collective delusions as they involve false or exaggerated beliefs,

but only rarely do collective delusions involve mass hysteria as to do so, they must report illness symptoms.

Many factors contribute to the formation and spread of collective delusions and hysterical illness: the mass media; rumors; extraordinary anxiety or excitement; cultural beliefs and stereotypes; the social and political context; and reinforcing actions by authorities such as politicians, or institutions of social control such as the police or military. Episodes are also distinguishable by the redefinition of mundane objects, events, and circumstances and reflect a rapidly spreading folk belief which contributes to an emerging definition of the situation.

Middle Ages, France

During the Middle Ages, dozens of outbreaks of hysterical fits and imitative behaviors were reported among repressed nuns in cloistered European Christian convents. "Volunteers" were often forced by their parents into joining religious orders against their will and to lead celibate lives that included vows of poverty and demanding physical labor (Madden 1857). During this time it was widely believed that humans could be possessed by certain animals, such as wolves. In France, cats were particularly despised as they were considered familiar with the Devil (Darnton 1984). It was perhaps this context that triggered an unusual episode of collective behavior, described in the passage below.

I have read in a good medical work that a nun, in a very large convent in France, began to meow like a cat; shortly afterwards other nuns also meowed. At last all the nuns meowed together every day at a certain time for several hours together. The whole surrounding Christian neighborhood heard, with equal chagrin and astonishment, this daily cat-concert, which did not cease until all the nuns were informed that a company of soldiers were placed by the police before the entrance of the convent, and that they were provided with rods, and would continue whipping them until they promised not to meow any more. (Zimmermann cited in Hecker 1844, 127)



Fifteenth Century Germany

A nun in a German nunnery fell to biting all her companions. In the course of a short time all the nuns of this convent began biting each other. The news of this infection among the nuns soon spread, and it now passed from convent to convent throughout a

great part of Germany, principally Saxony and Brandenburg. It afterwards visited the nunneries of Holland, and at last the nuns had the biting mania even as far as Rome. (Zimmermann cited in Hecker 1844, 127)

Milan, Italy, 1630

British journalist Charles Mackay (1852, 261-265) described a poisoning scare that terrorized Milan, Italy, in 1630, coinciding with pestilence, plague, and a prediction that the Devil would poison the city's water supply. On one April morning people awoke, and became fearful upon finding "that all the doors in the principal streets of the city were marked with a curious daub, or spot." Soon there was alarm that the sign of the awaited poisoning was at hand, and the belief spread that corn and fruit had also been poisoned. Many people were executed. One elderly man was spotted wiping a stool before sitting on it, when he was accused of smearing poison on the seat. He was seized by an angry mob of women and pulled by the hair to a judge, but died on the way. In another incident, a pharmacist and barber named Mora was found with several preparations containing unknown potions and accused of being in cahoots with the Devil to poison the city. Protesting his innocence, he eventually confessed after prolonged torture on the rack, admitting to cooperating with the Devil and foreigners to poisoning the city and anointing the doors. Under duress he named several accomplices who were eventually arrested and tortured. They were all pronounced guilty and executed. Mackay states that "The number of persons who confessed that they were employed by the Devil to distribute poison is almost incredible," noting that "day after day persons came voluntarily forward to accuse themselves" (264).



Lille, France, 1639

Mackay (1852, 539-540) reports that in 1639 at an all-girls' school in Lille, France, fifty pupils were convinced by their overzealous teacher that they were under Satanic influence. Antoinette Bourignon had the children believing that "little black angels" were flying about their heads, and that the Devil's imps were everywhere. Soon, each of the students confessed to witchcraft, flying on broomsticks and even eating baby flesh. The students came close to being burned at the stake but were spared when blame shifted to the headmistress, who escaped at the last minute. The episode occurred near the end of the Continental European witch mania of 1400 to 1650, when at least 200,000 people were executed following allegations of witchcraft.

Salem, Massachusetts, 1691-1693

In 1692, Salem Village (now Danvers, Massachusetts) was the scene of a moral



panic that spread throughout the region and involved witchcraft accusations which led to trials, torture, imprisonment, and executions. Others died in jail or during torture. At least twenty residents lost their lives. Social paranoia was such that two dogs were even accused and executed! All convictions were based on ambiguous evidence. The witch mania began in December 1691, when eight girls living in the vicinity of Salem exhibited strange behaviors including disordered speech, convulsive movements, and bizarre conduct. Explanations for the "fits" range from outright fakery to hysteria to ergot poisoning of the food supply. By February 1692, the affected girls had accused two elderly women and a servant from Barbados named Tibula of being witches, and they were arrested. Soon hundreds of residents were accused of witchcraft, and trials were held. In May 1693, the episode ended when Governor Phips ordered that all suspects be released (Nevins 1916; Caporael 1976; Karlsen 1989).

London, England, 1761

On February 8, 1761, a minor earthquake struck London, damaging several chimneys. When another tremor occurred on the following month on the exact day as the first (March 8), the coincidence became the subject of widespread discussion. According to Mackay (1852), a lifeguard named Bell then predicted that London would be destroyed in a third quake on April 5. "As the awful day approached, the excitement became intense, and great numbers of credulous people resorted to all the villages within a circuit of twenty miles, awaiting the doom of London" (259). People paid exorbitant fees to temporarily board with households in such places as Highgate, Hampstead, Islington, Blackheath, and Harrow. The poor stayed in London until two or three days before the predicted event before leaving to camp in fields in the countryside. When the designated time arrived, nothing happened.

Leeds, England, 1806

In 1806, a panic spread through Leeds and the surrounding communities that the end of the world was at hand. The "panic terror" began when a hen from a nearby village was said to begin laying eggs inscribed with the message, "Christ is coming." Large numbers flocked to the site to examine the eggs and see the "miracle" first-hand. Many were convinced that the end was near and suddenly became devoutly religious. Mackay (1852, 261) states that excitement then quickly turned to disappointment when a man "caught the poor hen in the act of laying one of her miraculous eggs" and soon determined "that the egg had been inscribed with some corrosive ink, and cruelly forced up again into the bird's body."

Worldwide, 1835

During the summer of 1835, a series of six newspaper reports appearing in the New York Sun caused a worldwide sensation. Created by journalist Richard A. Locke, the paper claimed that astronomer Sir John Herschel had perfected the world's strongest telescope in a South African observatory, and had discovered various life forms on the Moon: a two-legged beaver, a horned bear, miniature zebras, and colorful birds among them. His most astonishing observation was that he could see human-like forms on the Moon flying about with bat-like wings. The creatures were given the scientific name of "Vespertilio-homo" meaning bat-man. These beings were described with angelic innocence, peacefully coexisting with its fellow creatures in an environment apparently absent of carnivores. The delusion began on Friday, August 21, with an ambiguous story about new astronomical discoveries.

Great excitement prevailed in New York City and spread around the world; most newspapers had been hoodwinked, including the New York Times. Locke published the articles in a pamphlet and sold sixty thousand copies within a month. The New York-based Journal of Commerce newspaper eventually unmasked the hoax (summarized from Griggs 1852; Bulgatz 1993).

British South Africa, 1914

In the war scare setting of British South Africa in 1914, local newspapers erroneously reported that hostile monoplanes from adjacent German South West Africa were making reconnaissance flights as a prelude to an imminent attack. The episode coincided with the start of World War I. Despite the technological impossibility of such missions (the maneuvers reported by witnesses were beyond those of airplanes of the period and their capability of staying aloft for long periods), thousands of residents misperceived ambiguous, nocturnal aerial stimuli (stars and planets) as representing enemy monoplanes (Bartholomew 1989).

Island of Banda, Indonesia, 1937

During March 1937, the first Indonesian Prime Minister, Soetan Sjahrir, was living on the Moluccan island of Banda, where he described a head-hunting rumor-panic which swept through his village. The episode coincided with rumors that a tjoelik (someone who engages in head-hunting for the government) was operating in the area and searching for a head to be placed near a local jetty that was being rebuilt. According to tradition, government construction projects will soon crumble without such an offering. Sjahrir (1949) said that "people have been living in fear" and were "talking and whispering about it everywhere" (162), and after 7 p.m. the streets were nearly deserted. There were many reports of strange noises and sightings. Sjahrir stated: "Every morning there are new stories, generally about footsteps or voices, or a house that was bombarded with stones, or an attack on somebody by a tjoelik with a noose, or a cowboy lasso. Naturally, the person who was attacked got away from the tjoelik in a nick of time!" (164). Sjahrir described the scare as an example of "mass psychosis."

USA, 1938

On Halloween Eve 1938, a live fictional radio drama produced by Orson Welles was broadcast across much of the United States by the CBS Mercury Theatre. It depicted an invasion by Martians who had landed in Grover's Mill, New Jersey, and soon began attacking with heat rays and poison gas. Princeton University psychologist Hadley Cantril (1940) concluded that an estimated 1.2 million listeners became excited, frightened, or disturbed. However, subsequent reviews of Cantril's findings by sociologists David Miller (1985), William Sims Bainbridge (1987), and others, concluded that there was scant evidence of substantial or widespread panic. For instance, Miller found little evidence of mobilization, an essential ingredient in a panic. Hence, it was a collective delusion and not a true panic. Cantril also exaggerated the extent of the mobilization, attributing much of the typical activity at the time to the "panic." In short, many listeners may have expressed concern but did not do anything in response, like try to flee, grab a gun for protection, or barricade themselves inside a house. Either way one looks at this episode, it qualifies as



UFO: Unidentified Flying Orsons

a collective delusion. If, as Cantril originally asserted, many listeners were frightened and panicked, it is a mass delusion. Conversely, if we are to accept the more recent and likely assessments that the "panic" was primarily a media creation inadvertently fueled by Cantril's flawed study, then erroneous depictions of a mass panic that have been recounted in numerous books and articles for over six decades constitute an equally remarkable social delusion.

Mad Gasser of Mattoon, 1944

During the first two weeks of September 1944, residents of Mattoon, Illinois, were thrust into the world media spotlight after a series of imaginary gas attacks by a "phantom anesthetist." On Friday night, September 1, Mattoon police received a phone call that a woman and her daughter had been left nauseated and dizzy after being sprayed with a sweet-smelling gas by a mysterious figure lurking near their bedroom window. The woman also said she experienced slight, temporary difficulty in walking. Despite the ambiguous circumstances and lack of evidence, the following evening the incident was afforded sensational coverage in the Mattoon Daily Journal-Gazette ("Anesthetic Prowler on Loose"). After seeing the story, two other Mattoon families recounted for police similar "gas attacks" in their homes just prior to the incident.

Before the reports ceased (after September 12), police logged over two dozen separate calls involving at least twenty-nine victims, most of whom were females. University of Illinois researcher Donald Johnson (1945) investigated the episode, concluding that it was a case of mass hysteria. Their transient symptoms included nausea, vomiting, dry mouth, palpitations, difficulty walking, and in one instance, a burning sensation in the mouth. Given the influential role of the Mattoon news media, it may be that victims were redefining mundane symptoms such as a panic attack, chemical smell, one's leg "falling asleep," and the consequences of anxiety such as nausea, insomnia, shortness of breath, shakiness, dry mouth, dizziness, etc. as gasser-related.

"Miracle" in Puerto Rico, 1953

At 11 a.m. on May 25, 1953, an estimated 150,000 people converged on a well at Rincorn, Puerto Rico, to await the appearance of the Virgin Mary as predicted by seven local children. Over the next six hours, a team of sociologists led by Melvin Tumin and Arnold Feldman (1955) mingled in the crowd conducting interviews. During this period, some people reported seeing colored rings encircling the Sun, and a silhouette of the Virgin in the clouds, while others experienced healings, and a general sense of well-being. Others neither saw nor experienced anything extraordinary. A media frenzy preceded the event, and a local mayor enthusiastically organized the visionaries to lead throngs of pilgrims in mass prayers and processions. Tumin and Feldman found that the majority of pilgrims believed in the authenticity of the children's claim, and were seeking cures for conditions that physicians had deemed incurable. Various ambiguous objects in the immediate surroundings (clouds, trees, etc.) mirrored the hopeful and expectant religious state of mind of many participants.

Seattle Windshield Pitting Epidemic, 1954

On March 23, 1954, reports appeared in Seattle newspapers of damaged automobile windshields in a city eighty miles to the north. While initially suspecting vandals, the number of cases spread, causing growing concern. In time, reports of damaged windshields moved closer to Seattle. According to a study by

Nahum Medalia of the Georgia Institute of Technology and Otto Larsen of the University of Washington (1958), by nightfall on April 14, the mysterious pits first reached the city, and by the end of the next day, weary police had answered 242 phone calls from concerned residents, reporting tiny pit marks on over 3,000 vehicles. In some cases, whole parking lots were reportedly affected. The reports quickly declined and ceased. On April 16 police logged forty-six pitting claims, and ten the next day, after which no more reports were received.

The most common damage report involved claims that tiny pit marks grew into dime-sized bubbles embedded within the glass, leading to a folk theory that sandflea eggs had somehow been deposited in the glass and later hatched. The sudden presence of the "pits" created widespread anxiety as they were typically attributed to atomic fallout from hydrogen bomb tests that had been recently conducted in the Pacific and received saturation media publicity. At the height of the incident on the night of April 15, the Seattle mayor even sought emergency assistance from President Dwight Eisenhower.

In the wake of rumors of radioactive fallout and a few initial cases amplified in the media, residents began looking at, instead of through, their windshields. An analysis of the mysterious black, sooty grains that dotted many windshields was carried out at the Environmental Research Laboratory at the University of Washington. The material was identified as cenospheres-tiny particles produced by the incomplete combustion of bituminous coal. The particles had been a common feature of everyday life in Seattle, and could not pit or penetrate windshields.

Medalia and Larsen noted that because the pitting reports coincided with the H-Bomb tests, media publicity seems to have reduced tension about the possible consequences of the bomb tests-"something was bound to happen to us as a result of the H-bomb tests-windshields became pitted-it's happened-now that threat is over" (186). Secondly, the very act of phoning police and appeals by the mayor to the governor and even President of the United States "served to give people the sense that they were 'doing something' about the danger that threatened" (186).

Phantom Slasher of Taiwan, 1956

For a two-week period in 1956, residents in the vicinity of Taipei, Taiwan, lived in fear that they would be the next victim of a crazed villain who was prowling the city and slashing people at random with a razor or similar type weapon. At least twenty-one slashing victims were reported during this period, mostly women and children of low income and education. Norman Jacobs was teaching in Taipei at the time, and conducted a survey of local press coverage of the slasher. Jacobs concluded that those affected had erroneously attributed mundane slash marks to a dastardly slasher (Jacobs 1965).

Rumors amplified by sensational press coverage treating the slasher's existence as real served to foment the scare by altering the public's outlook to include the reality of a daring slasher. Police eventually concluded that the various "slashings" had resulted from inadvertent, everyday contact in public places, that ordinarily would have gone relatively unnoticed. For instance, one man told police in detail how he had been slashed by a man carrying a mysterious black bag. When a doctor determined that the wound was made by a blunt object and not a razor, the "victim" admitted that he could not recall exactly what had happened, but assumed that he had been slashed "because of all the talk going around." In another case, it was not the supposed victim but physicians who were responsible for creating an incident. An elderly man with a

wrist laceration sought medical treatment but the attending doctor grew suspicious and contacted police when the man casually noted that a stranger had coincidentally touched him at about the same time when he first noticed the bleeding. A more thorough examination led to the conclusion that the "slash" was an old injury that had been re-opened after inadvertent scratching.

On May 12 police announced the results of their investigation: they concluded that the episode was entirely psychological in origin. Of the twenty-one slashing claims examined by their office, they determined that "five were innocent false reports, seven were self-inflicted cuts, eight were due to cuts other than razors, and one was a complete fantasy" (Jacobs, 1965, 324).

First Flying Saucer Wave, 1947

On June 24, 1947, Kenneth Arnold was piloting his private plane near the Cascade mountains in Washington state when he saw what appeared to be nine glittering objects flying in echelon-like formation near Mount Rainier. He kept the objects in sight for about three minutes before they traveled south over Mount Adams and were lost to view (Arnold 1950; Arnold and Palmer 1952; Gardner 1988; Clark 1998, 139-143).

Worried that he may have observed guided missiles from a foreign power, Arnold eventually flew to Pendleton, Oregon, where he tried reporting what he saw to the FBI office there. But the office was closed, so he went to the offices of The East Oregonian newspaper. After listening to Arnold's story, journalist Bill Bequette produced a report for the Associated Press. It is notable that at this point, Arnold had described the objects as crescent-shaped, referring only to their movement as "like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water" (Gardner 1957, 56; Story 1980, 25; Sachs 1980, 207-208). However, the Associated Press account describing Arnold's "saucers" appeared in over 150 newspapers.

The AP report filed by Bequette was the proto-article from which the term "flying saucer" was created by headline writers on June 25 and 26, 1947 (Strentz 1970). Of key import was Bequette's use of the term "saucer-like" in describing Arnold's sighting. Bequette's use of the word "saucer" provided a motif for the worldwide wave of flying saucer sightings during the summer of 1947, and other waves since. There are a few scattered historical references to disc-shaped objects, but no consistent pattern emerges until 1947, with Arnold's sighting. There have only been a handful of occasions prior to 1947 that a witness has actually used the word "saucer" to describe mysterious aerial objects. Hence, the global 1947 flying saucer wave can be regarded as a media-generated collective delusion unique to the twentieth century.

Zeitoun, Egypt, 1968-1971

From April 1968 to May 1971, more than 100,000 people reported observing Virgin Mary apparitions above a Coptic Orthodox Church at Zeitoun, Egypt. Witnesses' descriptions varied between two main types: small bright, short-lived lights nicknamed "doves," and more enduring, less intense, diffuse patches of glowing light (Johnston 1980). Canadian neuropsychologist Michael Persinger of Laurentian University and his American colleague John Derr (1989) analyzed seismic activity in the region from 1958 to 1979, and found an unprecedented peak in earthquakes during 1969. They state that "The 'narrow' window of significant temporal relationship between luminous phenomena and earthquakes is within the classic time frame of more acceptable antecedents (e.g., microseismic activity) of imminent earthquake activity." It appears that the Marian observers were predisposed by religious

background and social expectation to interpreting the light displays as related to the Virgin Mary.

The Hispanic Goatsucker, 1975 to Present

Between February and March 1975, reports circulated in Puerto Rico of a mysterious creature attacking domestic and farm animals, draining their blood and scooping out chunks of their flesh. Residents claimed that they heard loud screeches and/or flapping wings coinciding with the attacks. Academics and police examined the carcasses, blaming everything from humans to snakes to vampire bats. Locals referred to the attacker as "The Vampire of Moca." This incident may have been spurred by the better known "cattle mutilation mystery" (Ellis 1996, 3). In November 1995, similar attacks were reported on the island. Called chupacabras or goatsucker, (named after a crepuscular bird that steals goat's milk), the bizarre being was described as a "bristly, bulge-eyed rat with the hind legs of a kangaroo, capable of escaping after its crimes in high speed sprints" (Preston 1996). It also exuded a sulfur-like stench. Stories described the bodies of animals disemboweled and drained of blood. One member of a Civil Defense team in a small city in the affected area says he spends half his time responding to chupacabras calls. Some people, he reported, have been so distraught "that they have had to be taken to the hospital" (Navarro 1996). Interest in the creature ran so high in May 1996 that a chupacabras Web site received enough hits to be ranked in the top 5 percent of all Web sites (Ellis 1996, 2). By March 1996, goatsucker stories had spread to Hispanic communities in Florida; by May, accounts of chupacabras attacks began to circulate in Mexico and soon after, to the Mexican-American community in Arizona. The chupacabras flap ended abruptly in mid-1996, and almost nothing has been reported on it since.

Indonesian Borneo, 1979

For several weeks in late 1979, a kidnapping rumor-panic suddenly broke out on the island of Borneo. Anthropologist Richard Drake was studying the Mualang peoples living on the Belitang Hulu River in Kalimantan Barat when the episode broke out (Drake 1989). Soon guards were posted around the village, rubber tapping ceased, and a local school closed for insufficient attendance. A variety of ordinarily mundane events (such as noises and rustling in the jungle) and circumstances were defined as kidnapper-related. The scare was triggered by rumors that the government was constructing a bridge in the region and needed a body to place in the foundation to strengthen it. The episode is related to periodic kidnapping and headhunter scares in the region dating back to the seventeenth century coinciding with real or rumored government construction projects and a local belief that such developments require a head or body to be laid in the foundation or on a special pillar nearby to make for an enduring structure (Forth 1991; Barnes 1993). Drake argues that such episodes reflect antagonistic tribal-state relations characterized by distrust and suspicion of a distant, central government.

West Bank, Jordan, 1983

Between March and April 1983, 947 mostly female residents of the Israeli-occupied Jordan West Bank reported various psychogenic symptoms: fainting, headache, abdominal pain, and dizziness (Modan et al., 1983). The episode was precipitated by poison gas rumors and a long-standing Palestinian mistrust of



Jews. The medical complaints appeared during a fifteen-day period, amid rumors and intense media publicity that poison gas was being sporadically targeted at Palestinians. The episode began in, and was predominantly confined to, schools in several adjacent villages. In one incident on March 27, sixty-four residents in Jenin were rushed for local medical care after believing that they had been poisoned when thick smoke belched from an apparently faulty exhaust system on a passing car. In all, 879 females were affected. Following negative medical tests, it became evident that no gassings had occurred, the hypothesis was discredited, and the transient symptoms rapidly ceased.

Mass Delusion by Proxy in Georgia, 1988

A rarely reported form of what could be described as mass delusion by proxy occurred at a Georgia elementary school near Atlanta in 1988. It involved the re-labelling of mundane symptoms that were instigated and maintained by erroneous beliefs among hypervigilant parents. The episode began during a routine social gathering of parents and students at the school cafeteria in early September. A student's mother commented that, ever since the term began, her child had experienced numerous minor health problems and looked pale. Other mothers at the meeting noted similar signs and symptoms in their children since the beginning of the school term: pallor, dark circles under the eyes, headaches, fatigue, nausea and occasional vomiting. They soon suspected that something in the school building was to blame, a view confirmed on October 11 when the school was evacuated after a minor natural gas leak occurred during routine maintenance. When intermittent minor gas leaks continued over the next month, concerned parents picketed the school and appealed to the local media, which highlighted their fears. After negative environmental and epidemiological studies, Philen et al. (1989) concluded that mothers had almost exclusively redefined common and everpresent childhood illnesses, while the children in question neither sought attention nor were overly concerned with their symptoms, maintaining high attendance levels throughout the term.

Kosovo, 1990

On March 14, 1990, at least four thousand residents in the Serbian province of Kosovo, in the former Yugoslavia, were struck down by a mystery illness that persisted for some three weeks. According to Dr. Zoran Radovanovic (1995), the head of the community medicine faculty at Kuwait University, the symptoms were psychogenic in nature and prompted by ethnic Albanian mistrust of Serbs. The transient complaints were almost exclusively confined to young adolescent ethnic Albanians, and included headache, dizziness, hyperventilation, weakness, burning sensations, cramps, chest pain, nausea, and dry mouth. The episode began at a high school in Podujevo, and rapidly spread to dozens of schools within the province. An outbreak of respiratory infection within a single class appears to have triggered fears that Serbs may have dispensed poison. Influential factors included rumors, the scrutinization of mundane odors and substances, visits by health authorities that served to legitimate fears, ethnic tension between Serbs and Albanians, and mass communication. The dramatic proliferation of cases across the province on March 22 coincided with the implementation of an emergency disaster plan whereby ethnic Albanians seized control of public health services.

Nigerian Genitalia Vanishing Epidemic of 1990

During 1990, an episode of "vanishing"



genitalia caused widespread fear across Nigeria. Native psychiatrist Sunny Ilechukwu (1992) said that most reports of attacks involved male victims. Accusations were usually triggered by incidental body contact with a stranger in a public place, after which the "victim" would feel strange scrotum sensations and grab their genitals to confirm that they were still there. Then they would confront the person as a crowd would gather, accusing them of being a genital thief, before stripping naked to convince bystanders that their penis was really missing. Many "victims" claimed that the penis had been returned once the alarm had been raised or that, although the penis was now back, "it was shrunken and so probably a 'wrong' one or just the ghost of a penis" (95). The accused was often threatened or beaten until the penis had been "fully restored," and in some instances, the accused was beaten to death. Ilechukwu (1992, 96) described the scene in one city:

Men could be seen in the streets of Lagos holding on to their genitalia either openly or discreetly with their hands in their pockets. Women were also seen holding on to their breasts directly or discreetly by crossing the hands across the chest. It was thought that inattention and a weak will facilitated the "taking" of the penis or breasts. Vigilance and anticipatory aggression were thought to be good prophylaxis.

Social and cultural traditions contributed to the outbreak as many Nigerian ethnic groups "ascribe high potency to the external genitalia as ritual and magical objects to promote fecundity or material prosperity to the unscrupulous" (Ilechukwu 1988, 313). The belief in vanishing genitalia was not only plausible but institutionalized; many influential Nigerians expressed outrage when police released suspected genital thieves. A Christian priest even claimed that a Bible passage where Jesus asked "Who touched me?" because the "power had gone out of him," referred to genital stealing (101-102).

Concluding Remarks

The next one thousand years will yield a new batch of social delusions and hysterical outbreaks that will reflect the hopes and fears of future generations. While it is not possible to know the exact nature of these episodes, we can confidently predict one of the first delusions of this period. For at the start of the second Christian millennium, we should be mindful that the millennial notion is itself a social delusion. The concept does not exist in nature but is a human creation—a product of history and circumstance. It has no significance beyond the meaning that humans attach to it. Yet, students of history know well that the consequences of beliefs can enormously influence the course of history.

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