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## Commentary

# Drugs, the democratic civilising process and the consumer society

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### Introduction

Drug use is generally perceived in terms of a fatal trinity of addiction, poverty and crime. Poverty (or alternatively, a troubled personal life) is seen as the main cause of the bad habit; and addiction (or other psychiatric disturbances) and crime are the conditions the unlucky user will invariably find him - or herself in. More nuanced approaches to the phenomenon do exist, but it fair to say that even in scientific studies drug use is most often treated as a problem - social, psychological, medical or legal.

In the present article I will address the question of why drug use became an important phenomenon in the Western world and remained so. I will argue that existing sociological models that have been used to grasp other cultural pursuits that are accepted as 'normal' and not as intrinsically 'problematic' can be fruitfully applied to understanding drugs. Two approaches will be discussed, namely that of Norbert Elias' concept of the 'civilising process' (Elias, 1994) and the idea of 'consumer society'.

### Drugs and the 'civilising process'

The history of drugs is as old as the history of humanity. During the 19th and 20th centuries Western colonial and commercial expansion and Western chemical industries turned them into a more or less globally integrated phenomenon of production, transport and trade. From the late 19th century there existed a consumer market for recreational cocaine and opiates among the dominant, white community of the West. But during the first half of the 20th century drug-taking (other than of alcohol, tobacco and so on) in the Western world tended to focus in ethnic minorities. However, the 'cultural revolution' of the 1960s changed the situation. Together with pop and rock music the children of the dominant ethnic

community discovered drugs - initially mainly cannabis, LSD and amphetamines. Drugs became an established, though not accepted, part of Western culture. Subsequently other drugs came into wide use such as heroin, cocaine and ecstasy.

The counterculture of the 1960s, of which drugs formed an important part, took a generally suspicious attitude towards the values of labour and rational order. Relaxation, love and direct human contact were valued.

Drug-taking in the Western world has always been connected with popular music. Drugs have often 'travelled' together with it, an early case being cannabis moving from the black jazz scene in the Harlem of the 1950s, through white *bohémien* poets and writers, to the new world of pop music of the 1960s (Sloman, 1998). The story of ecstasy and 'house' music is another example. Drugs form part of a subculture which has the party and 'having a good time' as its axis. Whether one considers it a harmful form of escapism or healthy distraction is immaterial in the sense that 'Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll' forms a subculture of leisure.

This brings me to my first observations. In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias analysed the gradual downward spread of the absolutist-court *civilité* through society at large. As ever stricter self-control was expected of people, manners became progressively more 'refined'. Over a wide field our 'animal' side was withdrawn from the public view. In the 19th century the industrial bourgeoisie continued the good work in the name of decency and labour discipline, finally resulting in Victorian society. Elias observed a 'certain relaxation' in the controls over natural functions during the 20th century. He mentioned as examples new bathing habits and dancing, the spread of sports, hiking and travel, the

early separation of young people from the family, and looser sexual *mores* (Elias, 1994, pp. 111, 115, 136, 153, 166, 517518). After Elias' days this process has continued with the explosive spread of emotionally charged and less 'refined' cultural forms. Mass sports events, open sexuality and popular music-festivals are cases in point.

Bauman (1982) (pp. 3851, 17984) accepts Foucault's analysis of modernisation as increasing disciplining powers, social control and surveillance over the individual. From the 17th century onwards popular cultural autonomy was suppressed in the name of reason. But in the 20th century there is a tendency for state repression to partly recede and to be replaced by a seductive power strategy through the offering of consumer goods. Bauman refers to the change as a 'decivilising process', rehabilitating the passions, self-indulgence and entertainment. (see also: Varcoe & Kilminster, 1996).

Elias himself did not feel the general direction of the civilising process was affected, though. It was only a 'very slight recession'. For example, discussing the new female bathing costumes, he recognises that they would have produced social ostracism in the 19th century. But women could only wear them under the condition that a 'very high standard of drive control' was preserved. Only if each individual remains 'curbed by self-control and a strict code of etiquette, can bathing and sporting customs having this relative degree of freedom develop.' The 'relaxation' remains 'within the framework of a particular "civilised" standard of behaviour' (Elias, 1994, p. 153; see also: p. 115).

This argument has a certain contrivedness about it. Women will only allow themselves to be observed partly uncovered when they know that men have learned enough self-control not to harass them. The achievements of the 'civilising process' remain the precondition for any subsequent relaxation. But one cannot argue away the real dialectic in this development. Whatever the self-control on the part of men, the fact remains that less self-control is demanded of women in their clothing. The preservation of self-control in one aspect does not make the reduction in another any less real.

According to Elias, by and large the 'lower strata, the oppressed and poorer outsider groups' tend to 'follow their drives and affects more directly and more spontaneously'. Their conduct is less strictly regulated than that of the upper strata (Elias, 1994, p.

460). In view of the fact that the 20th century has seen the breakthrough of democracy, we might elegantly explain changes of 'direction' in the civilising process - towards fewer restrictions on the showing of bodily needs and emotions - as a cultural concomitant of democratisation.

Cas Wouters argues that, with the growing social weight of the lower classes, during the past century their looser and more informal manners were indeed assimilated by society as a whole. Yet, he too holds that the relaxation of sexual and other rules constitutes no reversal of the direction of the civilising process. The relaxation of standards demands an *increase* in self-control, so as to avoid social breakdown. The feeling that it counts very much how to behave at social events, for instance at parties, is as strong as ever (Wouters, 1990, p.47). However, though increasing informality presupposes a higher degree of self-control, it does also imply almost tautologically that *less* self-control is demanded. With the breakdown of etiquette, visitors to discotheques must nowadays think harder than before about how to behave. They must more strictly 'control' themselves. But there is no question that dancing to 'house' music does not even approach the old ballroom dances in terms of fixed rules of movement. In that sense less self-control is demanded than before.

The paradox of the civilising process, captured by the term 'controlled de-control of the emotions' (see: Featherstone, 1998, p. 59), is that ever increasing self-control psychologically calls for *and allows* partial de-control; whereas that very de-control again calls for stricter self-control in order not to let the process get out of hand. As a result, democratic culture polarises itself in bizarre and unpredictable patterns of increasing and decreasing controls. The continuing disciplining processes in the democracies and the increasingly libidinous and playfully-violent nature of democratic culture, highlight two sides of the same medal. In this context the expansion of drug use in the Western world can be explained as a product of the 20th century process of democratisation of culture with its partial rehabilitation of the affects and the body in the public sphere.

### **Drugs and 'consumer society'**

Drug use can, furthermore, be analysed in the context of the so-called 'consumer society', to be understood as a society in which people's lives are for an important part determined by their consumption

activities. Relevant characteristics are, among others: rising affluence, falling working hours and more time for leisure pursuits, and the fact that consumption is no longer seen exclusively or mainly in utilitarian terms, but that people find and express their identity in specific patterns of consumption (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1994, pp. 8384).

One of the first texts included in Martyn Lee's *The Consumer Society Reader*, is from Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. The author explains that in many societies 'wasteful', conspicuous consumption is the mark of a life of leisure. The consumption of purely recreational goods expresses blissful disdain for productive labour. For Veblen the consumption of luxuries is the 'mark of the master'; but under the condition of widespread affluence and leisure it could become part of the psychology of large sections of society, which returns us to present-day Western society. The essay contains the following passage:

"The ceremonial differentiation of the dietary is best seen in the use of intoxicating beverages and narcotics. [...] Drunkenness and the other pathological consequences of the free use of stimulants, therefore, tend in their turn to become honorific, as being a mark [...] of the superior status of those who are able to afford the indulgence" (Lee, 2000, pp. 3233).

This mention of 'narcotics' is the only occasion when drugs are treated in this reader. Veblen wrote in 1899, at a time when opiates and cocaine were still largely not subject to legal control. It was only natural for him to treat them in one breath with alcoholic beverages. According to Jaap van der Stel, the main difference between alcoholic beverages and the illegal drugs is that the former are not only used for their psychoactive effect but also as a drink or to slake our thirst. The other drugs are consumed purely as psychotropic substances. This explains the difference in legal treatment between the respective substances (van der Stel, 1999, p. 16).

Though this duality is somewhat simplified, it is a fact that not only alcohol but also coffee and tea slake our thirst. All three have a *taste*. In a rudimentary way, the latter even holds true for tobacco, which is taken for its stimulating properties but also for its taste (or smell). In contrast, the illegal drugs either have no taste at all, as in the case of pills or injected material, or the taste or smell (as in the case of sniffed material or smoked opium and cannabis) is of very

minor importance as a gratification compared with the psychotropic effect. There seems to be a rough correspondence between the relative significance of taste/smell and psychotropic effect on the one hand and the regimes of legality and illegality of drugs in present-day Western societies.

This analysis harmonises with Veblen. Though real, 'material' consumer goods absorbed into our bodies, the illegal drugs are at the same time absolutely 'wasteful' consumer goods without any nutritious value whatsoever. They are 'luxury' *pur sang*, the ideal-typical product of the consumer society. Better than any other product, they express the desire for pure pleasure, a principled disdain for the useful. It is, therefore, only natural that a society with a powerful consumer ethos develops an interest in drugs.

Another aspect of the consumer society, treated in the work of, among others, Benjamin (1982) and Baudrillard (1983, 1988), is the development of 'dream worlds', of a 'simulational culture'. Consumerism has given rise to a kind of parallel worlds. First department stores, malls, shopping centres and exhibitions were set up. Then theme parks, holiday resorts, museums and other such complexes were created. Television produced a reality of its own. And now the Internet, computer games and 'virtual reality' are beginning to almost literally create parallel worlds. Scholarly works on consumer culture point out that people are daily confronted with 'dream-images, which speak to desires, and "aestheticise" and "derealise" reality.' We experience a 'sense of intoxication' in the 'dream-worlds of mass consumption' - an 'aesthetic hallucination of the real' (Featherstone, 1998, pp. 24, 68, 70).

Fredric Jameson (see Hardt & Weeks, 2000, pp. 208-210) analyses how the cultural sphere has expanded to the point of absorbing social and individual life. The image, the simulation, seems to become the new reality. Comparing postmodern culture in some of its aspects to the experience of the schizophrenic, he observes a 'mysterious charge of affect' which may express itself in 'anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, the high, the intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity'. Remarkably, in works on consumer culture drugs are almost never treated, though the thesis that this culture produces dream-worlds with a hallucinatory quality simply cries out for that. Once again, drugs are *the* product of

consumer culture. Drugs *are* dream-worlds. In contrast to supermarkets, theme parks or even 'virtual reality', drugs create an inescapable, real dream-world within our own minds. A culture, which invests so much effort to construct ever more complete dream-worlds, is almost bound to be fascinated by drugs.

As analysed in the work of, among others, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, in the new consumer society products are no longer merely objects to satisfy our needs. In Baudrillard's terms, they have acquired 'sign-value', conveying images that work on our desires, which allows the culture industry to manipulate consumers through the advertising process. However, this is no longer conceived as a one-way street. The game can be played in two directions. If consumer goods have become signs, they may also convey messages of individually preferred lifestyles. In consuming a particular product, consumers mark their identities as part of a subcultural group.

One of the options consumers have is to adopt ways of consuming that express independence from the established norms. Consumption becomes a sign of defiance. Michel de Certeau discusses the tactics consumers use to subvert the established meanings of consumer goods (see: Lee, 2000, pp. 162-174). In his article 'Object Domains, Ideology and Interests', Daniel Miller provides an example of children preferring sweets in the form of vampires, skulls and bones. The little consumers are, of course, not engaging in conscious resistance against the dominant powers. But they are aware that their parents find their sweets disturbing. By nevertheless consuming them, they confirm their independence (Lee, 2000, p. 15).

Bourdieu (1984) emphasises that in the culture of the consumer society social class and education continue to serve as important factors shaping consumer choices. There is a permanent undercurrent in modern European society to reject the taste of the common people as simplistic, animalistic and vulgar. It is in particular the 'new petite bourgeoisie' that is abandoning the 'narrow asceticism' of the old and engages in lifestyle experiments with a subversive undertone. In the name of the fight against 'taboos', they adopt 'liberated manners, cosmetic or sartorial outrages, emancipated poses and postures and systematically apply the cultivated disposition to not-yet-legitimate culture' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 370; see also: Featherstone, 1998, pp. 83-94).

But, in a paradox, consumer societies are particularly suspicious of goods that are believed to take the societal logic to its fullest, hedonistic conclusion. Products and lifestyles with markedly 'wasteful' and 'dream-like' qualities provide consumer societies with an intensified image of themselves, producing a guilty fear of being part of a decadent spectacle. Such products and lifestyles tend to be disapproved of as 'unhealthy' or 'harmful'. However, in condemning them, society provides its citizens with easy yet powerful ways to express their own sovereign identities. Once certain goods have been stigmatised, citizens need only to consume them to mark their independence from established norms. Social disapproval paradoxically increases the attractiveness of such consumer goods as vehicles for individual identity policies. 'Defiant consumption' has become an established aspect of the Western consumer society.

And, again, as the ultimate 'wasteful' and 'dream-like' goods, drugs trigger most forcefully the fear of decadence. Legal prohibition makes drug use the most attractive form of 'defiant consumption', for it makes this use an *ipso facto* act of defiance. The explosion of drug use in the Western consumer societies is, therefore, not only stimulated by the 'wasteful' and 'dreamlike' qualities of these products but also, paradoxically, by the legal ban provoked by these qualities.

## Conclusions

I have treated the question of why drug-taking has become a significant phenomenon of modern Western culture from two angles. Firstly, the direction of the 'civilising process' has during the 20th century been for a part reversed, with less 'refined' forms of behaviour on the way up. Though within boundaries set by continuing self-control, the body and the affects are readmitted into the public sphere. The increased drug use is part of this ambivalent phenomenon of 'controlled de-control'. Secondly, the attractiveness of drugs expresses general preferences of the consumer society for the 'wasteful' and the 'dream-like'; qualities which drugs epitomise in the most pronounced way. They have received an added attractiveness because society disapproves of products expressing its own spirit most markedly. Legal prohibition has made drugs the ideal vehicle for defiant individual identity policies.

My main conclusion is that drug use can be fruitfully studied in terms of the same sociological

theories and frameworks used to study 'normal' societal phenomena. The social sciences should stop treating drug use in a preconceived way as 'problematic behaviour' to be overcome. Compare the way homosexuality was once studied as a disease to be treated. Apart from the moral aspect of putting science in the service of dominant societal viewpoints, the preconceived model is counter-productive even from a purely scientific point of view. Focussing on the *a priori* problematic character of drug use hinders us in unprejudicedly using sociological frameworks, which are helpful in understanding drug use.

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