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Drug Addiction and Capitalism

- Too Close to the Body

For Peer Review

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Abstract: This article explores the relationship between drugs and capitalism. Consumption of drugs provides an insight into the role played by body and enjoyment in consumer capitalism. The outset of the argument is that the ideology of consumption holds an imperative of enjoyment. Taking drugs is an extreme form of consumption simultaneously fulfilling and undermining this imperative since the enjoyment experienced circumvents the ordinary capitalist circulation of objects. Using the theoretical approach of Žižek, the article argues that the manipulation of the body's capacity for enjoyment brings the drug user 'too close to the object'. Thus the body's status as a 'sublime object of ideology' can no longer be sustained and the drug user's subjective economy of desire is at risk of collapsing making. Such collapse turns the subject into a drug addict.

Keywords: Drugs, consumption, desire, addiction, capitalism, body, Žižek

In the cartoon Road Runner a classic moment is the following scene: At some point in his constant chase of the ever elusive Road Runner the coyote, Wile E., by accident runs over a cliff. Wile E. does however not immediately fall down into the canyon below, as one would expect, but instead continues running unsuspectingly into free air. Only the moment he senses something wrong and looks down to realise that he has no solid ground to support him does gravity start to function and he falls into the abyss below.

Being addicted to drugs is to be in a state similar to the one of the coyote in the air having realised the lack of supporting ground. It is a radical way of fulfilling the imperative of enjoyment constantly thrown at us by the contemporary ideology of consumption. The problem of drug addiction is that the extreme enjoyment achieved by the drug at the same time also reveals an ambiguity in the ideology of consumption and a fundamental paradox of the capitalist economy of desire. Compared to the ordinary capitalist subject, the addict's problem is not that he has lost solid ground under his feet. His problem is rather the realisation that there was never any such solid ground in the first place. While the ordinary capitalist subject stays unawares hanging in the air, the drug addict's realisation sends him falling directly into the abyss.

The object of the article is to explore the relationship between drug use and ordinary consumption in contemporary capitalism. We shall start by defining how the consumption of drugs constitutes a distinct form of consumption. Next we shall be looking into the relationship between drugs and capitalism. And finally drug addiction shall be analysed as a col-

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5 lapse of the subject's economy of desire.

6 The framework for the analysis is Slavoj Žižek's theory of the subject. In the course of the
7 article the main concepts of this theory will be presented including the concepts of the sym-
8 bolic, the Real and ideology. The aim is to unfold the potential of this particular theoretical
9 approach for understanding drug use and drug addiction rather than to provide a broad-
10 spectrum discussion of the topic. What are missed by using this theoretically narrow ap-
11 proach are off course the nuances between different forms of drugs, different kinds of addic-
12 tion and all the socio-economic factors surrounding the issue of drugs and addiction. In turn
13 we hope to provide a philosophically founded account of drug addiction as an input to a
14 research field otherwise dominated by neurobiological thinking.
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20 21 Consuming Drugs

22 'Drugs makes us ask what it means to consume anything, anything at all.' (Ronell, 1992:
23 63)
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26 Taking drugs is a form of consumption. But what is the difference between the consump-
27 tion of drugs like cocaine, heroine, crack and amphetamine and the consumption of more
28 ordinary objects of consumption like chocolate, cheese, music and films?
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31 If we look at the way drugs are introduced into the body one preliminary distinction re-
32 veals itself. The body is organically predisposed for consumption by being equipped with
33 different bodily openings and sensual organs through which we may consume different
34 things. Chocolate is consumed through the mouth, perfume through the nose, a flower
35 through the eyes and a piece of music through the ears. Even though the enjoyment of these
36 different objects may not be reduced to a purely sensual experience, it is nevertheless the
37 sensual organs connected with these bodily openings that trigger the enjoyment.
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41 A typical way of taking cocaine or heroin is by injecting it directly into the blood through
42 the arm or some other more or less random spot on the body. This form of consumption lit-
43 erally circumvents the inborn openings and ordinary sensual organs of the body. The junkie
44 himself makes a new hole in the body wherever he chooses to insert the needle. Even when
45 drugs like cocaine or amphetamine are consumed through the nose or the mouth, enjoyment
46 is not mediated by the senses normally connected with these bodily openings. Cocaine is not
47 consumed for its smell nor is amphetamine for its taste.
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52 The enjoyment achieved by the consumption of drugs is not due to their perceptual taste,
53 smell, sound, colour, etc. In stead they are consumed for the sake of their psychoactive prop-
54 erties (Goode, 2005: 8-10). The difference between consumption mediated by the senses and
55 extra-sensual consumption is continuous rather than categorical. The enjoyment of drinking
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alcohol or smoking a cigarette is for instance constituted in a blurred combination of sensual and extra-sensual effects. Both substances have psychoactive properties which however interact with our sensual perception of the world catalysing the atmosphere of a party or the pleasure of a meal. In this article I will however be focusing on 'hard' drugs such as cocaine and heroin since the enjoyment generated from these substances involves if any only a negligible element of sensually mediated effects. By circumventing our 'natural' channels of consumption drugs perform a very direct intervention in the brain's centres for reward and enjoyment (Gawin, 1991; Withers et al., 1995; Koob and Nestler, 1997). Paraphrasing Ronell we may speak of the enjoyment thus produced as a form of extra-epistemic enjoyment (1992: 33).

Another feature characteristic of drugs is their particular potential for causing addiction. The question of the addictive nature of drugs is both controversial and difficult. It is debatable to what extent different kinds of drugs are addictive, and whether illegal drugs are more addictive than legal stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine or alcohol. These questions of addiction are particularly tricky in the case of cocaine, which does not, contrary to heroine, produce distinctly physical symptoms of abstinence (Goode, 2005: 284). Furthermore it is open to questioning where precisely the line between drug addiction and mere drug use is to be drawn. Regardless of these issues we may however for the purpose of the argument at hand conclude that once you are addicted to a 'hard drug' the consequences for your entire subjectivity are far reaching and fatal. Being addicted to coffee has only local consequences for a very limited part of your life while an addiction to heroine colonises your entire being.

In the following we shall be exploring the use of drugs as a particular form of consumption and we shall be looking at the relationship between the two characteristics listed here: the extra-epistemic enjoyment and the undermining of subjectivity in addiction.

Subjectivity, Enjoyment and Castration

The concept of enjoyment plays a central role in Žižek's thinking about the subject and his relation to society and ideology. This makes his theoretical approach particularly suited for the investigation of the addicted subject and the consumption of drugs. First we shall be looking at some general aspects of the relation between enjoyment and subjectivity. Second we shall be applying these to the particular issue of drugs.

When Adam was expelled from the Garden of Eden it was because he let his desires outweigh God's prohibition against eating the apple. An immediate reading of the story may look like this: First there was Adam's desire for the apple and then there was God's prohibition against eating it, then came the transgression and finally the expulsion. Following Žižek's notion about the relationship between subject, law, desire and enjoyment (*jouissance*)

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5 these four moments should however be thought of as simultaneous. Desire is constituted
6 only through prohibition. Prohibition in turn is conditioned by its transgression. And the
7 desire for the apple is possible only when Adam is in a state already pointing beyond the
8 Garden of Eden. Desire is thus only possible the moment when Adam is already expelled. By
9 presenting the story of Adam's Fall successively the impression is created that Adam loses
10 something when he is expelled from the Garden of Eden. Truth is however that only the
11 moment Adam is expelled that which is lost is produced. Only at the moment of expulsion
12 *jouissance* is produced as that, which is lost.

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17 The story of Adam's Fall illustrates the paradoxical constitution of the subject. On the one
18 hand the subject is constituted as a desiring subject, a subject missing something, a subject in
19 pursuit of an object, which may fill in its lack and provide *jouissance*. On the other hand the
20 subject is constituted by a lacking capacity for complete satisfaction, for absolute *jouissance*.
21 The subject is in pursuit of something that is basically impossible.

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Being a subject is being part of a symbolic order of signs, language, prohibitions, law etc.
The subject's reflexive relation to himself and to his own desires is made possible only
through the symbolic order. The symbolic order makes possible the subject's verbalisation of
his own lack: 'I want an ice cream', 'I need a new car', 'I miss having a girlfriend'. The sym-
bolic order is however not a 1:1 representation of subjective needs that were already there
beforehand. A kind of simultaneity is at play whereby desire, the object of desire and the
representation of both is constituted in one and the same momentum. On the one hand the
symbolic order enables the subject's identification of his desires with different objects within
the order. But on the other hand it is also the symbolic order that founds the subject's consti-
tutive lack of Being, which is the very precondition for desire at all.

The symbolisation of desire is at the same time the condition of impossibility of the com-
plete satisfaction of desire. In order to describe the constitution of the subject Žižek uses the
rather dramatic concept of *symbolic castration*. This is illustrated with the Fall of Adam:
'[W]hen Adam chooses to fall in order to retain *jouissance*, what he loses thereby is precisely
jouissance ... Adam loses X by directly choosing it, aiming to retain it. ... That is to say: what,
precisely, is symbolic castration? It is the prohibition of incest in the precise sense of the loss
of something which the subject never possessed in the first place' (Žižek, 1997: 15).

The tree, from which Adam picks the apple, is the Tree of Knowledge. This suggests a con-
tradiction between knowledge and the absolute *jouissance* found in the Garden of Eden. In
similar fashion the subject becomes subject by gaining knowledge about his own desires
through the symbolic order. With this reflexivity a kind of alienation is installed in the sub-
ject's self relation which renders impossible the full complementation of the subject, makes

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5 impossible the absolute *jouissance*. '[A]ccess to knowledge is then paid with the loss of en-
6 joyment - enjoyment, in its stupidity, is possible only on the basis of certain non-knowledge,
7 ignorance' (Žižek, 1989: 68). In other words the price for becoming a subject is to deposit in
8 the symbolic order a piece of enjoyment, a remainder, so that all future enjoyment can only
9 become a derivative of the absolute enjoyment.
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12 This 'piece of enjoyment' has a rather complex status in the symbolic order. The story of
13 Adam's Fall illustrates, how it was never there in the first place. Nevertheless it now plays a
14 crucial role in the symbolic order. We may say that enjoyment circles around within this or-
15 der. It does not circulate however as real but as virtual. The image is projected into the sym-
16 bolic order that the subject may find here its lacking part, that the symbolic order does con-
17 tain the possibility for absolute enjoyment. Hereby the subject is linked to the symbolic or-
18 der.
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23 Applying Žižek's concept of the castrated subject, the fundamental existential question of
24 the subject may be said to be the following: How can I (re)gain my (lost) enjoyment? The
25 symbolic order willingly provides a variety of answers to this question. By offering different
26 objects as exactly that Thing, which the subject allegedly lacks for the completion of itself, the
27 symbolic order shapes the subject as a desiring subject. The objects offered are constituted as
28 'sublime objects'. Crucial to this procedure, if it is to reproduce itself, is the keeping of the
29 subject in a constant suspension, where on the one hand the object is presented as the answer
30 to the subject's problem, while on the other hand the object is kept at a distance from the sub-
31 ject in order to retain the object's status as sublime. '[D]esire's *raison d'être* ... is not to realize
32 its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire' (Žižek, 1997: 39).
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40 Enjoyment and Capitalism

41 Today ... our politics is more and more directly the politics of *jouissance*, concerned with
42 ways of soliciting, or controlling and regulating, *jouissance*. (Žižek, 2006: 309)
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45 In any society desire and enjoyment are very much a matter of ideology. We shall now see,
46 how this is particularly the case in the contemporary capitalism.
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48 As analysed by Weber, capitalism in its earlier stages was permeated by a high degree of
49 protestant asceticism (1905). In stead of using his profit to buy objects for consumption and
50 immediate enjoyment the capitalist was urged to cut back on spending in order to invest as
51 much as possible in the recirculation of capital. Profit was not a means to enjoyment but
52 rather a promise of future enjoyment in the afterlife.
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55 The spirit of contemporary capitalism however seems no longer to be found in the sphere
56 of production but rather in the sphere of consumption (Baudrillard, 1970; Bauman, 1998;
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Campbell, 1987). Consumption and enjoyment are no longer vices but rather virtues and we are constantly bombarded by demands for us to buy, consume and enjoy. Commercials of all different sorts of course play a crucial role here since they not only make us aware of any needs we may have, but simply install in us desires which we did not have in the first place. In the consumption society the commercial is a fundamental part of the production apparatus, since it produces and reproduces the society's capacity for consumption. 'The system of needs is a product of the system of production' (Baudrillard, 1970: 74).

In his diagnosis of contemporary capitalism Žižek also directs his focus at consumption. For example he identifies Coca-Cola as the ultimate capitalist merchandise and uses it to illustrate, how the reproduction of the capacity for consumption works:

It is no surprise that Coke was first introduced as a medicine – its strange taste does not seem to provide any particular satisfaction; it is not directly pleasing and endearing; however, it is precisely as such, as transcending any immediate use-value (unlike water, beer or wine, which definitely do quench our thirst or produce the desired effect of satisfied calm), that Coke functions as the direct embodiment of 'it': of the pure surplus of enjoyment over standard satisfaction, of the mysterious and elusive X we are all after in our compulsive consumption of merchandise. (Žižek, 2000: 22)

When the commercial tells us 'Coke is it' and 'Enjoy Coca-Cola' the ideological subtext is that Coca-Cola is precisely that object, which can satisfy our desire, give us the full real enjoyment. Coca-Cola is allegedly the answer to the lack of Being constitutive to our desire. The real consumption of Coca-Cola does however have the exact opposite effect of satisfaction since it makes us want even more. It reproduces rather than satisfies our desire.

Not only the commercials urge us to consume and enjoy. The command is found also in other places than the market. Žižek goes as far as saying that contemporary consumption society is a post-Oedipal society, where the rule against excessive enjoyment is turned around and into an imperative saying: Enjoy! (1999). Enjoyment is no longer only allowed it is simply obligatory (Žižek, 2006: 310; Declercq, 2006).

By way of this imperative we start acting as consumers not only on the market but in a wide range of other spheres (XXXX, 2005: 283). This may be in the political sphere, where real-political events are perceived as entertaining spectacles to be experienced, consumed and enjoyed and not as moral problems calling for engagement and contemplation. This may be in our working life, where we are expected to not only do the tasks demanded by our employer but also to do it with joy and passion. Or it may be in our love life, where the demands for immediate passion and self development in the relationship are ever growing while it is almost considered sinful to stick together out of habit or practical reasons.

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Is this enjoyment society not the realisation of our wildest fantasies about free access to whatever objects we may desire? If there is unlimited access to everything does this mean that there is no ideological regulation of desire?

The best answer to these questions is probably that ideology has just taken on another form. An important aspect of the ideology of consumption is the fact that the seemingly liberal approach to enjoyment is followed by an equally effective definition of what is enjoyable and what is not. There is an explicit imperative saying, Enjoy!, and an implicit standard for the appropriate ways of pursuing enjoyment.

According to Žižek this permissiveness takes the form of a totalitarianism saying: 'I know better than you do yourself what you *really want*, what is in your best interests, so what I order you to do is what you, deep within yourself, really unknowingly desire, even if you seem superficially to be opposed to it!' (2000: 134). Hereby the distinction between duty and enjoyment (as we find it for instance in the Kantian moral philosophy) is collapsed and the very pursuit of enjoyment becomes a duty in itself, which may even be associated with a kind of bad consciousness. 'In a "permissive" society, subjects experience the need to "have a good time", really to enjoy themselves, as a kind of duty; consequently, they feel guilty if they fail to be happy' (Žižek, 2000: 135).

The point is not that it is never pleasurable to go to work or be with your girlfriend. There is however a constitutive deficit in our actually experienced enjoyment compared to the enjoyment promised by the symbolic order of consumption society. Regardless how refreshing we may find a Coke on a hot summers day (and it may in fact be more tasty than Žižek claims in order to make the example fit his argument) it is never quite 'It' or 'the real Thing'. The consumption society exploits the subject's constitutive lack of Being by staging various objects of consumption as being exactly *the* lacking piece, which will complement the self. This goes for Coke as well as for work or love. The enjoyment actually experienced is however always only a derivative of the absolute enjoyment, which would make us fully satisfied and eliminate our desire for anything else or for more. By sustaining the subject in a constant feeling of 'this is not quite It' a steady reproduction of desire for more and new objects of consumption is secured. The ideology of consumption promises the subject that it shall regain the enjoyment deposited at the entrance to the symbolic order (i.e. at the moment of symbolic castration) by means of the objects of consumption.

Reality and the Real

Symbolic castration whereby the subject becomes a subject through inclusion into the symbolic order may to some extent be described as a form of 'social construction of the subject'.