

On the legalisation of drugs

9 June 1999

Dear Editors,

First, I really enjoy the articles at the *World Socialist Web Site*, and I find your analysis of the NATO war (as well as the Starr witch-hunts) to be accurate and excellent.

Unfortunately, I take issue with the article on the Sydney Drug Summit. I find that the human need and desire to alter their consciousness to be a natural condition of human nature, especially with naturally psychoactive properties. Even animal research shows that they even seek out to alter their consciousness. To lay the fault of drug taking on the human condition ("transforming conditions for the majority of the population so that life becomes a challenging and fulfilling experience, not a 'disappointing' and 'mediocre' one") is perhaps disingenuous, if not a little simplistic.

Other than that, I appreciate your coverages and perspectives, and I look forward every evening (here in California when the next day stories seem to be posted) to reading your latest items.

Thank you,

SW

Dear SW,

Thank you for your correspondence to the *World Socialist Web Site* and your support for the material posted on the site.

We have fundamental disagreements, however, with your attitude to drugs.

You write: "I find that the human need and desire to alter their consciousness to be a natural condition of human nature, especially with naturally psychoactive properties." (Our emphasis) What evidence do you have for this proposition? Can you point to any scientific or historical research that supports your "finding"? If it were true, one would expect to discover, throughout history, entire populations voluntarily pursuing that end. (As opposed, for example, to the population in China in the middle of last century, sections of which were systematically drugged with opium as part of British colonial strategy.)

History in fact suggests that there is indeed a natural human need and desire to alter consciousness—in the form of the acquisition of knowledge, the overcoming of ignorance and the mastery of nature. This is a very different thing. It involves the genuine expansion of consciousness, not its destruction. While periods of regression have existed, in general, humanity has developed through the pursuit of science, technique, education and the arts.

One of the hallmarks of society today is the denial of the

possibility of engaging in any meaningful work or creative endeavour for the vast majority of the population. Even those lucky enough to be employed in productive labour have little or no say in the production process and the conditions of their work. Moreover, they remain alienated from the products of their own labour. "Success" in terms of material wealth is dangled before the mass of people through the modern media, but it is out of reach for all but a small minority.

It is precisely because the natural urge to develop one's productive and intellectual potential, and that of society as a whole, is blocked for so many people that drugs are turned to as a substitute. Unable to engage in genuinely satisfying activity, millions seek solace in one form of chemically-induced escapism or another—from alcohol, cannabis and glue-sniffing to heroin and cocaine. Not only are these substances known, in sufficient quantity, to cause brain damage, they are also life-threatening.

New South Wales Labor Premier Bob Carr's remarks, which formed the focus of our article, need to be assessed within this context. After attending his government's Drug Summit for a few days, he made an abrupt conversion. Previously a vocal opponent of the legalisation of narcotics he foreshadowed a significant policy shift, on the grounds of his discovery that "life is inherently disappointing for most human beings" and some "just can't cope with that".

Carr's statement is remarkable in two respects. First, it constitutes an open admission of political failure. Since its inception more than a century ago, the Labor Party has claimed that the market economy could be modified and reformed to improve social conditions for all. Now a senior Labor politician has admitted that it cannot.

Furthermore, Carr explicitly argues that drugs are a useful tool in helping people to "cope". By this he means, not that their lives will improve, but that drugs can assist in helping them to accommodate to life's disappointments. Or, put more crudely, to passively accept their lot.

Allow us to provide you with some background to his remarks. Most of the victims of drug abuse in Australia are teenagers or young people in their 20s. These are also the age groups most affected by the deterioration in social conditions over the past 15 years. Increasingly deprived of decently-paid work and forced to live with their parents until well into their twenties, the situation they face is bleak. Since 1982, the poverty rate among Australian teenagers has almost doubled.

The resulting financial dependency on their families creates economic and emotional strains, leading to personal conflicts, family breakdown and rising homelessness.

Many young people have no choice but to remain at school, with no prospect of finding decent employment. Predictably, this creates tensions in the schools. In New South Wales last year, for example, school principals used new disciplinary powers introduced by the Carr government to suspend 38,000 students—5 percent of the total student population.

The turn to drugs is not motivated by a natural creative urge to explore the possibilities of the mind, as you suggest, but to cope with depression, anxiety and despair. For growing numbers, they provide the vehicle for self-destruction.

The latest statistics show that in 1997, a record 2,723 people committed suicide in Australia, a rise of 14 percent in a year and 24 percent over a decade. One-fifth of 1997's victims were aged 15 to 24. In that age group, suicide accounted for 19.1 percent of all deaths. Among 25 to 44 year-olds, the rate was even higher: 21 percent. This does not include those who died, intentionally or otherwise, from over-dosing. Last year, as we reported, 600 people overdosed on heroin alone.

The progression from casual drug-taking to addiction is well-known. We cited the statistics: in the past decade the number of drug addicts has trebled to 200,000. The consequences of this are equally well-known: psychiatric disorder, physical distress, prostitution, homelessness and crime.

All of these are rife in the working class suburbs of Australia's major cities as well as in many rural districts, where social conditions and employment prospects have all but collapsed. Yet it is not only the poorest and most oppressed layers who are affected. Young people of all social classes, particularly the more sensitive, have been profoundly influenced by the prevailing ideological climate.

Under conditions where solidarity and the traditions of collective struggle have been systematically undermined, and where no alternative seems to exist to a social order based on self-interest, violence, hypocrisy and a vast and increasing divide between rich and poor, many youth seek solace in drugs.

You describe as “disingenuous and simplistic” our argument that the solution lies in “transforming conditions for the majority of the population so that life becomes a challenging and fulfilling experience, not a ‘disappointing’ and ‘mediocre’ one”. But what remedy do you propose?

Altering one's consciousness by chemical means simply avoids—and compounds—the problem, which is social, not individual, in origin. That is why it is now all but advocated by Carr, in alliance with some of the most openly right-wing political figures in Australia, including Victoria's state Liberal Premier, Jeff Kennett.

Some within the radical protest milieu welcome this shift, arguing that at least funds and facilities will now be provided to care for the drug trade's victims. But in reality public health facilities are being starved of funds, while mental health and

drug treatment programs are being gutted. The purpose of this policy switch is not to provide additional resources but to legitimise the drug problem. In fact, one of its prime motivations is cost-cutting. Much of the 75 percent increase in the New South Wales prison population over the past decade, for instance, has come from drug-related crime. Instead of locking these people up in jails, where they have to be fed and clothed, governments will simply leave them on the streets, with ready access to cheap (and legal) drugs.

As we pointed out, while we oppose the criminalisation and punishment of the drug trade's victims, we equally oppose those who advocate the public acceptance of drug-taking. These positions are two sides of the same coin. Both leave entirely untouched the social crisis that has given rise to the drug epidemic.

Consider the following, famous passage written by Karl Marx. Religion, he writes, was the “opium of the people”. Why? Because, like religion, opium induces passivity and a blind acceptance of the existing social order. He indicts both religion and drugs for substituting “illusory happiness” for real happiness. He demands the abolition of the social conditions that require such illusions.

“Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain,” he writes, “not so that man will wear the chain without any fantasy or consolation but so that he will shake off the chain and cull the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusiones man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will revolve round himself and therefore his true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself.” (Marx, *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* [1844])

Sincerely,

Mike Head and Linda Tenenbaum



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