Mass Consumption Culture and Consciousness Alteration:

Why Performance Enhancers Are a Problem for Prohibition[1]

ABSTRACT

In this article we suggest that drug prohibition cuts against the consumerist cultural grain of advanced industrial society and is therefore likely to be perceived as increasingly problematic. This argument is rooted in an observation found in virtually all classical social theory and most modern historical writing: the spread of modern capitalism loosens the grip of tradition, especially ascetic traditions. For example, in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1985 [1920]), Max Weber argued that the affluence generated by capitalism has cultural consequences that undermine the asceticism which helped generate that affluence in the first place (see also Marcuse, 1964; Bell, 1976). For better or worse, the consumption of commodities for pleasure appears to be growing inexorably more central to modern capitalist societies and therefore more legitimate. In effect, many commodities and purchasable experiences are consciousness-altering; performance-enhancing and other licit and illicit drugs are only one type of such commodities. We argue that such consumption has become so intrinsic to modern society that more and more people will be ingesting more and more consciousness-altering commodities, and, therefore, that drug prohibition's selective use of criminal law to enforce abstinence from one group of such commodities is likely to be increasingly perceived as illegitimate and to be increasingly ineffective.

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Ingestion of the relatively few drugs that are currently illicit has become a proverbial small fish in an enormous sea of commodities and commodified experiences that are advertised, sold, and consumed precisely because they alter feelings, mood, and consciousness. This is because the U. S. and other advanced industrial societies have become what many scholars call mass consumption cultures. By the late 19th century, the industrial revolution had given rise to mass production and assembly line manufacturing, thereby changing forever the ways modern societies produced the things citizens needed to live. However, most people were not then accustomed to purchasing manufactured goods to satisfy their needs. Most people still either made a great deal of what they needed or made do with what they had. This created a problem for the captains of commerce and industry. If their huge investments in new mass production technologies were to be profitable, the new products had to be sold on a huge scale — that is, mass production required mass consumption. Citizens had to be converted into consumers.

In the early decades of the 20th century, a number of influential American business leaders began to solve this problem by luring Americans to break their old habits of saving and home producing, and to start consuming instead. Captains of industry transformed themselves into what Stuart Ewen (1976) has called "captains of consciousness" in order to create demand for mass produced consumer goods. They developed innovative marketing and advertising techniques, and they used the insights of the new discipline of psychology to establish techniques for convincing people to satisfy their needs and wants — and to assuage the anxieties and

insecurities that advertising was often designed to create — through the consumption of commodities.

At first, mass consumption spread slowly, existing alongside traditional lifestyles which valued scrimping and saving, making things or making do. The construction of the consumer was also slowed by the Great Depression and World War II. But in the post-war economic boom, and with the rampant suburbanization in the 1950s and 1960s, mass consumption began to spread among working-class and affluent families alike. The architects of mass consumption not only translated traditional needs for the "hardware" of social life — food and furniture — into the commodity form; they also increasingly created new needs for "software": beauty products, health and mental health services, movies, music, massage, amusement parks, video games, vacations, art, and spectator sports. Their ingenious use of advertising and other pioneering marketing techniques created a growing array of new "needs" and wants in a process that philosopher Richard Lichtman (1982) has called "the production of desire."[2]

From the present vantage point at the end of the 20th century, it seems plain that culture and character have been transformed almost as dramatically as the assembly line had transformed the handicraft labor of blacksmiths. Shopping malls and shopping districts have become the most important arenas of public life in many cities, towns, and suburbs. Shopping has become a leisure activity in itself. The modern economy has become dependent upon mass consumption: without it, aggregate demand declines, and so do industrial production, profits, growth, jobs, taxes, public services, and the quality of our lives. Economists speak of "underconsumption" as the essence of economic recession.

Daniel Bell (1976) has pointed out the contradiction between America's old work culture and its new mass consumption culture. The Protestant work ethic and delayed gratification may still remain relatively strong in the work sphere. But, Bell argues, in leisure and private life people are incessantly encouraged to enjoy, indulge, and consume — and they do. Mass consumption has become intrinsic to modernity, one of the defining features of advanced industrial societies (see also Marcuse, 1964). Most Americans whose incomes put them above the poverty line spend a great deal of their leisure time and disposable income consuming commodities for entertainment and pleasure. The word pleasure is important here, for whether one likes it or laments it, the pursuit of pleasure has become a rather normal "vocabulary of motive" (Mills, 1940). When asked why they buy all these commodities, Americans (and, we suspect, many others) tend to answer that they derive pleasure from them. This is the same reason drug users give for their drug use.

From this vantage point, the consumption of consciousness-altering commodities is not so much alien to modern culture as intrinsic to it. Modern men and women inhabit a world where they routinely get "high" on music, feel moved by movies, hope to improve their chances of experiencing sexual ecstasy by consuming Calvin Klein cologne or Johnny Walker scotch, and endlessly "improve" their selves with commodities ranging from hair coloring to psychotherapy to cosmetic surgery. In such a world, the consumption of consciousness-altering commodities — drugs — is not a large leap down a dark, unknown road but just another short step along a well-worn and familiar path.[3]

Prozac Present, Pharmacological Future

It seems likely that the future will bring ever more consumption of commodities, including consciousness-altering commodities. The technical capacities for changing the self with chemicals continue to multiply at an astonishing rate. The pharmaceutical industry is prospering in part by inventing ever more drugs that

[1] *In a similar vein, Paul Scriven has noted that because the U.S. is a "medicine society," illicit drug use is "rooted in legal drug use. We are a society of members who routinely use drugs to maintain and enhance our lifestyle. In a sea of behavioral drug usage, a certain portion is contained and declared immoral and dangerous. Why should we be surprised that so many venture into the roped off area ....?" (1992:xi)*

[2] *Weil, Andrew, The Natural Mind: An Investigation of Drugs and the Higher Consciousness (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972). This article is adapted from the conclusion of the forthcoming book, Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice (University of California Press, 1997), edited by Craig Reinarman and Harry G. Levine. It was presented in paper form on the panel on performance enhancing drugs at the 8th International Conference on the Reduction of Drug Related Harm, Paris, March 23-27, 1997.*

[3] *In his classic book, The Affluent Society, economist John Kenneth Galbraith makes much the same point: "As a society becomes increasingly affluent, wants are increasingly created by the process by which they are satisfied. This may operate passively. Increases in consumption, the counterpart of increases in production, act by suggestion or emulation to create wants. Or producers may proceed actively to create wants through advertising and salesmanship.... The higher level of production has, merely, a higher level of want creation necessitating a higher level of want satisfaction" (1958:128).*

enhance human capacities and improve, control, or otherwise alter our moods and minds (e.g., Valium, Librium, and an expanding array of other common tranquilizers, anti-anxiety, and anti-depressant drugs).

Prozac is one such drug. We think it provides a window on the pharmacological future. Many psychiatrists have hailed this relatively new anti-depressant as a mental health miracle, and it has been immensely popular and profitable. Since its invention in 1987, over 15 million people have used it, most of them Americans. More than any other single drug, Prozac was responsible for a 50% increase in the 1980s in the number of patients who were prescribed consciousness-altering drugs by psychiatrists in the U.S. (Rothman, 1994). It is taken by people who feel too "down" or too "up," and for various forms of depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, anxieties, attention deficit disorders, general malaise, and a growing array of other "conditions" that a decade ago were considered within the normal range of human mood and personality variation. Now U.S. doctors are prescribing Prozac to hundreds of thousands of young people for "teenage problems" – a "disorder" that was seen until recently as only the problems of teenagers. Indeed, according to the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, the number of prescriptions for antidepressants for children has nearly tripled in recent years, from 1.5 million in 1990 to 4 million in 1994, much of it "off-label" prescribing (i.e., not officially recommended by pharmaceutical manufacturers because the safety and efficacy of such drugs have not been tested for children [Sacks, 1997:1A]). It is not too much to say that Prozac and its sister substances are, like ritalin before them, being prescribed to enhance the psycho-behavioral performance – or at least the social manageability – of millions of children.

Psychiatrist Peter Kramer praises Prozac in his book, Listening to Prozac (1993), which jumped onto the New York Times Bestseller List and stayed there for months. The book's subtitle contains the telling phrase "the Remaking of the Self." The author cheerfully writes of "cosmetic psychopharmacology" in which people who are not by any standard definition mentally ill are given Prozac because, like the millions of ordinary looking people who opt for cosmetic surgery, they found that they liked their "selves" on the drug better than their "selves" without it. Little wonder, for the effects of this new drug, Kramer writes, tend to *"give social confidence to the habitually timid, to make the sensitive brash, to lend the introvert the social skills of a salesman."*

We think Prozac, Ritalin, the benzodiazapines (Valium, etc.), and other pharmaceuticals should be seen not only as exemplars of the new psychopharmacology, but also as part of a revolution in mood and consciousness-alteration that is well underway. There is little historical or scientific reason to believe that drug prohibition will be able to manage all the mood-altering and performance-enhancing drugs that are proliferating. In fact, this revolution is already overwhelming existing physician- and pharmacy-based regulation (see, e.g., Murray et al., 1984). As historian David Rothman (1994:38) put it:

"Today we stand and listen to Prozac; tomorrow we will listen to a new hormone, and the day after tomorrow, to a new genetic manipulation. I can conceive of strict rules and procedures, but I have grave difficulty imagining them being implemented and respected. We would need a very different breed of patient and doctor, and we would have to be a very different kind of society."

Here is our argument in a nutshell: the economic-cultural technology that creates demand for consciousness altering commodities, as well as the pharmaceutical technology for satisfying it, are both racing ahead of the political technology for controlling it.

If this is true for drugs that are, in theory, controlled by prescription, it is

certainly no less true for illicit drugs that are not controlled at all. Just as alcohol prohibition led to dangerous, concentrated forms of liquor from illicit distilling, so has prohibition of heroin, for example, led underground chemists to make synthetic heroin (fentanyl). Dozens of "designer drugs" have sprung up underneath the nation's drugs laws. The U.S. Congress and the Food and Drug Administration now take longer to make a new drug control law (even if we assume it will be effective) than chemists take to invent or discover a new drug. Indeed, one recent memoir by a well known pharmaceutical chemist contains 500 pages of chemical formulae for 179 new psychedelic drugs (Shulgin and Shulgin, 1991).

Even if effective controls on chemists were conceivable, how long will the 100 or more little-known psychoactive plants in places like the Amazon rain forest remain out of reach when communication and transportation technologies are shrinking the globe? (see, e.g., Weil, 1972:98-111; Schultes and Hoffman, 1979; Siegel, 1989). One need not refer to drugs from distant and exotic lands to show the futility of prohibition's efforts to keep up with the drugs that exist or will be brought into existence. In March of 1994, the Wall Street Journal offered a front-page story on the "hallucinogenic venom" contained in a species of Colorado River Toad found in the Southwestern U.S. While the article of course proclaims the dangers of this substance, it also describes a Boy Scout leader who had four such frogs as pets, and details how extracting, drying, and then smoking the venom yields the hallucinogen Bufotenine (Richards, 1994).

Perhaps most important, the line separating psychoactive recreational drugs from other substances is becoming increasingly blurred, thanks in large part to performance-enhancing drugs. There has been much news about the use of anabolic steroids in the Olympics or other athletic competitions. But there is also growing use of such steroids by body builders in high schools, colleges, and local fitness spas across the country. Steroid use entails well known health risks, but tens of thousands of young athletes and body builders have found underground sources and continue to inject them anyway — and not just because steroids add muscle bulk quickly but because at least some steroid injectors "get off" on the extra aggressiveness they feel in their bulked-up state. Just as anorexic cover girls and models have led many young women to internalize unnatural feminine beauty ideals, so have many young men internalized the Arnold Schwartzenegger body image as the essence of masculinity and sought a chemical shortcut to achieving it. In cultures that are achievement-oriented, value aggressiveness, and advertise all manner of products purporting to help individuals look, feel, and do better, market demand for a growing array of performance-enhancing substances is very likely to increase.

As for supply, Prozac and steroids are only recent cases in a longer pharmaceutical history which suggests that chemists will continue to find or invent new substances that are either designed to enhance human performance or will quickly be used that way. And because these substances fall in between our current chemical categories, they will cause yet more problems for prohibition. For example, so-called "smart drugs" — combinations of vitamins and more exotic ingredients that can alter consciousness — have been common for years in health food stores and in the "rave scene," where MDMA or Ecstasy use is common (Beck and Rosenbaum, 1994). Recent New York Times reports have noted that since 1990, millions of doses of a legal Chinese herb, ma huang or ephedra, have been sold over the counter as an organic, herbal cousin of illicit drugs like Ecstasy or methamphetamine. Different brand names of this substance, such as "Herbal Ecstasy," "Ultimate Xphoria," and "Cloud 9," promise "a floaty, mind-expanding euphoria," "increased sexual sensations," "enhanced sensory processing," and "mood elevations."

The key ingredient in these products, ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, is already present in numerous non-prescription cold and allergy medicines. The herb itself is inexpensive and the synthetic form of it is very easy to produce. Thus it is likely that more such substances are on the way and that governments will have an increasingly difficult time even regulating them, much less prohibiting them. According to Dr. David Kessler, Commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, *"You are always chasing harm after it has occurred. What companies do is reformulate, and we have to start all over again, and because there are many different products and many different combinations, you end up chasing forever"* (Burros and Jay, 1996:B8; Lambert, 1996:A12).

Similarly, college newspapers across the U.S. have reported that new "smart drugs" and other herb-based substances can enhance test-taking and other dimensions of intellectual performance. Students have long known that over-the-counter caffeine products like No-Doze can help them stay awake to cram for exams, and they are likely to be faced with many new alternatives. Similarly, coffee, tea, and cold caffienated beverages are already present in most workplaces precisely because they are performance enhancers. With the growth of super vitamins, smart drugs, and the many other performance-enhancing and consciousness-altering substances that are coming along, it is not clear where the border of moral-legal acceptability will be drawn in the future, much less how it could ever be effectively patrolled by the state.

Finally, the efficacy and legitimacy of prohibition look bleaker still if one gazes into the crystal ball of science fiction. Science fiction is fiction, of course, but it also has one foot in science and real trends, and it has sometimes been quite prescient. The science fiction novels of the 1950s contain some still unimaginable technological feats, but they also contain a great number of innovations that we now take for granted. Most sci-fi fans of the 50s probably did not think that humans would walk on the moon a decade or so later. We already have organ transplant surgery, whole encyclopedias condensed onto tiny CD Rom disks, genetically engineered strawberries and medicines, as well as space travel. How long will it take the Human Genome Project, avant garde neuroscientists, hormone therapy researchers, and software designers to astound us with entirely new chemical and even electronic means of consciousness alteration? Comedian Lilly Tomlin once quipped, *"I worry that the inventor of muzak is busy inventing something else."* With respect to the future of consciousness alteration, we wonder what the inventor of Virtual Reality is busy inventing. As the 20th century comes to a close, pacemakers, artificial hips, and all manner of plastic surgery have fallen into the realm of normalcy. Meanwhile, cutting-edge computer engineers, artificial intelligence experts, and other cyberists are already working on miniature computers that can be implanted in the body to enhance human capabilities and other means of escaping the body by electronically "downloading" knowledge, sights, sounds, and highs into consciousness (see, e.g., Dery, 1996; Haraway, 1985). Can anyone who has lived through the breathtaking technological advances since World War II credibly claim that the early 20th-century invention of drug prohibition will be able to control the consciousness-altering technology that is likely to be invented in the early 21st?

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