

Drugs and social complexity: constants of the past and present

Silvia Núñez García*

Despite the differences inherent in the particular situation of each country, the growing relevance of drug-related problems in the international community has created a universal dilemma regarding the very viability of our civilization.

Within this framework, the degree of deterioration in social conditions which each country has experienced would seem, to a greater or lesser degree, to be both a cause and an effect of the increase in drug abuse. However, in spite of this argument's effectiveness in illustrating the dialectical nature of the problem, there are two additional contributing factors which cannot be ignored.

The first is the recognition of the fact that the human race has used and abused drugs throughout history. In order to assess the current situation objectively previous contexts and

perceptions must be considered carefully.

The second factor is that we must locate the decline of present society within the framework of crises in our political and economic structures. This is a crisis reflected in reduced individual and collective expectations, lower standards of living, and the loss of legitimacy of those institutions which traditionally enjoyed a broad social consensus, the most important of these being the family, the state, and the church.

An examination of history suggests the multiple roles which drugs have played. In the *Manual de las Materias Medicinales* of 1597 we see that regardless of their origin "drugs have the power to heal and relieve pain, but they can be deadlier than a sword." This passage reveals a high degree of awareness of the risks involved in the use of drugs.

In ancient China, Egypt, and Pre-Columbian America, the "magical properties" of opium, hashish, coca,

and peyote had been noted and recorded.

These herbs, and extracts made from them, were believed to provide the means to make contact with the supernatural. Their influence could also be felt in the political, religious, social, and economic spheres. In societies governed by theocratic military structures, communication with the gods was singularly important, not only as worship per se, but also as political strategy.

The healing or analgesic properties attributed to certain plants was also socially functional in the cycles of sickness and health. Coca, which was used exclusively by indigenous communities until the seventeenth century, is a typical example of the role played by drugs in the economy¹.

The use of the coca leaf was also accepted because of its power to

¹ See Antonio Escobonado, *Historia de las Drogas*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1989, 2 vols.

*Researcher at the CISEVA.



Rodolfo Valtierra/Cuartosuro

A youthful victim of an ancient problem.

enable people to withstand the rigors of daily work. The people of the Andes, whose geographical realities made it particularly hard for them to perform difficult physical tasks, benefitted enormously from a substance which, whilst alleviating the fatigue of its peasants and warriors and easing the population's suffering in times of scarcity, at the same time helped them survive.

One phenomenon, many facets

The increased use of opium throughout Europe, where reports dating from the

earliest times indicate it originated in the Middle East, had numerous consequences.

One of the most important was the massive introduction of opium into China at the beginning of the seventeenth century. A tool of Western colonialism, the narcotic flood altered the tradition of moderation regarding the use of opium which the Chinese had cultivated for centuries.

The Chinese had previously used opium for medicinal and culinary purposes. However, the events which led up to the so-called Opium Wars in

the nineteenth century illustrate the economic, geopolitical, and social factors which contributed to a new opium myth. Concrete financial interests were served by the artificial creation of a need for opium.

Since opium was already used for bartering in China, the Europeans were able to take advantage of the fact that it could be easily transported by sea and introduced on a large scale in exchange for tea, silk and spices, all for a considerable profit.

Oppression, coupled with growing discontent with the ruling classes, led to a rapid increase in the number of opium smokers in China, further inflated because the use of tobacco was prohibited.

The opium laws, which first prohibited the import of opium and eventually made both its cultivation and use illegal, appeared to have moral foundations, but were in fact based primarily on economic considerations.

The Western hunger for precious metals threatened the fragile Chinese economy based on spice trading. Opium was prohibited primarily as a protectionist measure.

However, as is often the case with economic policies, the measure was counterproductive. Popular discontent grew to such an extent that opium smoking became a symbol of resistance in the face of Manchuian tyranny. The creation of a black market made even higher profits for the Europeans, who had plenty of experience in handling smuggled goods. The Chinese regime was weakened by the sudden increase in corruption and illegal trading.

The surrender of the Chinese in the face of the expansionist British capitalists following a ceasefire and the signing of a treaty in 1842 signalled the end of this chapter of the Opium Wars.

As compensation for the large quantities of British-owned opium which had been destroyed, and the "rigid Chinese commercial policies," England was awarded Hong Kong and

Amoy. Several years later opium imports in that area were once again legalized, and Europeans obtained sailing rights along the Yangtze river and freedom of movement for Christian missionaries.

Liberals and conservatives

The case of opium in China has been described in some detail in order to remind ourselves of the degree of caution with which it is necessary to begin dealing with the problem of drugs in this century.

As the direct descendants of liberal ideas and laissez-faire policies, our societies are at present in the midst of a crisis in which conservative clichés, while offering no alternatives, faithfully indicate the high level of irritation.

There is a myriad of different viewpoints not only on the social significance of drugs, their use and consequences, but also on their legalization or prohibition.

When the advantages of industrial society are called into question by the numerous signs of deterioration, the most reactionary minds tend to associate drug use with moral degradation and absence of values, which they then attribute to an increasingly *lay* society.

To solve the problem conservatives have suggested strengthening military and police forces in order to catch drug traffickers and protect civilians from the violence ascribed to drug addicts. They advocate collective testing to detect the use of illegal drugs in both education and the workplace.

Like their conservative counterparts, the liberal position is located within the broad range of abstractions contained by the notion of freedom.

The most radical advocate the total legalization of drugs, whilst at the same time insisting that society renew its commitment to instill a sense of self-control in its members as an integral part of responsible freedom.

Using detailed analyses to support their arguments, they contend that anti-drug laws prevent the individual from adopting a critical, objective stance towards the problem, and a vicious circle is born. Given that it is unrealistic to suppose that the use of drugs could ever be totally eliminated, a more pragmatic approach might be to allow drugs to circulate in a self-regulating market.

From another point of view, liberals defend the community's prerogative to define and adopt ad-hoc

policies according to their particular circumstances in order to solve the problem. By objecting to any kind of coercive measures, they also protect the rights of the individual.

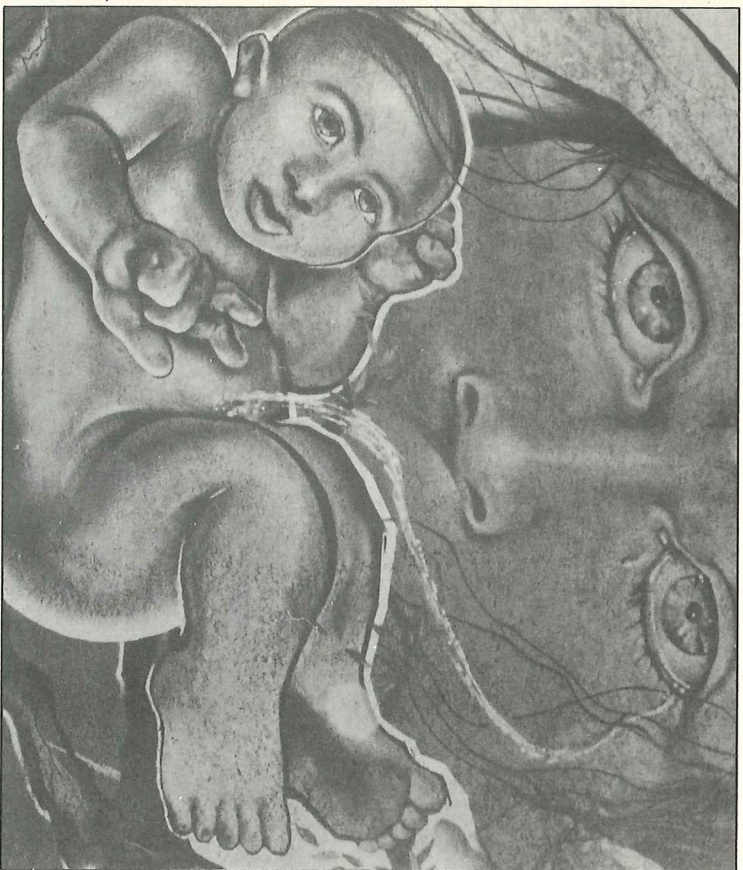
The basic tenets of this ideology brings to mind Thomas Jefferson, who in his *Notes on Virginia* (1784-1785) argues that freedom of individual thought and conscience is a natural and inviolable right. Therefore, the use or abuse of drugs is an entirely personal decision which should only be punished if it harms others.



Julio Candalaria/Cuartoscuro

It's just too easy for him to get hold of...

Tomás Martínez/Cuartoscuro



One addiction can have two victims.

Nevertheless, one question remains unanswered. If we accept Jefferson's argument in relation to an adult's capability for discernment, how is the problem of addiction in minors to be dealt with?

A concrete example in Mexico: the use of inhalants

Whilst the following is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis, it does aim to highlight aspects of the problem which have transcended national boundaries.

The population explosion, together with the ever-increasing concentration of the population in urban centers, continues to challenge developing countries.

In these circumstances fewer opportunities leads to marked social inequality, the effects of which are most acutely felt among the poorer sectors of society.

In an environment where depression, violence, insecurity, and hunger reign, inhaling chemical solvents provides both children and young people with an accessible means

of avoiding reality and experiencing a vital feeling of belonging to a group, in this case often their gang.

Such addiction, and the serious physical effects caused by consuming poisonous substances, threatens to increase as the social, industrial and domestic use of solvents makes them both cheaper and more available, and the economic crisis increases the level of insecurity and hopelessness in society.

Even though the last National Survey on Addiction in Mexico, made three years ago by the *Dirección General de Epidemiología* (Department of Epidemiology) and the *Instituto Mexicano de Psiquiatría* (Mexican Institute of Psychiatry), mentions marijuana as the most commonly used drug in the country and states that only 5% of the total population has used drugs at some time, available information on inhalants reveals an urgent need to implement measures aimed not only at preventing but also at halting the spread of their use because most of the victims are children.

The studies indicate that children start using these chemical substances between the ages of eight and fifteen and that, in spite of existing regulations prohibiting their sale to children under eighteen, solvents can be obtained through friends or acquaintances who acquire them directly or indirectly.

Users come from broken homes and tend to have had limited schooling. Only 29.4% are employed for the whole year. Among the users, 33.3% have more than ten children and 58.4% of these parent users are over forty years old. It has also been demonstrated that solvent abuse in the child often coincides with the parents' addiction to alcohol or other drugs.

The problem is aggravated in Mexico by the fact that solvent use has a strong correlation with juvenile criminal activity.

Given the delicate nature of the situation, in addition to providing information about the risks of addiction through educational campaigns and having institutions encourage voluntary rehabilitation, all Mexicans should commit themselves to the goal of social justice.

In a world which is governed by consumer choice, the poverty in which these child solvent-users live should make us realize the real source of the problem.

If we could go one step further, we might even question the nature of the social pathology in which we ourselves are immersed. The widespread use of all kinds of medicines would seem to signal the entrenchment of an established order under the permanent influence of legal drugs.

What are our priorities? To answer the universal need to soften the impact of reality, and to do it safely, or the economic power wielded by chemical and pharmaceutical companies? **M**