

## **‘Slamdance the cosmopolis’: Political Discourses around Drugs and Alcohol**

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Ghetto defendant  
It is heroin & Buckfast pity  
Not tear gas nor baton charge  
That stops you taking the city  
(*Ghetto Defendant* by Jones, Strummer [& Player])

### **Introduction**

My name is John Player, like the cigarettes. Some readers won't have heard of these odious cigarettes. My grandfather, also called John Player, died of lung cancer and is buried in a grave in Glasgow. His gravestone looks like the John Player Special (JPS) packet - gold lettering on a matte black background. He died of lung cancer at 55. This was, and remains, around the age that so many men die in Glasgow and the West of Scotland. I never met him, so this is personal.

The tobacco companies knew they were using the most addictive substance known to humankind to create one of the most successful capitalist commodities. They were also well aware, from the 1960s on, of the causality between smoking and early deaths due to lung cancer though this knowledge was suppressed for decades. It turns out that the tobacco companies were experts in semiotics: the study of signs deployed in advertising, for instance. The John Player Navy Cut signage of the dependable sailor was 'interpellated' (see Althusser 2001) in my grandfather's consciousness. He was 'hailed' by the tobacco companies shouting 'Hey, you there!' My grandfather turned around answered the call! Like so many others, he became their addicted 'subject'.

In turn, my own intoxicated identity was constructed partly through the signage of the 'moment' of 1968, when the left youth culture growing around the Anti-Vietnam War

movement and Black Power in the US, was articulated alongside the notion of emancipation through drug use. The widespread use of drugs and the introduction of opioids, amongst war veterans in the 1970s in the US and in the 1980s in Scotland, had an untold effect on the development of the New Left, on deprived communities and on me, personally. Considerable evidence now exists of the role of the CIA and FBI in targeting activists in the US by supplying such drugs (see McCoy 2003; Potash 2015). By way of a retort to these international structural concerns, I regard it as my personal responsibility now not to use drugs, and to give something back by beginning to help unveil historical structural causes and resistances.

### **Culture Clash**

The Clash, in their song Ghetto Defendant, warn of the role of heroin, crack and other Class A drugs in ensuring that movements of social change get derailed, or incorporated. Their blast is a forerunner to the early-1980s to 2000s hardcore punk straight-edge abstinence approach 'towards a less fucked-up world' (see Riotfag 2016). The uncompromising message of straight-edge abstinence anarchism is that, if social revolution is to succeed, then dependence on drugs and alcohol must be overcome. In *Towards a Less Fucked Up World: Sobriety and Anarchist Struggle* Riotfag asserts that this abstinence approach is derivative of the strong tendencies towards sobriety initiated by the Black Panther Party after their intense conflicts with internal imperialism in the USA in the 1960s and '70s. 'Capitalism plus dope equals genocide' was the adamant message of the Black Panther Party after these bitter and disabling experiences. They further asserted that it's in the interests of the capitalist class and their FBI agents that so many activists are 'doped out our heads'!

### **The contemporary context**

Scotland today is in the midst of a drugs crisis! The rise in drug-related deaths has been relentless, with the number of deaths increasing almost every year since the 1990s, and earning Scotland the title of 'drug death capital of the world'. Some 1,187 people died from drug-related causes in 2018 - an all-time-high for Scotland; higher than any other European country, and nearly three times that of the UK as a whole. The figures for

2019 are expected to show a significant increase. These figures are more than doubled when alcohol is taken into account. Stigma, the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee (2019:52) reported, is part of causality, with one respondent with lived experience maintaining that media accounts have a significant part to play by the language they use, and how they routinely portray people who use drugs.

The outcome of any serious community engagement must surely be to assist those experiencing drug and alcohol dependency to unveil and decode the structural apparatuses which stigmatise, oppress and criminalise. Such a collective retort would seek to contest such apparatuses by revealing ‘the ideological dimensions of texts, institutions, social practices and cultural forms such as television and film, in order to reveal their selective interests’ (McLaren, 1994: 07); selective interests which benefit and maintain the misery of those who inhabit and suffer from the diseases of despair.

It is no accident that drug-related harms and deaths, and, indeed, COVID-19-related deaths, cluster disproportionately in the most deprived areas of Scotland, exacerbating existing health inequalities. Compared to people in the least deprived areas, those living in areas of most deprivation experience lower levels of life expectancy (13.1 years less for men, 9.8 years less for women), lower levels of healthy life expectancy (23.9 years less for women, 23.1 years less for men), a 17 times higher level of drug use disorders (see Scottish Public Health Observatory 2018), a 23 times higher level of drug-related deaths (DRD) (see McPhee et al 2019), and are 2.3 times more likely to die of COVID-19. This is surely promising terrain for engaged political community development.

### **The Share: Learning for Democracy**

Notions of structural control and population management have become curricular issues for this adult education recovery programme based in Edinburgh. Those in recovery from drugs and alcohol engage in critical adult education, looking at the structural issues not necessarily covered in the '12-step' programme. The initiative is supported by ERA (Edinburgh Recovery Activities). The programme considers the ways in which social structures work, and in whose interests it is that the poorest in Scotland are dying disproportionately from DRDs (Drug Related Deaths). Riotfag (2016), for example,

asks, is it significant that some sections of the population, especially from poorer communities, are 'fucked by poly-drug use'? This candid language catalyses and impels political community development to truly consider what is at stake here!

### **Historical roots**

The group has begun to consider these questions by examining the historical genealogy of drug and alcohol use. It is interesting to note that Chartism flourished in the 19th century as part of, and alongside, the temperance movement. As Nicholls (2009: 51) points out,

Like the radical teetotallers of the 1830 and 1840s, socialist temperance campaigners identified the drinks trade as an industry which conspired to disenfranchise and exploit working people. Unlike their teetotal forebears, however, they absolutely rejected the simplistic 'absurdity' that drink was the sole cause of poverty. The drink problem was part of a wider problem of exploitation, lack of opportunity and cultural denigration. Nevertheless, it was a crucial part of the system of social and economic power that acted against the interest of the workers.

Their views were in some ways, then, akin to those of Calvinistic Presbyterianism, but they differed in their objectives: that you can't create social revolution – you can't create social change – if you're 'pished' out of your head! The counter hegemonic proposition for radicals in the 19th Century to this existential hell was quite straightforward. Political means, rather than personal annihilation, had to be developed to address suffering and alienation.

In 1919, in George Square, Scottish tanks were kept ready in Pollokshields in case there was a revolutionary alliance between the workers and the soldiers, as had been the case in the newly-formed Soviet Union. John Maclean, the revolutionary leader of the 1919 period, and founder of the Scottish Workers Republican Party (SWRP) was entirely abstinent from alcohol. Although educated within the church, Maclean developed his interests in secular Dialectical Materialist philosophy and Marxian economics.

Cooke (2015) points out that the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Scotland, along with the SWRP were militantly opposed to the First World War, while the licensing bodies and the breweries were fully in support. They encouraged their staff to fight, there was free drink for servicemen, and they whipped up a deep populist antagonism towards the Independent Labour Party: 'They loved drinking tea' was the demeaning image the breweries loved to project about the ILP. It could be argued, indeed, that the breweries helped ensure that, per head of population, more Scots died in the First World War than any other nation.

As already stated, the Scottish section of the ILP had a strong temperance cast to its politics. As late as 1926, it was passing motions for 'the total prohibition of the manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquors'. But the ILP was more than a Christian socialist 'heaven on earth' sort of organisation, it also had a radical wing that sent volunteers to fight Franco and were allied with the POUM, the Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista. In June 1937, Andrés Nin and most of the POUM leadership were 'arrested' by Stalinist agents and Nin was executed shortly afterwards. The ILP in Scotland, thus, had a well-developed anti-Stalinist analytical theoretical lens as well as a commitment to temperance. These links to the POUM and the CNT, the anarcho-syndicalist revolutionary organisations fighting Franco, are part of the legacy of the ILP in Scotland that have become hidden, or subjugated.

### **Recurring thematics**

Ed Edwards (2018) in his insightful and disturbing play *The Political History of Smack and Crack* draws parallels between the role of the British State and the FBI/CIA in the USA. He suggests, for example, that in areas of the UK after the 'riots' in 1981, or resistances and rebellions in Brixton, Toxteth, Moss Side, Handsworth, and Chapeltown, there had been a flooding of crack and smack on the streets, and the embryonic political movements were thus dissipated. He advises reading McCoy's (2003) *The Politics of Heroin, CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* to remind ourselves of the role of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, and the manner in which they coercively helped to destroy the rise of the Black Panthers at the end of the '60s, and amidst the Vietnam War; that heroin flooded the streets in which they were organising.

The argument goes that heroin was cheaper than marijuana and helped suppress the organisational ability of the Black Panther Party, the most influential black movement organisation of the late 1960s with the strongest link between the domestic Black Liberation Struggle and global opponents of American imperialism. As Harris (2015 03) points out it 'places the blame for the group's demise almost solely on the intransigence of the FBI, who allegedly colluded with the mafia and local law enforcement to flood the black community with drugs, necessitating the drug violence and addiction!' Similarly, both Edwards and McCoy maintain that drugs, as a population management tool, did not arrive by accident and have been utilised by nation-states such as the US and UK in times of intense crisis. These are sinister propositions that deserve further scrutiny.

I am suggesting that political community engagement should build upon the skills, knowledge and approach of the embryonic Share: Learning for Democracy group, with its emphasis upon the notion of praxis - the relationship between theory and practice. Given the unequivocal association between drug-related deaths and social class, I would suggest that a curriculum needs to be developed that seeks to theorise social class and its application to the study of health inequalities. Such an analysis would take into account the linguistic turn in Marxism, the nuances of post-structuralism and the voices of people who use drugs, and those who no longer use drugs. One serious question is: How do we support this community to resist, and not internalise, the biases, stigma and oppression of dominant discourses (see 'Conducting Critical Discourse Analysis' in Shaw and Crowther 2017)? Or as Joe Strummer puts it 'slamdance the cosmopolis'!

Finally, there is an issue of social justice surrounding the incidence of drug and alcohol deaths in Scotland. Contemporary community development, adult education and the new social movements concerned about Drug Related Deaths in Scotland needs to consider these wider political questions so that, as Edwards (2018) argues, those enduring disproportionate suffering may become full persons with respect to justice and no longer just objects of charity and benevolence.

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