

Confronting A Silent Assassin

Intoxication Culture in Resistance Movements

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I ain't a moralist – however an individual decides to poison their body is their business. But individual decisions and actions don't exist in a vacuum. And all too often the consequences of ones self-destruction through substances affects others. And shit, the anarchist movement has seen more deaths as a result of intoxication culture than deaths by cops and fascists combined. Imagine the feds just sittin' back watchin' intoxication culture diminish any and all insurgent potential on both an individual and collective level. Anyone who trivializes the damage intoxication culture has caused in movements past and present, from communities to individuals, or who thinks that simply speaking critically of intoxication implies some form of elitism, is just straight up ignorant. -Flower Bomb

The Real Opium of the Masses

Like any anarchist, I'm opposed to enforced sobriety and behavior modification. Sadly, many non-sober folks become offended and defensive when sobriety is brought up. I acknowledge the trauma of being forced to get "clean" or witnessing the horrors of others who've been caught up in various rehab programs. Radical sobriety should be about promoting individual autonomy and decision making while refusing to deploy moral condemnations. The "intervention" model, whether through courts as an alternative (or adjunct) to incarceration or through family and friends dogpiling to get you to change your habits, is based on coercion and needs to be rejected outright. But that doesn't mean not paying attention to how substances affect one's life and the lives of others.

Recreational intoxication has been part of the human (and non-human) experience for as long as we have been a species, from the simple ingestion of plants to the fermentation of different liquids and grains. Substances are chosen for their euphoric or stimulant or sedative effects, and some are chosen for the hallucinatory experiences of those who ingest them. According to many ethnographies of tribal cultures, in most cases the latter especially are used within ceremonial or religious contexts; frequently, it's only the person or persons with special or pre-existing access to the spirit world (erroneously labeled "shamans" in contemporary new age circles) who ingest the substances. In other cases, where a seeker of visions ingests the substance, the person or persons with access to the spirit world will not ingest it, remaining "in this world" in order to guide and monitor the seeker. In either case, care it taken to remove the use of such substances from a recreational realm.

From an anarchist perspective, intoxication remains a source of contention. Many radical anti-capitalist anti-statists remain unaware of the ways intoxicants, stimulants, and depressants have been deployed by ruling classes throughout history as mechanisms for diminishing the self-defense capacities of industrial and agricultural workers, peasants, and slaves. Sadly, many radicals – especially in the USA – see the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs as an authentic and valuable aspect of working class (but not necessarily oppositional) culture. From an individualist perspective, the issue is further fraught with contention due to the peer pressure and unspoken assumptions of subcultural conformism that inhere in their consumption. And adding an extra dimension to the conversation is an anti-civ perspective, where we must acknowledge their reliance on industrialized production and distribution.

Throughout anarchist history there have been those drawn to what in the 19th and early 20th centuries was called "naturism." This tendency promoted hiking, nudism, vegetarianism (if not veganism, *avant la lettre*), as well as a rejection of opium, tobacco, and alcohol - sometimes even coffee, tea, and sugar (most of the other intoxicants we are familiar with today had yet to be synthesized and/or commodified). From some of the illegalists centered around the so-called Bonnot Gang in the 1910s to large sections of the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth in the 1930s, to contemporary Vegan Straight Edge anarchists, various critiques of the production, distribution, and consumption of these commodities have been raised, promoted, and expanded.

Naturally, there have also been plenty of shortcomings to these critiques. Many of them are based in humanism (centering human life as the most valuable), like arguments about their damaging effects on human biology (which is undeniably true since most of them are basically poisons), while often ignoring the exploitation of human and non-human labor in the production processes. Other arguments are based on moralism, where the consumption is derided as harmful to psychological and emotional health; the promoters of this line of reasoning present themselves as politically, psychologically, and emotionally superior to those who still indulge in such vices. Being a post-left anti-civ pro-individual anarchist, I find the overtly evangelical character of these critiques to be quite obnoxious.

Some of the Spanish anarchists were clear about the class-based reasons for avoiding liquor and tobacco. After working a 10 or 12 or 14-hour day, most anarchists wanted to learn more rather than be idle. Consciously anarchist education was aimed at basic literacy, art, science, and overall self-improvement. The widespread existence of ateneos (that era's infoshop) was an important part of the anarchist subculture throughout Spain (and to a lesser extent Portugal). Ateneos were places where classes were taught (similar to skillshares), theatrical productions were staged, and where fundraising activities occurred. Brainwork was required, so sobriety and focus were necessary. Smoking and drinking (and in some places eating meat) were discouraged for the previously mentioned moral and humanist objections, but also - and often especially - because they were considered the domain of the non-working rich.

What, then, is a decent 21st century critique of consciousness-altering substances without humanism and without moralism? An anti-civ perspective is a good starting point. Looking at human (and some non-human) culture prior to, or without, civilization, we notice the use of foraged and sometimes cultivated plants for food and medicine. Knowledge of the effects of various plants is an integral part of human culture, that requires only the desire to observe and learn. Similarly, the natural process of fermentation requires only the desire to observe and learn. No division of labor is necessary since plants and liquids and grains are generally available to anyone; all that's needed is reliable storage. Distillation, on the other hand, requires specialized knowledge, specialized tools, and the investment of time and materials (division of labor and technology). An ideology justifying divisions of labor and class expands the justification for technology (which requires scale and class division), which in turn feeds into the justification for more divisions and greater technological scale. The alienated regime of commodity production, class division, and hierarchy goes hand in hand with the widespread use of technology and specialization.

From a pro-individual perspective, one that already rejects moralism, my observation is that the consumption of alcohol and tobacco (and to a lesser extent, meat) is part of a larger mainstream set of cultural pressures of conformism and cohesion. Even oppositional subcultures foster and maintain their own pressures, often including the same substances. Anarchist organizations - even affinity groups - develop their own sets of normative behaviors, actions that are expected to be modeled by anyone hoping to be included. Naturally enough, they also outline what they consider deviant acts, acts that provoke sanctions from ostracism to ridicule to expulsion. All collective structures, anarchist or not, gravitate toward conformism; drinking the right kind of alcohol and smoking the right kind of tobacco (mixed or not with other substances) are conformist activities. In order to be accepted into any subculture or affinity group or collective or federation, you have to "develop the taste" for these substances - or more correctly, deaden your taste to accommodate their poisonous natures.

To counter the potential (probable) knee-jerk condemnation of my rant, dismissing my analysis because I sound like a grumpy abstentionist or someone who fears altered consciousness, let me say that I'm always in favor of people having a good time by themselves and/or in social situations. But if you require a drink or a toke (or worse, a snort or a shot), then you're probably not very fun to begin with. Are you normally an unpleasant person? And then, what happens to the fun when your favorite social lubricants aren't available? There are other methods of stimulating endorphins, dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin (to name only the most prevalent and well-known). You can see stars or even hallucinate if you eat hot peppers. You can become giddy by holding your breath or hyperventilating. You can meditate and experience moments of transcendence. You can exercise or have an orgasm and experience

euphoria. But these other activities have been removed from the mind-altering playbook by an atomized society based on dulling senses rather than expanding them.

I have seen dozens of anarchists and other radicals struggle with substances over the years I've been active in the scene. Most of the time the results have been a diminished capacity for clear thinking, making poor choices (sometimes leading to too much contact with law enforcement, including incarceration), and just being unpleasant to be around. Four anarchists in particular, who I'd consider to be friends, have been involved with various substances that have caused me plenty of heartache and sadness over the years as I've watched them progressively lose their analytical and critical edge and become less coherent. The one who's still alive is a brilliant and witty writer. He's also a serious alcoholic, whose consumption of beer is inversely proportionate to his best material. When he's drunk, he has a tendency to make questionable decisions (often at the expense of his friendships and associations), and too often makes sweeping statements without consulting others who might temper his most outrageous alcohol-fueled assumptions. His drinking turns his brilliance into personal vindictiveness and gratuitous insult, which undercuts his analytical capabilities, and inevitably tarnishes his reputation.

Three other examples have to do with friends who are now dead, whose deaths can be – and should be – linked with their intake of various substances. A friend who'd struggled with heroin for decades finally died of heart failure before he was 50. He had been involved in a long running journal that suspended publication for almost three years due to him using the funds supposed to go to the printer to purchase drugs to feed his habit. He visited me many years ago (ostensibly to discuss several pamphlets and books we wanted to release under our imprint), but was so desperate for junk that he suggested we rob a liquor store; I turned down the chance to be his lookout.

A gifted and talented writer who worked with us for many years also had a heroin habit on and off for much of his adult life, but at some point he switched to speed. He would stop taking it for months, at one time for almost two years, but then fall back into it. Throughout, he chain-smoked cigarettes and chugged coffee as if his life depended on it. His habits cost him a few years in jail, one in rehab, and, for the last decade of his life, contact with his spouse and two of his five children. He died of heart failure at 57.

Perhaps the most tragic and frustrating was another writer and publisher who was overweight, diabetic, and hypertensive, but who continued to consume quarts of coffee and soda every day – the latter often secretly. His writing didn't seem to suffer from the stimulants he had in his body all the time, but his behavior was erratic, especially early in the mornings before he had his first fix. The reason I bring up his death – again, before 50 – is that it was entirely preventable, but for the physiological pull and psychological compulsion of altering his brain chemistry. Unsurprisingly, he died of a stroke.

Not long ago I was kicked out of a facebook group. The admin posted a link to "The Revolution Will Not Be Sober" and I had the temerity to object to the content. When I first read that screed, I could only read about a paragraph at a time before I either start laughing or wanting to gouge out my eyes. The first and primary objection I have to the authors' many absurd assertions is that sobriety is a form of colonization because it removes people's agency. Agency, in this particular case anyway, is fulfilling the desire to get high (personal agency in general is a far more complicated topic. As if you don't have to work at creating the conditions for mind alteration, as if you can just wander around and gather an already-existing substance (well, to be fair there are mushrooms, but you'd better know exactly what you're doing before you ingest them).

The authors rightly attack the completely unanarchist and non-radical 12-step model of recovery. Yes, that model is less hierarchical and more DIY - and less expensive - than residential detox programs. But it is based on a generic american protestant framework that insists that there's no possibility of getting and staying sober without a "higher power" – god or big brother or some other cretinous figure of the Freudian Super-Ego, a true Stirnerian spook. They rightly attack the absurd identitarian construct of the "sober addict." They rightly advocate for the destigmatization of people struggling with addiction. They rightly promote the uncoupling of substances from a regime of commodity consumption. I agree

that none of those things are addressed by the 12-step model, which makes it a complete dead-end for anarchists.

As an anarchist I support harm reduction; I live in a world where addiction is a social, and often communal, problem. As an anarchist I support the full decriminalization of recreational drugs, despite not wanting to partake, and having no interest in any subculture with their use as a major part of it. My objections to drugs aren't based on moralism and the extreme conformism that inheres in such a philosophical position. But TRWNBS is not an essay about what usually gets called harm reduction or decriminalization; the authors promote getting high as a political position of resistance and a very peculiar, perhaps inverted, form of harm reduction, which is as hilarious as it is misguided.

How do they obtain their chosen substances? Unless they have access to a stable DIY situation or are careful scroungers/foragers, then they'll be forced to rely on commodity exchange, either licit or illicit depending on the legality of their substance(s) of choice. If they are legal substances, then they are engaged in a regulated market and paying extra for the privilege of attaining those substances through taxes extorted by the state and federal authorities. Certainly we all end up paying something in taxes at many points in our lives, but voluntarily paying extra taxes for the sake of intoxication isn't in the top 10 activities I'd promote as an anarchist.

If the substances are illegal, then they are forced to engage in gray- or black-market commerce. While there are few (if any) government taxes involved in this manner of exchange, there are other problematic - and often more damaging - consequences. The primary issue is that illicit drug dealers are generally connected at some level to large corporate entities with international reach (so-called cartels), not unlike the public or private capitalist enterprises often targeted by anti-globalization protesters. The illicit and semi-legal/semi-tolerated political economy based on international trafficking promotes high levels of corruption and supports and maintains levels of violence, exploitation, and domination oftentimes uglier than those undertaken by governments (which are at least somewhat sensitive to such vagaries as public opinion and critical media scrutiny and judicial investigation). The point is that there is no commodity exchange that can take place outside of the structures of the market; there are no commodities, licit or illicit, that are free from the taint of capitalist production and consumption. Wouldn't an organizing strategy more in line with the much-touted prefigurative politics do away with reliance on international supply chains (transport networks that can only continue with the extraction and refinement of fossil fuel) and the continuation of the hyperexploitation of marginalized, poor, and dispossessed people?

How/where do they partake of their chosen substances? Definitely not in "ceremonial" contexts, as is the case with most tribal cultures, but in contemporary atomized class society. Their position as substance advocates is within the fullblown fucked up society we're all forced to inhabit, in which we all choose how to carve out little pockets of liberation, individually and/or with friends and accomplices. But these moments are always temporary and cannot possibly create any lasting counter-hegemonic infrastructure - I'm presuming that any radical project worth creating and defending needs to have something approaching at least a semi-permanent network of temporal and spatial locations.

Perhaps the most unintentionally hilarious - and offensive - claim in their little pamphlet is that anti-sobriety is decolonial. This flies in the face of the amount of damage alcohol (and more recently, meth) has done in indigenous communities throughout the colonized world. Part of that devastation has been deliberate colonial strategy; fucked-up people are useless in a fight, increased dependence on hand-outs (food, drugs) means less time for resistance, stupefied adults can't maintain traditional cultural structures and values. From the notorious Opium Wars that were an explicit part of British colonial strategy, to the flooding of Black ghettos with heroin in the wake of the urban rebellions of the 1960s to keep a politically volatile situation from getting the better of US law enforcement, the spread of easily accessible drugs has been a deliberate state policy to undermine targeted communities. A similar domestic strategy was used with crack cocaine in the late-80s to help raise funds for the Contras in Nicaragua and in turn increased the instability of many areas of South America, which led to increased US military intervention. The idea that opium grown in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand was not connected to the prosecution of the Vietnam War is absurd, just as the more contemporary increase

in opium production in Afghanistan was an unmistakably intimate aspect of the US occupation. The international drug trade – and not just in opium and coca, but also including various pharmaceuticals and their popular derivatives, authentic or counterfeit – has been intimately connected with overt and covert counterinsurgency since at least the end of WWII. There’s nothing remotely decolonial about that.

I’m not straight edge. Over the years, I’ve partaken of lots of alcohol, taken mushrooms, and eaten cannabis, plus I’ve ingested lots of opiates after various surgeries. Except for alcohol, which I’ve only ever had in small amounts, I’m completely non-functional in the sober world when I’ve been high. Aside from the four detailed examples already mentioned, here’s a list of things I’ve seen and experienced when people are high: impaired cognitive ability (sometimes to the point of not being able to speak coherently); occasional incontinence and/or emesis; excessive gregariousness, often to the point of unmalicious assault (due to a generalized lack of any concept of personal boundaries); and assault with malicious intent. It’s true that different people respond differently to different substances, but the general predictable aspects of altered behavior due to intoxication are clear. People who use drugs – especially habitual users – are unreliable, both in terms of memory and security; they are vulnerable to extortion and coercion from law enforcement (check out the Green Scare and how many cooperating defendants were habitual substance users). If being sober is not your default condition for the bulk of your waking hours, then you’re a liability to virtually all radical oppositional activity.



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