Uncomfortably Numb

Scott McLemee reviews Laurent de Sutter's *Narcocapitalism: An End to the Anaesthetic Society*.

By Scott McLemee (/users/scott-mclemee)

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When sorting books en masse, a prominently placed keyword can move the process right along -- the proverb about how we shouldn't judge them by their covers notwithstanding. I noticed a volume with "narcocapitalism" in its title among the incoming review copies a few months back and assumed it would cover that unregulated, trigger-happy frontier of the capitalist mode of production known as the illegal drug trade. Treatises on globalization are no longer as abundant as they once were, but protectionism does not extend to sectors of the economy involving protection money, and the "illicit forms of commerce" book pile remains as transnational as ever -- fortified now with studies on cryptocurrency books and human trafficking.

And so Laurent de Sutter's *Narcocapitalism: Life in the Age of Anaesthesia* (Polity (http://politybooks.com/bookdetail/?isbn=9781509506835)) landed in that stack, for a while. This was not wholly off the mark, though not quite on it, either. The author, a professor of legal theory at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, recasts the concept of narcocapitalism by going back to the root meaning of "narco" as numbness or stupor -- the effect of narcotic substances as originally and narrowly defined, without reference to their legal status. Connotations of violence and corruption (e.g., narco-state) came later and have by now largely displaced the primary meaning.

The concept of narcocapitalism à la de Sutter applies to a tendency or process within modernity (and postmodernity, if you will) rather than just to the manufacture and sale of certain psychoactive chemical commodities, legal and otherwise. To think of such substances in terms of addiction or abuse misses the point. Their effects on the brain are secondary to the narcocapitalist rewiring of the circuitry of human existence -- our ways of being in the world, the range of its norms and possibilities. Antidepressants and birth-control pills fall under the heading of narcocapitalist technology just as much as cocaine. They create, or at least seem to offer, a degree of control.

From the histories of psychiatric and sociological history, de Sutter extracts what becomes his orienting concept of "excitation" -- a state of agitation prone to disturbing the running of a hospital when manic-depressive patients exhibit it or disrupting the political order when masses of people do. Excitation means "being led outside oneself, being flung out beyond the limits of one's being, being taken by an outside [force] that is beyond the sufferer's control."

The opposite of excitation, in the author's schema, would be anesthesia -- a term he frames much

more broadly than in its surgical context, though it starts there. "Thanks to anaesthesia," he writes, "surgeons had peace: an anaesthetized body is a body that causes no bother -- a body that at last coincides with itself, which is to say with what is expected of it in the context of its operability, its capacity for being operated on." Likewise, in effect, with chlorpromazine, which gave psychiatrists peace by bringing manic or schizophrenic states under control by reducing the patient to the condition of a sentient vegetable. Subsequent developments in psychopharmacology (e.g., Prozac) are more refined and specific in effect but fall under the same heading of anesthetic control mechanisms.

"Psychopolitical reprogramming," de Sutter writes, "has become the privileged means for the reintegration of individuals who create disorder in the inner spaces of the world of production -- conceived as the default horizon of existence." It seems we have wandered into Foucault's old neighborhood, where crowd control through asylums and prisons is even more efficient now thanks to an outpatient clinic with a well-stocked pharmacy. *Everything is perfectly normal or will be soon*. "Narcocapitalist psychopolitics presented itself as an apolitical functionalization," we read, "while taking politics into the heart of ontology."

I quote the last sentence not to mock it, which seems too easy to be much fun, but because it, in fact, offers a reasonably precise formulation of the author's whole outlook. The grounds for inventing and prescribing seem pragmatic -- a function of their effectiveness, to be assessed according to risks and side effects. But stabilizing mood and behavior can mean yielding to the existing order of things (letting being alone, to put it sort of ontologically) is the only real possibility. And the profitability of anesthesia ensures there will more of it.

"At the beginning of the development of industrial capitalism," de Sutter says about a third of the way through *Narcocapitalism*, "cocaine played a role similar to the one it was meant to play for its consumers: the role of the most powerful stimulant." This is fairly typical of the author's penchant for sweeping syntheses, and to that extent, it should offer a warning to the reader. Marx and Engels were writing about industrial capitalism as a highly developed system on the way to conquering the world no later than 1848. Cocaine was first synthesized in 1860. Placing it "at the beginning of industrial capitalism" is rather like saying that America Online was a pioneering force in telecommunications.

In other words, *Narcocapitalism* is an example of that mode of "doing theory" in which something that may look like a historical claim is more in the nature of food for thought than, well, evidence. That said, I found parts of the book interesting. And all the more so given its points of convergence with Jamieson Webster's altogether more lucidly put argument about psychopharmacology (https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/11/19/the-psychopharmacology-of-everyday-life/) that just appeared on *The New York Review of Books* website. I read the article only after chewing over the thoughts above for a while, but with hindsight, I'd recommend starting with it and going on to *Narcocapitalism* if sufficiently stimulated.

By Scott McLemee (/users/scott-mclemee)

Scott McLemee (mailto:scott.mclemee@insidehighered.com) is the **Intellectual Affairs** columnist for *Inside Higher Ed.* In 2008, he began a three-year term on the board of directors of the National Book Critics Circle. From 1995 until 2001, he was contributing editor for Lingua Franca. Between 2001 and 2005, he covered scholarship in the humanities as senior writer at *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* In 2005, he helped start the online news journal Inside Higher Ed, where he serves as Essayist at Large, writing a weekly column called Intellectual Affairs. His reviews, essays, and interviews have appeared in *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, The Nation, Newsday, Bookforum, The Common Review,* and numerous other publications. In 2004, he received the Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing from the National Book Critics Circle. He has given papers or been an invited speaker at meetings of the American Political Science Association, the Cultural Studies Association, the Modern Language Association, and the Organization of American Historians.