

England began importing coffee from the Muslim East in the seventeenth century. At first many Britains viewed the brewed substance with suspicion, and some groups made efforts to demonize it. The “coffee house” was a threat to English ale houses, and thus the economy, and of course was counter to Christian values. Worse still, its stimulant actions caused impotence and “made men as unfruitful as the deserts whence that unhappy berry is said to be brought.”¹ England eventually made peace with the popular and profitable bean, however, reclassifying it as a harmless beverage.² Today coffee is not just the working person’s daily wake-up fix and the café philosopher’s stimulant of choice—it is also a global billion-dollar business.

This about sums up the modern history of drugs: irrational and unpredictable, full of fear and loathing, with a strong theme of commerce running right through the center. Far from deviating from this norm, America in the twentieth century dealt with drugs in a fashion as irrational and as seemingly unpredictable as any nation in history. The only obvious constant in America’s relationships with psychoactive substances, whether from the street, the store, or the pharmacy, was that, like coffee, nearly all these substances at some point carried a strong emotional charge in society. This was as true for heroin and alcohol as it was for popular “medicines” like Benzedrine, Miltown, and Prozac.

Drugs in twentieth-century America thus became a vast and layered realm of significance, a territory of meaning contested with great zeal. For the meaning of a drug determined not only its legitimacy but also who could use it and how, and who could not—at least not legally. By midcentury, drugs in America began to be divided up accordingly, as the market for mind-altering substances fractured into two and then three parts: the “illegal drugs” of the black market, the “ethical medicines” of the pharmaceutical market, and the drugs of the gray market, which by the end of the century included alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine. Whether a drug fell into one category or another at any particular time was viewed not as an irrational and unpredictable enterprise driven by the historically contingent

forces of culture and commerce but as a straightforward scientific issue. Even respected drug scholars and researchers held throughout the century that by entering the bloodstream and thereby directly impacting the brain, drugs acquire special powers.

Modern science did not do away with myth, in other words, by tearing down the ancient view of drugs as powerful spirits. Instead, a cult of pharmacology emerged as pharmacological essences replaced magical ones. The former were said to act in much the same manner as the latter, in that a drug's powers were still viewed as capable of bypassing all the social conditioning of the mind, directly transforming the drug user's thoughts and actions. As "soul" was reinterpreted as "mind," and "spirit" was reinterpreted as "biochemistry," magical explanations of drug action fell out of use. Indeed, psychobabble and biobabble had taken their place.

But do not misunderstand me. In suggesting that a cult of pharmacology came to reign supreme over America, I am not also suggesting a conspiracy theory. In this book I describe various networks of understandings within which drug-related phenomena, both praised and condemned, were interpreted, and how these understandings caused the social and historical determinants of "drug effects" to be overlooked. The pharmaceutical industry, the tobacco industry, modern biological psychiatry, the biomedical sciences, the drug enforcement agencies, and the American judicial system—all these institutions were quick to embrace and promote a cult of pharmacology not as a conspiracy but as a belief system that served their own interests, albeit in varying ways. In fact, to suggest an active conspiracy would be to miss a central theme of this history, for the power of the cult of pharmacology to classify drugs as angels and demons stemmed largely from the fact that it was widely embraced. America became the world's most troubled drug culture not because the government conspired to allow access to drugs to some while denying access to others, but because more than any other nation, it was a full member of the cult—it truly believed.

Still, the ideology of the all-powerful drug, the cult of pharmacology, at times came into question, as in Peter Laurie's *Drugs*, Alfred Lindesmith's *Addiction and Opiates*, Stanton Peele's *The Meaning of Addiction*, Oakley Ray's *Drugs, Society, and Human Behavior*, Eric Schlosser's *Atlantic Monthly* essays on "reefer madness," Thomas Szasz's *Ceremonial Chemistry*, Andrew Weil's *The Natural Mind*, and Norman Zinberg's *Drugs, Set, and Setting*.³

These and other interrogations of drug issues implicated a variety of non-pharmacological factors in the shaping of drug outcomes and of America as a drug culture. Although they had little effect in tearing down the cult of pharmacology, they were nevertheless significant for promoting understanding of how drugs work.

Weil's *Natural Mind* (1972), for instance, lays out a first principle about drugs and society: the desire for altered states of consciousness is a natural drive among human beings (indeed, of all the cultures in the world, only the Eskimos lack a tradition of drug use).⁴ Much of what has taken place in the name of drugs, throughout history and in twentieth-century America, boils down to this fact and one other, namely, that given the basic human tendency toward altered states, society is always confronted with the problem of how to deal with mind-altering substances and activities.

Weil later co-wrote *From Chocolate to Morphine*, an equally lucid work that, among other things, attempts to clarify the differences between *drug use* as a description of behavior and *drug abuse* as a moral judgment of that behavior. "Any drug can be used successfully, no matter how bad its reputation, and any drug can be abused, no matter how accepted it is. There are no good or bad drugs; there are only good and bad relationships with drugs."⁵ Here Weil presents another basic principle for drugs and society: in its response to drugs, society has a tendency to load them with extraneous meaning — with myth. Gradually, but sometimes very quickly, this meaning joins the drug ritual itself, animating drug outcomes.

In looking at drugs in twentieth-century America, one must pick up where the nineteenth century left off, that is, in the middle of an ongoing drug drama, a drama that not only spilled over into the twentieth century with great impact but also clearly emerged from the two principles identified by Weil: drug use is ubiquitous, and the social meanings drugs acquire often transform their effects, their uses, and their users. But something specific to drugs in twentieth-century America was also evident by the end of the century. Below the surface of the influential pseudoscience of drugs that developed was a strong and growing undercurrent of understanding, both scientific and conceptual, that, had it been acknowledged in Western society, could have undermined the modern mythologizing of drugs as angels and demons.

Instead, America became the world's most troubled drug culture, never

making peace with drugs. In much the same manner that the U.S. government protected settlers from the “transgressions” of American Indians more than a century ago, it came to defend one side of drugs (pharmaceutical drug use and “misuse”) while trying to exterminate the other (illicit drug use and “abuse”). What is more, it did this in large part by promoting the mythology that “drugs” and their users, like the American Indians, are demons in need of total destruction.

That a cult of pharmacology continues to prevail reveals a final, basic principle about mind-altering drugs: any society that allows the meaning of drugs to unhinge from their everyday, human reality puts itself at risk for great misadventure and even unprecedented human tragedy.