

aversion to an agreeable sensation does not give a man the right to measure his neighbour's peck by his own bushel.<sup>2</sup>

In Japan, the intensely toxic flesh of the puffer fish, fugu, is prized as a fine seasonal delicacy. So dangerous is it that only tiny morsels may be consumed under extremely controlled circumstances, and fatalities arising from heart failure following an incautiously large ingestion are by no means unheard of. We may find it unfathomable that anybody should wish to take such a risk, but that is scarcely a reason to prevent them from doing so. These arguments are developed further in chapter 5 of this book, but it will be useful to remind ourselves at the outset of two uncontroversial but frequently forgotten points regarding illegal drugs.

The first is that we must learn to distinguish between substances. Even the legal classifications permit some distinctions, crude and unreliable though they are, between types of drugs, and the different actions they have in the body. Some drugs carry a high potential for dependency; others carry none. All that binds this entirely heterogeneous pharmacopoeia together is that all its elements have been declared illegal. To accept that blanket classification without query represents a failure of mental agility. Just because legislators have voted to be part of that failure, enshrining its ignorance in the role of the Drugs Tsar (whose unenviable task it is to bring about a reduction in consumption of these substances while simultaneously talking nonstop about them), does not mean that we have to accompany them into the dark cloud of unknowing. It constitutes a laming of the intellect to keep speaking of drugs as one amorphous, overweening category, as if the devil within it came forth and named its own evil at the mere mention of that haunting monosyllable. "Drug" is traceable back to the Old French "*drogue*"—the same as the modern French—before which its origin is swathed in uncertainty, but for most of its career it has been a value-free shorthand for all pharmaceuticals. Here is a sadly not atypical piece of maundering from a review of twentieth-century cultural history—Peter Conrad's *Modern Times, Modern Places*—otherwise rightly praised for its intellectual grip:

[I]n Los Angeles, Aldous Huxley experimented with psychedelic drugs, which he thought of as a chemical technology, a means of

instantaneous transport to nirvana. This was a seditious venture, because drugs challenge the imperatives of action and exertion which drive our history. They allow the user, immobilised during a trip which takes him nowhere, to slip out of time—to kill it by sitting still, rather than (like the Italian futurists in their sports cars) by frantic acceleration.<sup>3</sup>

A working mother of the 1960s, zipping through the ironing on prescription speed, might have been able to take issue with that last point, as might the superstar chef on cocaine, but it isn't simply that the hazed-out trance that was the paradigm state of "being on drugs" in the popular perception of the time won't serve as an emblem of all drug-taking now any more than it did then. It is also that it isn't especially serviceable as an account of the effect of hallucinogenic substances like Huxley's mescaline. (Huxley is actually anything but "immobilized" during his inaugural mescaline experience, as it is recorded for us in *The Doors of Perception*.) And then there is the familiar characterization of drugs as inimical to social functioning, as if a good deal of this "action and exertion" that has impelled our history hasn't in itself been brought about by individuals and classes whose awareness of reality was continually modified by intoxicants of all sorts. To posit the existence of a single, compendious substance called "drugs" is also to get away with the fiction that taking them is an eccentric pursuit found only in a deviant, dysfunctional subculture. But intoxicants in many forms have been an integral part of the lives of the mass of humanity both before and since many of them were declared off-limits, and in the light of that fact, we must question what sort of agenda is served by such a malevolent act of synthesis.

Having created this menacing shibboleth by means of the law, it has been easier to convince those who have stayed within the bounds of the officially sanctioned intoxicants—caffeine, tobacco and alcohol—that use of any of the other substances is an enterprise fraught with peril. Two mythical notions have been brought to bear in all public discourse on the subject: (a) the addiction model, under which all illegal substances are invested with the power to enslave the curious should they venture anywhere near them, and (b) the slippery-slope narrative, which warns that the seemingly less dangerous drugs are really gateways to harder, more injurious substances,

the process itself having a fatal inevitability about it that entraps even the most ironbound will in its tentacles. It will be seen that the two propositions can't both be true. Either all drugs are as addictively, corrosively bad as each other, in which case we may wonder what the derivation is of Schedule 1, Schedule 2 and so forth, or the truth is that there are some drugs that are not addictive. The latter is of course the case, but it is a truth that was only very reluctantly conceded by legislative authorities as recently as the 1970s, and it could only be apprehensively granted if it were tied to a mendacity that would prevent investigation of these so-called "soft" drugs. (A "soft" drug has always sounded to me about as exciting as a soft drink when what you want is a glass of beer, so the terminology may not have been an entirely fortunate one anyway.) There is no inevitable process that leads from cannabis to heroin, a point evinced by every single survey of illegal drug use; they all find that the vast majority of people who take proscribed substances take only cannabis, and have done so over many years. If the slippery slope does exist, it must be inclined at an extremely gentle gradient. In fact, as political administrators well know from their own commissioned research—much of it kept securely unpublished—it doesn't. It's just easier to lie.

This is the second point I would ask the reader to bear in mind. Only a small minority of drug use is what is currently termed "problematic," that is, leads to wrecked health, antisocial behavior and a drain on public finances. Most of it has no negative medical or social implications—nor should it, I believe, have legal implications. Saying this is not to deny the tragedy and squalor that dependency, particularly in the case of the opiates, can create. A lot of crime is committed in order to finance heroin addiction, and that, as I shall argue, is precisely a function of its illegality. I have heard of and personally witnessed hair-raising examples of the consequences of heroin addiction, as well as nightmare encounters with hallucinogenics. I have given assistance to people who have slithered into hypertensive panic after swallowing strong ecstasy in nightclubs. Most upsetting of all has been the helplessness I have felt at the sight of an old and valued colleague subsiding into the quicksand of alcoholism. This book, though, with respect, is not about them. Those hoping to hear recurring salutary tales of chronic illness and prema-

ture death will, in the main, be disappointed. It is rather about the broad, open field of intoxication in which most are able to disport themselves without sustaining anything more serious than the odd grazed knee or sprained ankle. Or thundering hangover.

A significant part of my research has consisted in talking to people who do use banned substances. Most of these take something every weekend, some (in the case of cannabis mainly) every day. Most of what I have gleaned has emerged in the course of ordinary social interaction. I have deliberately avoided the usual sociological fieldwork methods—questionnaires, interviews and so forth—because I strongly feel that as soon as research of this sort is cloaked with the trappings of official inquiry, you stop hearing the truth. Whenever I have allowed myself the sociological phrase “one of my respondents,” I am using material that I personally know to be true, or that I have very strong circumstantial grounds for accepting. I am confident that the insights gained this way are more sturdily reliable than what results from sticking a micro-recorder under a teenager’s nose, and asking, “Why do you take drugs?”

A strong clue as to the answer to this question is anyway supplied by the psychoanalytical theorist Slavoj Žižek in a collection of lectures on the theme of “enjoyment as a political factor,” delivered in 1989–90. The immediate point concerns sexual passion, but speaks even more eloquently to the subject of these numberless and nameless “drugs” that bulk so large in many people’s lives:

[A] simple illicit love affair without risk concerns mere *pleasure*, whereas an affair which is experienced as a “challenge to the gallows”—as an act of transgression—procures *enjoyment*; enjoyment is the “surplus” that comes from our knowledge that our pleasure involves the thrill of entering a forbidden domain—that is to say, that our pleasure involves a certain *displeasure*.<sup>4</sup>  
[emphases original]

It may simply be that the displeasure of the criminal law incurred in intoxicating oneself with banned substances, and the excitement that that entails given that there seems to be no objective moral reason not to do so, is all that unites these incendiary materials called drugs. Drug-taking offers to all who have financial and social access

to it the chance of breaking the temporal law without any cost in moral guilt, since nobody else is seemingly being hurt, deprived or incommoded in any way. It carries an innervating thrill all of its own, against which the officially sanctioned options—the roller-coaster rides, the gambling casinos, the aquaplaning and parachuting clubs—cannot begin to compete. Zizek goes on:

The uncanny excess that perturbs the simple opposition between external social law and unwritten inner law is therefore the “short circuit” between desire and law—that is to say, a point at which desire itself becomes Law, a point at which insistence upon one’s desire equates to fulfilling one’s duty, a point at which Duty itself is marked by a stain of (surplus-) enjoyment.<sup>5</sup>

If the conflict between external and internal laws (the same conflict that is the essence of all human drama) motivates the first involvements with controlled substances, its excitement nonetheless fades away as the various intoxicated states become familiar. After that, one’s choice of drug evolves into a matter of personal conviction. To some, the ever-present theoretical risk of confrontation with the law seems a tiresome burden to shoulder, and they will from then on make do with whiskey and espresso. To others, a particular banned substance is too enjoyable for itself to forgo. Still others will continually be open to new experiences, whatever the risks, costs or rules. The challenge to society, and to lawmakers (many of whom are themselves no strangers to intoxication), is to find a way of allowing individuals to fulfill those imperatives without either bleaching too much of the thrill out of them, or conversely threatening them with ever more furious and irrelevant penal tariffs.

The approach I have taken is a thematic one, and reflects the ways in which altered consciousness has been viewed within different contexts in Western culture. After an analysis of the attitudes to the subject that prevailed in the classical Greek and Roman periods, the focus is turned successively on the religious, social, legal, medical-biological and aesthetic facets of intoxication.

A copiously accumulating body of literature on this theme has been appearing in recent years, its contributors addressing it from

different specialist angles, and this book is an attempt to synthesize and augment that literature. In chapter 1, I offer a selective overview of some of the more pertinent recent contributions to a field that I have called Intoxicology—the study of the alteration of consciousness by means of natural and synthetic chemical aids. Since the drive to achieve intoxicated states is a universal and abiding one, we may fairly conclude that it deserves to be studied in its own right. I draw an analogy with the surprisingly recent emergence of gastronomy as a serious aspect of cultural studies, and argue that intoxicology needs to be disentangled from its constricting associations with criminality, with the sociological study of deviancy, if we are to begin to understand its multiform appearances and its complex development.

Chapter 2 examines the ambivalence that existed within the classical cultures of Greece and Rome toward the question of intoxication, principally with regard to drinking. To the Greeks, wine played a double role. It was, on the one hand, the sacrament of the orgiastic worship of Dionysos, the antic god who was imported into the Greek pantheon from less socially developed, more oriental cultures, and who was only imperfectly house-trained by his translation to Mount Olympus. Then again, wine could be the social lubricant that played an undisguised, catalyzing part in the great postprandial philosophical debate known as the symposium. We shall look at the attitudes taken to drinking in religion, philosophy and social life, and at how these emphases began subtly shifting by the time of the Roman Empire's ascendancy. I believe this was the last period in Western history that intoxication was allowed this dual role, and all the antagonism that our cultural institutions have shown toward it in the Christian era stem from the willful repression of its hedonistic aspect in the interests of metaphysics and monotheism. Never again will being drunk have a dignified or serious side to it—until, that is, the nineteenth century starts to pathologize it. The classical era also saw the flourishing of an extraordinary religious rite given the name of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the sacrament at which was not alcohol but some sort of visionary substance of tantalizingly indeterminate identity. The chapter concludes with a description of these ceremonies, and of their eventual demise.

Picking up on the interdictive note sounded by the early Christian church with regard to Greek and Roman habits, chapter 3 looks

at the attitudes to drinking and drug-taking as they came to be codified in the three preeminent Western religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We can trace a proscriptive trajectory among these three from the relatively permissive stance of the Jewish faith, through the moral ambiguities of the New Testament attitude to drunkenness, arriving at the blanket ban that Mohammed throws over the whole practice of intoxication for his followers. These teachings and ordinances crucially cast the altered state of mind as a less than perfect or even downright sinful state, and the sense of guilt they encouraged their subjects to internalize has largely survived the wholesale secularization that has taken place in non-Islamic societies. There is a moral aspect to the urgings of the modern-day health lobbies on the question of intoxication that has replaced religion as the inculcator of guilt in the matter, and that may be read everywhere from the gluing together of questions of moral and physical well-being in the work of temperance campaigners to the nebulous mystical authority—the Higher Power—who oversees the operations of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In chapter 4, I address the question of whether intoxication is a socially disruptive or destabilizing influence, in the light of the inability of legislative authorities to resist the temptation to keep throwing restrictions around it. Beginning with a consideration of the findings of often dubious animal experiments on this theme, we shall then turn to a catalogue of the principal intoxicating agents—both permitted and proscribed—outlining something of the cultural history of each, and describing the effects they have on those who take them. Certain cultural (and subcultural) practices have evolved around use of the various substances, and it is in the light of those that we can best assess the question of whether intoxication is as truly subversive—or antisocial, or solipsistic—as its detractors habitually claim. It is as agents of social corrosion, after all, that controlled drugs first came under the most exclusionary control of all: their transformation into contraband.

Chapter 5 then traces the prohibitive enterprise from Mohammed through to the contemporary drug laws to highlight the often violent and extravagantly punitive deterrents that societies have devised to warn people off them. The histories of the American and British

drug laws are most instructive because they have established the models by which most other governments have sought to fence off intoxication from their citizens' prying gaze. We shall look at the question of why bans don't work, paying particular attention to the doleful experience of national Prohibition in the United States, that social and legislative tragedy that not only blighted the lives of hundreds of thousands of its contemporary victims, but left a lingering residual stain of distrust in public office in the USA that stubbornly won't wash out. Notwithstanding that, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is the ringleader of an international enforcement industry that is fighting a losing battle, with both guns and dollars, to persuade people all over the world that intoxication must forever be denied to them. I have examined the arguments for and against drug legalization (that is, *relegalization*), taking as my text a richly detailed contribution to the debate from a sociologist who has been interested in this field for around thirty years, and who has concluded that relegalization is not the way forward.

If death threats, prison terms and fines won't persuade us to eschew our right to altered consciousness, then the agitation of the medical lobbies is the supplementary line of attack. Chapter 6 recounts how, in the mid-nineteenth century, there was a curious moment—more or less coinciding with the development of the first safe general anesthetics, chloroform, ether and nitrous oxide—when medicine briefly overlapped with the pursuit of pleasure, as scientists such as Sir Humphrey Davy discovered that there was more to these medical aids than had at first appeared. But as the altered states provided by opium, then morphine and cocaine, came to be seen to have medical implications, the recreational aspect of intoxicants was elbowed aside in favor of wholesale pathologization, which itself paved the way for the drug laws. I have cast a critical eye over the alcohol unit-counting system now advised by medical authorities in the USA, the UK, Japan and elsewhere, before moving on to a theoretical reflection on the eternally antagonistic concepts of moderation and excess. In order to establish why the use of intoxicants might be psychologically valuable, it is necessary to have some grasp of how each of the various classes of substances behaves in the body, which is to say, in the brain. I have tried to present this



information as nontechnically as is consistent with gaining some insight into it, and I have incorporated some of the very latest findings about the action of drugs such as MDMA and cocaine, and what can be done to ameliorate the management of addiction. The chapter concludes with a philosophical investigation into why altered consciousness should be so important in the lives of most of us, and rejects the view that it is a dereliction of our better natures.

In chapter 7, I examine the question of whether intoxicants have the power to inspire the production of great art. This is the aspect of my theme that has perhaps received most attention of late, and so I am necessarily selective in the artists whose work I consider. A large volume of commentary has been produced on the opium ideology of Samuel Coleridge and others of the English Gothic-Romantic period, and the American Beat writers of the 1950s and 1960s have likewise received plenty of attention—more than most of their output perhaps merits. I acknowledge these examples, but I have also glanced at the careers of two singers—Janis Joplin and Billie Holiday—to see what impact personal drug use had on their work, and described the facilitating impact that unbridled drunkenness had on the precursor of Western philosophy, Socrates, as he is represented in Plato's texts. My contention is that intoxicants may perhaps animate the work of already gifted writers and performers, but that there is not within them some magic elixir that can inspire creativity at the push of a hypodermic plunger. After considering the question of why so many stars of the mass entertainment industries have succumbed to problematic, frequently fatal, drug and alcohol use, I draw a parallel between the view that ordinary mortals take of these exemplary excesses and the didactic tales of heroic ruin in classical drama.

It was only in the century recently ended that the name of intoxication was rescued from its etymological entrapment in malignity. Before that era, to be intoxicated was to be contaminated with some foreign substance that had a pejorative effect on the body and, perhaps, on the soul as well. From the seventeenth century, it implied stupefaction, a rendering senseless and incapable, a paralyzing and subjugating encroachment on the normal operation of the faculties. As a metaphor, it proved as easily susceptible as its inebriate victims

of transference to another state, so that the faculties intoxicated might equally be the moral ones, as much as the mental. At its heart, and barely disguised by linguistic accretion, is the inescapable label *toxicum*, or poison—the lexical skull-and-crossbones that warned of its potency and peril. Then, in the early years of the eighteenth century, a new, more ambivalent usage arises that refers to “the action or power of highly exciting the mind; elation beyond the bounds of sobriety,” and that allows it to qualify any headily exhilarating sensation, perhaps the intoxication of wealth and power. The contexts in which it is thus applied may still have some morally tendentious resonances (to be drunk with power and money is assuredly not to be in a state of grace), but suddenly there has been artfully imported into it these notions of excitement and elation. How did they get in there? And how can they be reconciled with the stupefying action of alcoholic liquor, or the mortifying consequence of poisons? By the time Wordsworth uses the participular adjectival form to invoke “the mind intoxicate/With present objects,” we are not sure whether he means stupefied or excited, so befuddled have we become with intoxication’s Janus-faced character.

In the Gillespie and Coats lyric of the interwar years, “You Go to My Head,” the experience is now thought sublimated enough to account for the wholly benign impact of love on the helplessly enamored, whose very soul is intoxicated by the lustrous eyes of the beloved. We should not run away with the idea that this is a metaphor cut loose from its literal analogue, however. The whole lyric is a play on the business of drinking, with its references to champagne, to sparkling Burgundy and to the spirituous kick of a julep, so that we may be sure that the singer’s rising temperature is something to do with alcohol hypertension, as much as the hot flush of carnal obsession. Its finest deliverer came when Billie Holiday recorded it, in the winsome bloom of youth in 1938 and then, even better, with the careful, measured tread of the seasoned drinker in 1952. On the latter recording, the song’s metaphoric scheme is reconnected unequivocally to its real-life model by the singer’s own evident drunkenness, in the double plosion of “bubbles” and the paradoxical collapsing swoop of pitch just as the lyric says “rise.”

“Will you be writing about all forms of intoxication?” asked someone, on hearing of my project. “Such as?” “The intoxication of

love!" Well no, but I am content to record that the word has all but thrown off its noxious implication in poisoning, and is now thought fit to supply the sign of love's force. This marks some sort of coming-of-age. If, following our linguistic habits, we can learn to love intoxication itself as well, instead of approaching it in bitter dread and reviling, we will be fit to face its own very literal force with the stoutest minds and boldest hearts.