

Heroin is So Passé

Sadie Plant, *Writing on Drugs* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999)

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Once more, Sadie Plant has written a book that only takes an afternoon to read. This is just as well. For the bulk of the book, the reader is presented with little more than a list of famous and obscure people who have taken drugs and been writers, together with their accounts of ‘what it was like’ – writers who take drugs sometimes think and write about their habit! Coleridge and de Quincey, unsurprisingly, feature heavily. The extent of the analysis (which isn’t even hers) of the way drugs and the wider culture reacted upon one another is exemplified halfway through the book:

The opiates had calmed and numbed the nineteenth century; cocaine came on line with electricity; speed had let the twentieth century keep up with its own new speeds. For Marshall McLuhan, it seemed obvious that hallucinogens were performing some similar cultural role. (126-7)

If you need to *learn* that many nineteenth century writers took drugs and that ambivalence towards their effects (that they give you something to write about but often take away your desire and ability to actually do the writing) together with the desire to control the use of drugs is as old as Modernity, then this will be worth reading. There are much better quotations – given the people Plant quotes, it could not have been hard to find them writing or saying interesting things about drugs but this just highlights that what this book essentially is, is a *primer*: well written and structured and if it gets people reading Burroughs, Foucault or Deleuze and Guattari, then good. Though it is puzzling that Plant whilst referencing Deleuze and Guattari’s thoughts about drugs ignores that they insist

(following Henry Miller) that the real trick is to get high without drugs, to get drunk on a glass of water. But people who are already familiar with these peoples' work will find little surprising in these pages, and irritatingly, quotations made within the main body of the text are not referenced in any form. Indeed, quotations feature so heavily that it is hard to know what Plant's own thoughts are.

Two interesting points can be distilled from this book. First, that the category of 'drug' is deeply problematic and has always been unstable. *Writing on Drugs* does show how drugs have played an important part in the development of our understanding of the brain's neuro-chemistry; Freud's papers and experiments with cocaine are the major focus of this section and later there is yet another account of the CIA's involvement: first their experiments with LSD in the Vietnam War and then in the '80s their attempts to control the cocaine trade by ensuring they were the biggest and best supplier. As a result of a century's experimentation with narcotics, we now know they work only because they mimic innate chemical processes of the human body. So if you can't afford to buy heroin, then go jogging (and endorphins can be as addictive as heroin, though without *all* the withdrawal symptoms). If drugs are such an evil, perhaps we should ban jogging...

Secondly, and where *Writing on Drugs* gets most interesting, is in the last fifth where the link between drugs and international capital is shown not to be a twentieth century phenomenon but rather that drugs and capital are (and always have been) inextricably linked. Opiates were an essential commodity for the development of capital in nineteenth century Britain and that the first 'wars on drugs' were fought not to limit their trade but in order to open up the Chinese market to the British run East India company. Similarly that American attempts to control the trade were caused by a double movement of taxation of imports and attempts to get countries to buy goods that America did happen to produce. Morality, as usual, turns out to be a very late arrival on the scene of America's attempts to control the world.

Unfortunately, there is nothing really resembling an intoxicated Marxist theory attempting to emerge from this book; which is annoying as the four writers mentioned above could clearly be mined for the resources for such

a theory, Burroughs, perhaps being used to modify Marx's famous formula to: Junk-Capital-Junk?¹

Writing on Drugs tells us that:

By the time Coca-Cola celebrated its centenary, the Coca-Cola Company had become one of America's top ten corporations, selling nearly half of all the soft drinks in the world, and spending some \$4 billion every year on marketing and it was advertising that allowed Coca-Cola to survive without cocaine. Adverts filled the gap left by the drug, compensating for the loss of an ingredient that had once allowed the drink to sell itself. Adverts were the hook with which Coca-Cola became the first addictive commodity to contain no addictive substance. In effect, the drink became a kind of virtual cocaine, a simulated kick, a highly artificial paradise. Twentieth century consumer culture learned much from this sleight of hand. (69-70)

However, anecdotes, even amusing ones, are no substitute for analysis. This linking of drugs, adverts and addiction begs for a chapter itself but we are left hanging, wondering how adverts function: is it correct to say that the drink alone functions as a 'virtual cocaine' or would it be better to say that the drink-advert assemblage functions addictively? The reader will have to write that one themselves.

The ever present danger though, of being interesting (and this is an interesting book, in as much as it holds your interest), is the risk of being unoriginal. Interesting points have the irritating habit of having been made by other people and this in the last respect is the major problem with this book: that all the links, allusions and lists that *Writing on Drugs* makes have been made before and in greater depth and detail. Read it when hung-over and then mainline some Burroughs.

¹ "The cotton [or Junk] originally bought for £100 is for example re-sold at £100+£10, i.e. £110. The complete form of this process is therefore M-C-M'" *Capital* Volume 1 (251).