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VIEWPOINT



Decolonising drug studies in an era of predatory accumulation

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ABSTRACT

The cultural and political-economic valences of psychoactive drugs in the Global South offer critical insights on local and international fault lines of social inequality and profiteering. Historically, in a classic primitive accumulation process the trafficking of industrially produced euphoric substances across the globe have wreaked havoc among vulnerable populations while extracting profit for the powerful. The complex flows of capital generated both by illegal addiction markets and also by the mobilisation of licit public funds to manage their mayhem, however, suggest the contemporary utility of the concept of ‘predatory accumulation’. The Enlightenment-era concept of ‘primitive accumulation’ usefully highlighted state violence and forcible dispossession in the consolidation of European capitalism. A contemporary reframing of these processes as predatory accumulation, however, highlights contradictory, nonlinear relationships between the artificially high profits of illegal drug sales, repressive governmentality and corporate greed. It sets these patterns of destructive profiteering in the context of our moment in history.

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The powerful pharmacological characteristics of psychoactive drugs mobilise culturally constructed meanings that are shaped by even more explosive political-economic forces. This makes studying industrially produced and illegally marketed mind-altering drugs incredibly challenging, interesting and important if we are to comprehend the stakes of our contemporary globalised era of devastating narcotics profiteering. The complexity of the pharmacological/cultural/political-economic mesh may also explain why we understand so little about drugs despite their powerful effect on shaping inequality, cultural conflict and the omnipotence of capitalism across the world.

As historians of colonialism and globalisation have repeatedly documented (often only from the margins of their discipline), ever since the rise of merchant capitalism and the expansion of European colonial conquest, the trafficking of industrially produced pleasurable substances has often wreaked havoc. It also created the modern phenomenon of ‘addiction’ among vulnerable populations across the globe.¹ Arguably the course of these wide-ranging regional and micro-local ‘epidemics’ represent canary-in-the-mine bellwethers that can help

us identify the fault lines of suffering both within a society, a city or a rural village, and across continental divides. They expose the violent contradictions of power, social inequality, vulnerability and resistance both within local communities and across large-scale social formations.

If one approaches illegal drugs and their use – or abuse – empathetically with a strong dose of anthropology’s hermeneutic of ‘cultural relativism’, they are also capable of revealing – or rather grasping at – a tantalising, but hard-to-define, glimpse of human strivings for utopian dreams and social solidarity, even as they expose us to the brutal reality of the vicious depths of human greed and self-interested cynicism. Repeated historic attempts to experiment with, as well as to repress, drugs demonstrate the fraught potentials of human creativity and dogmatic normativising intolerance. Similarly, contradictorily, a close documentation of epidemics is simultaneously capable of evoking both a faith in the human universal search for dreams or happiness, and a confirmation of the symbolic ideological violence of individual agency and self-control that justifies repression and victim-blaming.

On an embodied level, ‘narcotic’ drugs – whatever ‘narcotic’ really means, aside from being judged illegal and immoral by state authorities² – are simultaneously capable of relieving and producing physical/psychic pain, anxiety and depression. They promote dialectics of social generosity and cruel, self-interested greed – creativity and stupor, as well as revolt and domestication. As this collection of articles on drugs in the Global South demonstrates, the effects and trajectories of drugs on individuals and societies often appear exceedingly familiar, but simultaneously prove themselves to be shockingly socially labile or mysterious. In distinct settings and moments of history, they have alternatively been objectively harmless, essentially irrelevant, ecstatically fun or brutally destructive and cruelly manipulable.

The intellectual poverty of public health-dominated drug studies

Unfortunately, most of the well-funded researchers who have studied mind-altering psychoactive illicit drugs over the past half century have been concentrated in public health, which is the only major academic discipline to have a large, thriving subfield devoted to their study, currently referred to – somewhat politically correctly and moralistically – as ‘substance-use-disorder prevention research.’³ This research is disproportionately funded by the US government through its multiple National Institutes of Health – especially the Institutes on ‘Drug Abuse’, (NIDA), ‘Alcohol Abuse’ (NIAA) and ‘Mental Health’ (NIMH). Behavioural psychologists dominate the field of public health, and this young, insecure and largely soft-money-funded discipline tends to mimic, for its survival and legitimacy, the rigour of quantitative methods and the technical determinism of the laboratory sciences.⁴ The lion’s share of the funding targets applied solutions to complex social problems through the prolonged scientific Rorschach of the human genome or through massive investment in often for-profit random-controlled trials that test magic-bullet pharmacological antagonist synapse blocks to the brain’s pleasure receptors, or through individual-level psychological therapeutic interventions administered in a socially decontextualised vacuum.

‘Harm reduction’ has managed to establish a liberal hegemony over the applied topic of substance abuse and HIV prevention, but this approach, which thinks of itself as being non-judgmental and strives to meet users on their own terms to reduce chronic suffering, is, in fact, a jumble of inconsistent contradictions. It is dominated by biomedicine’s hyper-sanitary population-level gaze and, despite its good intentions, often morphs into a pathologising

left hand of the state inadvertently at the service of social control. Harm reduction is also subject to the blinders of public health's narrowly conceptualised middle-class fantasy world that celebrates individual agency and normativity in an unrealistic social power vacuum. It is hegemonized by a naïve conviction that democratic access to 'objective knowledge' will drive conscious individual behaviour change, one person at a time, on a population level. Harm reduction represents an almost textbook case of a classic mechanism of governmentality, illustrating Foucault's⁵ passive/aggressive conception of the quasi-omnipotence of 'biopower' as a 'positive' discourse in the 'knowledge/power apparatus'. It saves life while stripping human subjectivity of its capacity for autonomous creativity in the name of civilisation and responsible modernisation. As Ghiabi's⁶ provocative ethnographic deconstruction of repression and compassion in Iran's national policies towards drug control, in this special issue, illustrates, harm reduction travels problematically. It is a slippery, culturally constituted, humanitarian scientific approach buffeted by overlapping contradictory ideological, religious and secular values that congeal in the all-too-practical state priorities of managing social crisis and maintaining control of unruly non-normative populations. Harm reduction everywhere – not just the notably contradictory case of Iran – is capable of melding scientific therapeutic efficiency and empathetic ethical tolerance with ideological righteousness and even brutal repression, despite simultaneously quasi-politically carving out temporarily semi-safe shared public spaces⁷ for vulnerable populations.

The prohibitionist imperial power stigma of drug use

The ebbs and flows of regional, global and local tastes and preferences for specific drugs repeatedly catch us by surprise even when they are simply repeating forgotten patterns that may have occurred only two, three or four generations earlier. Drug-use fashions almost inevitably generate moral panics and predictably mobilise nationalist xenophobic, messianic and socio-biological racist discourses even though the epidemics will be ultimately tamed or will simply burn out by themselves and fade away. To be fair, anyone who has experienced on an embodied level the mystery of 'addiction', whether personally through uncontrollable emotional cravings or manic ecstatic/soothing epiphanies followed by torturous withdrawals, or through the loss of a family member or loved one, knows how seriously one has to take the pharmacological power of drug effects. Unfortunately, the socio-cultural and political-economic 'determinants' of drug effects are much harder to see. When one does ethnographic work in settings dominated by drug trafficking and drug use, the everyday emergency and high stakes of money, violence and damaged health can overwhelm one's capacity for the larger, longer term perspective offered by Rodgers'⁸ analysis in this issue of life history outcomes in a formerly crack- and gang-ridden, barrio in Managua, Nicaragua.

The poverty in academic, policy and popular thinking about drugs and the underdevelopment of theory in much of the academic literature probably have something to do with the stigma that surrounds drug use. It may, more politically, be the historical effect of the unevenly and hypocritically enforced long-term prohibitionist global era whereby the most imperially powerful nations have fitfully attempted to criminalise or contain psychoactive drug use, even as they have also been the protagonists in promoting industrial drug trafficking over the past two centuries in their ongoing internecine struggles for global dominance of foreign markets, territories and natural resources. The United States, not surprisingly, has for well over a century been the leading hypocritical gendarme of prohibitionist drug

policies. US officials have repeatedly intervened directly in the internal sovereign public policy affairs of countries, as Campos⁹ documents in this issue with his 1940 case study of the US government's sabotage of Mexico's attempts to medicalise and decriminalise illegal use of drugs to diminish their harmful effects. Simultaneously, the United States throughout the Cold War and continuing now through the War on Terror-for-Oil has repeatedly fomented, or at least tolerated, industrial-level cultivation and processing and it even sometimes facilitated the consolidation of mafioso/cartel/paramilitary/gang organisations that have promoted the trafficking of drugs – especially heroin and cocaine – in order to finance counterinsurgency guerilla fighters serving US interests across the globe. This has been most dramatically well documented in South-east Asia during the Vietnam War¹⁰ and in Central America during the revolutionary decade of the 1980s.¹¹ Historians, political scientists, anthropologists and investigative journalists have repeatedly documented these cynical imperial state power plays, but their scientific or journalistic muck-raking publications tend to be treated as bizarre, ultra-leftist conspiracy theories simply because they document outrageous political excesses and unethical interventions. Their inconvenient facts tend to be 'doxically'¹² swept under the rug of historical memory.

The critical theoretical potential of drug studies

From a safer theoretical distance, *longue durée* historians of globalisation, and occasional anthropologists in indigenous settings have provocatively suggested that the human appetite for altered states of consciousness has been a driving force for exploratory travel, international trade, conquest, colonialism and imperialism.¹³ Anthropologists working in more 'traditional' stateless societies have repeatedly documented the centrality of psychoactive drug use in rituals buttressing social cohesion, personal and community health, and age-graded socialisation processes and hierarchies.¹⁴ Again, it is the industrial production and trafficking of psychoactive substances – including alcohol, of course – that most disrupts a society's ability to harness psychoactive drug use. This has been occurring unevenly all across the world with the expansion of the market demand for psychoactive drugs among vulnerable lumpenised populations. In fact, a review of the literature documenting the hyper-profitable traffic in psychoactive substances that has accompanied most cultural, economic and military contact throughout history suggests that drugs and alcohol have been a crucial component of Marx's¹⁵ somewhat ambiguous and polemical concept that he ambivalently referred to as 'so-called primitive accumulation'. The flooding of industrially processed drugs and alcohol into vulnerable non-capitalist social formations violently unleashed the market demand along with the labour force willing to work for wages. It facilitated dispossession from land and natural resources, enabling the consolidation of the transition from merchant agricultural to industrial capitalism. Arguably, drugs have become even more crucial for extending our current transition to a high-tech-, digital- and finance-driven neoliberal version of predatory speculative and, ironically, state-subsidised, corporate capitalism.

This special issue, with its broad spectrum of social science and historical approaches to the topic of illegal psychoactive drugs in the Global South which explore the lessons that can be learned from a decolonising emphasis, highlights the exciting power of interdisciplinary international comparative case studies, but also brings home how little we actually know. Methodologically, the papers draw from a combination of ethnographic methods (Carrier, Ghiabi, Passos, Rodgers, Seward), social historical and diplomatic archival excavation

(Campos, Ghiabi, Mansfield, Mills, Windle) and voluminous grey and popular press literature documentation (Carrier, Ghiabi, Passos, Windle). The critical insights of social scientist drug researchers and the unorthodox combination of qualitative and grey literature documentation, however, tends to be relegated to the margins of both academic and public policy discourse. It is no coincidence, for example, that a disproportionate number of the authors in this special issue – including me – are located within awkward or opportunistic and fragile interstitial academic research, policy and applied biomedical settings. Hopefully, following Bourdieu's¹⁶ critique of academic orthodoxy or Foucault's – again passive/aggressive – celebration of the 'specific intellectual',¹⁷ the collective cross-fertilisation of our marginal academic locations may facilitate critical, heterodox insights on misrecognised processes of social inequality and coercive normativity. The papers also provocatively reveal the limits of our ability to document taboo facts on the ground, as well as our analytical understandings of the distinct commonalities and disjunctions of the effects of drugs across distinct geographical and historical settings. They challenge us to push our field forward further. There are clearly some dramatic regional/continental patterns as suggested by the strong contingent of individual case studies in this issue, from Latin America (Campos, Passos, Rodgers, Seward) and the Middle East/Central Asia (Ghiabi, Mansfield, Robins) as well as the more synthetic solo articles on South-east Asia (Windle) and sub-Saharan Africa (Carrier), supplemented by a detailed social history and decolonising historical case study of the South Asian demand for industrially produced cocaine in the early twentieth century (Mills). Pointedly, there are, however, just as many dramatic local regional discontinuities; hence the issue's topical rather than more traditional geographical or historical organisation. The challenge for us is to raise even more ambitious critical questions around what new perspectives on illegal psychoactive drugs in the Global South can reveal about our moment in history – or dare I say the essences of human ways of being in the world, as Ghiabi writes in his introduction to this special issue.

Predatory accumulation across the Americas

My participant-observation anthropological (and my more technocratic 'specific-intellectual' applied public health) work on drugs has all been in the Americas at the retail endpoint of the multi-billion dollar cross-continental narcotics industry primarily in what I call the Puerto Rican–US inner city colonial diaspora,¹⁸ as well as in multi-ethnic homeless shooting encampments stranded in vacant lots or under urban freeways.¹⁹ Having spent so much of my life befriending often-violent sellers and street-based injectors and abusers and users of heroin, cocaine and fortified liquor in US inner cities, I may be overrating the importance of illegal narcotics, but I think they represent an extreme version of a more widespread pattern of 'predatory accumulation' that has increasingly shaped the global economy since the 1980s, when the right-wing populist politicians Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher rose to power in the United States and England and aggressively instituted the neoliberal policies that have dramatically increased social inequality and augmented corporate power both locally and cross-continentially.²⁰

In an effort to make sense of and lay blame for the attraction, destructiveness and enduring mesmerising power of drugs among the most vulnerable poor, I am revisiting Marx's 200-year-old concepts of 'lumpen [populations]'²¹ and 'primitive accumulation'²² to adapt them to our unfortunate historical era. This helps me explain the economically irrational

brutality of the US state's response to the human collateral fallout from the rising rates of unemployment, racist segregation and economic inequality that its prohibitionist and neo-liberal policies have propagated. This predatory era has been especially violent, innovative and transformative across the Americas, generating tremendous levels of human suffering among displaced peasants and vulnerable shantytown dwellers as well as humongous profits for oligarchs, multi-national corporations and lumpen drug dons.²³ The profitable illegality of narcotic drugs has also spawned flexibly adaptive de-territorialised networks of organised crime. Drug cartels have been capable of establishing vertical monopolies over the cultivation, production and marketing of psychoactive drugs. Ironically, following the licit economy's notoriously undercapitalised export platform maquiladora factory logistics that proliferated across the Global South outside of sovereign state control since the US pioneered the model during the Korean War in its Caribbean colony of Puerto Rico,²⁴ the illicit economy is producing heroin, cocaine, crystal methamphetamine and synthetic opioids primarily for US and European consumption. Narcotics laboratories hidden in remote jungle and desert settings thrive across the Global South and increasingly the Global East precisely because these regions suffer from inadequate public- and private-sector investment and from corrupt legal infrastructures. Ironically, this innovative 'post-colonial' mode of predatory production of a handful of globally illicit agricultural consumption items – heroin from poppies and cocaine from coca leaves²⁵ – has inverted the directionality of the abusive Global South-to-North terms of unfavourable trade and capital flows for export agricultural products that have historically favoured the more industrialised Global North.

The illicit predatory economy

Contemporary addiction markets for illegal psychoactive drugs arguably, at first sight, represent a more classic example of a primitive accumulation industry. The hyper-profitability of exporting laboratory-processed pure heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and synthetic opioids requires the artificial regional advantages of coercive state policies of illegality and public-sector dysfunctionality in select countries of both the Global North and South. They also produce ever-larger reservoirs of lumpenised populations across the world. The narcotics industry is not capable of reproducing itself through licit productive processes of stable, exploitative surplus-labour extraction through legal mechanisms. Instead, these addiction markets have to rely on brute force to administer themselves and extract their monopoly profits. In an abusive form of lumpen accumulation, they routinely kill off or maim a large proportion of their customers and most of their entry-level labour force – including their administrators. Contradictorily, however, contra Marx's insightful analysis of how colonialism and the slave trade spawned Europe's transition from mercantile to industrial capitalism, and contra Rosa Luxemburg's²⁶ critique of industrial capitalism's need to expand markets through imperial conquest, the destructive global trade in narcotics has been able to capitalise the hitherto unusable labour of increasingly lumpenised populations expelled from the licit economy in both the Global North and South. Again, piggy-backing on global financialisation and flexible maquila export-platform production techniques, they hitch-hike rides on the transport routes of shipping containers, commercial airplanes, speedboats, light aircraft, digital bank transfers, tax shelter schemes and – presumably in the future – drones. Ironically, they have managed to re-energise the market consumption power of the younger generations who lost their footing in the post-industrial labour force of the North even as

they maim or kill off that generation. They innovatively produce cyclically changing menus of psychoactive products – ‘speed’, ‘dope’, ‘crack’, ‘weed’ – that creates a profitable inelastic compulsively fetishistic demand for their exports. The only subsidy they require from the state is that these products remain illegal; otherwise their profits would plummet to the levels of coffee, sugar, tea and tobacco commodity exports.

International banks and financial service companies – generally the same ones that cater to dictators and Mafioso-style racketeers – have been laundering the dirty dollars that US addicts spend on illicit agricultural and synthetic products, channelling them southward since at least the 1980s. A substantial amount of that illicit cash has been reinvested productively in the licit economy – especially in Colombia and Mexico – in a more classic productive process of primitive accumulation. In fact, even relatively minor, sideshow transshipment territories such as the Dominican Republic have cashed in productively on the global narcotics industry. Agricultural rural and informal urban shantytown economies have been unevenly capitalised by remittances from the criminal diaspora. Dirt-poor peasant villages in the Dominican Republic, in the remote provinces of Northern Mexico, and even in the indigenous Miskitu territories of Honduras and Nicaragua, have sprouted brand new multi-story cement houses, cell phone towers and clandestine airport runways. Almost half a dozen Caribbean island nations and, not coincidentally, most of the still-really-existing colonies from the trans-Atlantic slave trade era – especially the British Virgin Islands, Aruba, Cayman Islands, Curacao and Sint Maarten – have morphed into mini-outlaw finance service economies that launder cash from international narcotics sellers and assorted racketeers.²⁷

Southward narco-capital flows to Latin America from the Global North, however, come at a tremendously destructive cost of corruption and paramilitarisation. Most Latin American countries – with the exception of Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil – were too poor to become endpoint markets for smugglers. By the late 1990s, however, a multitude of new internal domestic addiction markets had exploded throughout Latin American countries – especially Central America and the Caribbean. This explosion in local narcotics consumption – cocaine rather than heroin – in so many large and small cities, as well as remote rural villages of Central America, the Caribbean and northern Mexico, is simply the geographical accident of a few crumbs of the much larger narcotics trade spilling over en route before they reach their more-profitable final destination in the United States. To lower production and transport costs, the cartels pay local processors and smugglers at transit points in-kind with a small sample of the product they are producing or transporting rather than in cash. These local subcontractors then take it upon themselves to violently flood their impoverished villages with cheap cocaine products in the form of crack (‘roca’, ‘piedra’, ‘patraseado’) or even more toxic precursor substances from the cocaine production process (‘basuco’ in Colombia, ‘paco’ in Argentina, ‘base’ in Ecuador) to convert their in-kind payments into cash.

Again, in a pattern consistent with colonial-era primitive accumulation dynamics, the diffusion of these addiction markets to exceptionally remote locations and vulnerable populations in Latin America has been the product of the ratcheting up of state coercion and legal repression generated by the escalation of the US wars on terror and drugs. Traffickers responded to the intensified monitoring of US airspace after 9/11 by multiplying short-legged international transport layovers along diversified airborne, overland, underground and aquatic routes. This proliferation of transshipment points diversified and expanded local tributary markets that became incubators for interpersonal and gang violence. Firearm

imports flow along narcotics export routes, and the rising demand for heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and marijuana in North America, as well as the US government's dogged commitment to domestic repressive prohibition drug policies and weak gun control laws, have skyrocketed the rates of firearm murder across much of Latin America and the Caribbean since the 1990s.²⁸ During the 2000s, seven Latin American countries had the highest per-capita rates of 'peace-time homicide' in the world. Seventeen Latin American countries found themselves in the ignominious United Nations tally of the 20 most murderous states on Earth in the 2010s.²⁹

Contra the more classic trajectory of primitive accumulation that channels violently expropriated subsistence and communal resources into the productive licit private market economy, the easy undocumented cash of illegal narcotics distorts national patterns of economic development in producer nations.³⁰ It curtails investment in human capital and stymies opportunities for employment in more diversified economic sectors that are not linked to the easy money of narcotics production. Again, I find it more useful to conceive of it as 'predatory accumulation' whereby disjointed economies, dependent on an exceptionally profitable extractive resource like oil or diamonds, lumpenise disproportionately large sectors of their populations, and administer themselves through violence rather than market forces. The influx of US addiction-dollars also distorts the consumption patterns of narco-elites. They squander their cash on the conspicuous consumption of fetishised foreign import luxuries, reversing the southward flow of the capital they manage to capture at such a high human cost. More importantly, the Southward flood of narcotics cash corrupts politicians and spawns warlord-controlled fiefdoms. Entire nations morph into narco-states, institutionalising the interface between the state and organised crime. Impunity becomes routinised, thriving off of incompetent administrative bureaucracies that fail to deliver services to the licit economy. In the most affected nations (Honduras, Guatemala and large regions of Mexico in the 2000s–2010s), the justice apparatus and some of the highest executive politicians and ministers can be bought for an insignificant fraction of the narco-dollars accumulated by nouveau-riche local drug bosses. This, in turn, spawns further investment in hyper-profitable extractive illegal natural resource depredation – especially mining and rainforest clear-cut lumbering – initiating new cycles of ongoing predatory accumulation that destroys the environment and dispossesses indigenous populations. The only requirement is that the state be weak, cheap and illegitimate.

Licit predatory economies and special interest groups inside the US

Ancillary predatory licit special interest groups and micro-industries have also exploded at the impoverished retail endpoints of the global narcotics industry in the US inner city, where the premature die-out and incarceration of an ever-larger and younger generation of licitly unemployable addicts is occurring. Most street-corner drug lords do not have the legal cultural capital to operate outside their impoverished ghettoized neighbourhoods, and the minimal amount of illicitly generated capital they begin to accumulate becomes visible and is often channelled back into the mainstream licit economy through criminal justice fines, civil forfeiture asset seizure laws and rapacious lawyers. The size of this legal syphoning of capital out of the illegal narcotics markets is massively augmented by the mobilization of a completely licit taxpayer-financed public subsidy of punitive and therapeutic service providers to manage the victims of predatory accumulation.

The punitive right hand of the US states' almost fivefold increase of its incarcerated population between 1980 and 2010³¹ has exploded public budgets for law enforcement, criminal justice and medical emergency.³² This gold rush of public tax dollar subsidies for the administration of punishment bloats the unionised overtime pay of police officers and prison guards, inflates the salaries of lawyers and judges and multiplies the lucrative contracts available to ancillary correctional administration industries and construction firms. As a police officer quipped to me, 'The War on Drugs put my daughter through college'; and a lawyer acknowledged, 'Zero tolerance [police enforcement] pays my mortgage'. Civil-asset-forfeiture mechanisms and court fees and fines are the most blatant and purposeful mechanism for extracting visible capital from inner-city drug markets. They enable the legal expropriation of both legally and illegally generated accumulations of capital and property so long as the funds or property are reinvested in law enforcement.

The politically weakened left hand of the state also, largely unwittingly, participates in this predatory accumulation that mobilises taxpayer resources off of the destruction of lumpenised populations. Massive amounts of tax dollars are transferred to clinicians and social service providers through the allocation of physician-mediated disability subsidies.³³ Even well-intentioned criminal justice alternatives to incarceration such as the expansion of court-mandated drug and mental health treatment become cash cows for a slew of private for-profit and non-profit social service agencies.

The profitable mesh of poverty, unemployment, racism, hyper-incarceration and plentifully accessible drugs in the US inner city is by no means monolithic or conscious of itself. For the most part, it is inadvertent and opportunistic. This does not mean, however, that specific special interest groups are not conscious of their self-interests. Notably, the stock value of the private, for-profit corrections corporations was the first to skyrocket the day after the right-wing billionaire Donald Trump unexpectedly won the US presidential elections on 7 November 2016. A generation earlier, the prison guard union took advantage of Reagan's opportunistically punitive right-wing charisma and, by the mid-1980s, had already become the second largest political lobby in the state of California. It pushed that state to pioneer the nation's enactment of draconian zero-tolerance drug laws. California led the United States with the fastest rise in incarceration rates of any state for almost two decades, setting the model for the historical phenomenon of mass incarceration – or, more precisely, the 'hyper-incarceration' of poor African Americans and Latinos.³⁴

The licit pharmaceutical multinational corporations arguably represent the deadliest special interest addiction micro-industry. The producers of cold remedies lobbied politicians to allow them to maintain pseudoephedrine (a precursor for methamphetamine) in their multi-billion dollar over-the-counter products for colds, and spawned the rural speed epidemic of the late 1990s and early 2000s.³⁵ Simultaneously, the licit pharmaceutical producers of prescription pain pills initiated a long-term propaganda campaign putting scientists and government bureaucrats on their payroll. They managed to persuade medical associations across the United States to declare pain to be the 'fifth vital sign'. Researchers publishing in the most prestigious US medical journals sloppily began citing a 101-word-long letter to the editor about low rates of substance abuse disorder among terminally hospitalised cancer patients as definitive, scientific proof that 'opioid therapy rarely resulted in addiction.'³⁶ Pharmaceutical companies deployed an army of marketeers and lobbyists to knock on doors inside hospitals and US Congress. Pathetically, US doctors were boondoggled into massively overprescribing opioid pills.³⁷

Purdue Pharma spearheaded this national opioid orgy timing it to coincide with the release of its newly patented OxyContin pill in 1996.³⁸ Purdue even managed to infiltrate the bureaucracy of the Federal Drug Administration (FDA), the US government agency responsible for testing drug safety and efficacy, and arranged for an official, Dr Curtis Wright, to officially declare OxyContin 'safer than rival painkillers.' In fact, however, Purdue scientists had pharmacologically engineered OxyContin's high-dosage time-release formula to increase the potential for consumers to develop a compulsive craving for opiates.³⁹

The explosion of the national opioid pill addiction epidemic from the mid-1990s through the late 2010s adroitly tapped into public-sector subsidies for health insurance for retired and disabled people as well as into the market for legally insured – primarily white – unionised blue-collar public- and private-sector workers. A disproportionately high number of the legally employed – primarily white – consumers of these initially medically prescribed pills lost their footing in the legal labour market once they became physically addicted, creating a nefarious – but again completely unintended – feedback loop of additional disposable consumer demand for illegal heroin. It also created a niche market for discounted counterfeit synthetic opioid pills made from fentanyl powder produced and marketed by diversified Chinese and Mexican cartels. US heroin and opioid pill overdose mortalities skyrocketed to record levels in the second half of the 2010s.

Ironically, since the 2000s, some of the processing and marketing cartels – especially in Mexico, China and Colombia – have increasingly proved themselves capable of out-competing the traditional licit industrial behemoth of pharmaceutical multi-national corporations headquartered for the past century in Europe and the United States. This first occurred when Mexican cartels began importing precursor chemicals from China to produce crystal methamphetamine for the US market, shortly after 2006 when the US politicians were finally forced by a muckraking press to oblige the licit pharmaceutical corporations to remove pseudoephedrine (a precursor for methamphetamine) from over-the-counter cold remedies.⁴⁰ In the early 2010s, these flexibly morphing cartels took advantage of the market demand created by the Big Pharma opioid producers to synthesise much more deadly and innovative clandestine laboratory-produced fentanyl and fentanyl-related opioid compounds.

Big Pharma's and organised crime's predatory accumulation through addiction markets pale in comparison to the cynical and purposeful manipulation of the compulsive qualities of the licitly industrially marketed products created by 'Big Tobacco' and 'Big Food'. Both those industries hired scientists to carefully maximise the addictive appeal of their products. The industrial food industry titrated relative contents of sugar, fat, salt, textural composition and colour to over-stimulate pleasurable taste receptors, thereby setting off a global obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease epidemic. The fake science of the US-based tobacco companies is legion,⁴¹ but the cynicism and racism of the production and marketing of menthol cigarettes is less well known. Mentholated cigarettes pharmacologically increase the psychoactive release and intensity of delivery of nicotine to the brain's synapses because of menthol's affinity to the nicotinic receptors when it is combusted. Furthermore, they targeted these mentholated products to African American youth – concentrating billboard advertisements around segregated high schools. As a result, African American men have the highest rates of death from lung cancer of any group in the United States. This racist targeted marketing to vulnerable youth, however, is minor compared to their subsequent investment in massifying the distribution of cheap industrially packaged cigarettes to the

much larger Chinese and African international markets that are creating huge future die-outs from lung disease.⁴² Similarly, the Big Pharma opioid producers are seeking out new global markets in the face of the US backlash against the rising overdose rates they caused.⁴³ These diverse corporate predatory lumpenised accumulation processes operate all over the world, but they tend to pioneer them in the United States. Their brutal macro-level effect can already be measured epidemiologically by the ‘mystery’ of the historic reversal of modern secular demographic trends in life expectancy since 1997⁴⁴ among poor whites in the United States. Maybe we are nearing the end of the post-enlightenment era of biopower.

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Note on Contributor

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Notes

1. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit*; Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise*.
2. Bourgois, “Disciplining Addictions.”
3. National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), “Drugs, Brains, and Behavior,” 5.
4. Porter, *Trust in Numbers?*
5. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.
6. Ghiabi, “Maintaining Disorder.”
7. Zigon, “An Ethics of Dwelling.”
8. Rodgers, “Drug Booms and Busts.”
9. Campos, “A Diplomatic Failure.”
10. McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*.
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