

**Drugs and narcotics in history**, ed. by Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich.  
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It is sometimes tempting to believe that the pervasive use of legal and illegal drugs is a distinctively modern cultural phenomenon, and that present day 'drug problems', because they are putatively unprecedented, require new ways of thinking and new forms of social control. The eleven chapters of this book illustrate the opposite point: The current state of affairs in the world with respect to drugs is not without precedent. The point is made by tracing the historical development of drug products, patterns of everyday drug use, religious, legal and professional attempts to control drugs, and the commercialization of the drug trade from ancient Greece to the present. Rather than seeing present day drug dilemmas as discontinuous with the past, what emerges instead is a strong sense of theme and variation in public and private responses to drugs and narcotics throughout history.

Reflecting their historical and pharmacological significance, opium and related opiate narcotics receive more attention in the current volume than any other class of drugs. Chapter 1 reviews the descriptions of opium cultivation, preparation, and therapeutic use in ancient Greek and Roman medical texts. Chapter 3, which covers the period from 1600 to about 1900, describes the role played by opium in several of the earliest known scientific experiments on human and animal pharmacology. Chapter 6 shows how a variety of social, political, and economic interests motivated the American Medical Association to transform the meaning and use of opiates during the first half of the 20th century. One sees in these chapters evidence of both continuity and change with respect to the use of opium. On one hand, opium has been used therapeutically with great success for more than 2500 years, although with due caution because of its potential for lethal overdose and addiction. On the other hand, the harshly stigmatized and highly

restricted medical use of opiates in America at present represents something of an historical anomaly.

Chapter 2 describes the global expansion in the use of tobacco, coffee, cocoa, tea and distilled spirits that began in the 16th century and continued for nearly 200 years. This chapter is useful because it shows, especially in the case of coffee, tea and cocoa, that substances now widely regarded as (virtually) harmless were once scorned, feared, and strictly controlled. It illustrates how drug policies emerged out of a dialectical interplay between social interests and the physical effects of new substances (e.g., intoxication). The realization that shifting attitudes toward these now familiar substances were affected by a variety of historical contingencies encourages the reader to wonder whether attitudes towards today's taboo drugs are a reflection not of intrinsic dangers of the drugs but of similar dialectical processes.

Chapters 4 and 5 address the regulation of drug manufacture, distribution and use. Chapter 4 describes the emergence of pharmacy as a profession in England during the 19th century, spurred on primarily by the efforts of the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain. In this example one witnesses the interplay of two themes that run throughout most historical developments surrounding drugs. First, drugs are potent, complex in their formulation, and potentially dangerous. Therefore an expert professional class of workers (e.g., pharmacists, physicians, etc.) should be charged with their safe distribution. Second, they are highly profitable as consumer products. Hence, monopolistic control over their distribution and use is highly desirable. Chapter 4 shows how arguments about the need to protect the public from the dangers of drugs have historically been used to further not just the public good but also the narrow professional and economic interests of a fortunate few (in this case pharmacists). In its brief history of the German Imperial Health Office, Chapter 5 also highlights the tension between private gain and public good which so often seems to arise in connection with drug regulation.

Chapter 7 attempts to explain recent changes in alcohol use among the Navajo Indians in the American Southwest. It is unlike the other chapters in its presentation of empirical evidence in the form of several data tables. The chapter suggests that negative responses to drugs may in large part be learned social behaviors rather than manifestations of a drug's pharmacological effects. Chapter 8 describes how the meaning of the word 'drug', which once referred almost exclusively to what we now call medicines, has become synonymous with narcotics and illegal drugs. Interestingly, this transformation proceeded in spite of the vehement protestations of pharmacists.

Chapter 9 is a history of large pharmaceutical manufacturers in Great Britain from the late 19th century to the present. The impact of historical thinking on British responses to AIDS and intravenous drug abuse is discussed in Chapter 10. The authors conclude that historical input to policy making is only welcome during times of substantial uncertainty and policy flux. Chapter 11 is an engaging polemic against the 'drug wars' and against the ideology that accepts 'war' as an acceptable metaphor on which to base public health-oriented social policy. Written by a physician who had been personally affected by these 'wars', the chapter would have been more compelling had it been more carefully referenced. Even to a reader sympathetic with the author's arguments, the chapter comes across as a bitter attack on ideological rivals.

In all, the chapters in this volume offer valuable historical insights into the political, economic, religious, and moral issues that have surrounded the legal and illegal use of drugs for centuries. More than anything else, these eleven brief essays make it possible to see, in historical context, contemporary efforts to control and regulate the drug use process. Another of the book's strengths is its ample documentation. Anyone studying the history of opium, especially, would be well advised to consult the references to the relevant chapters discussed above.

As with many edited volumes, the book as a whole lacks a certain coherence, with some chapters fitting in far better than others. Perhaps the most significant shortcoming of the book is the persistent failure (or unwillingness) on the part of the authors to draw broad, far-reaching conclusions about their subject matter. The conclusions offered at the end of each chapter read more like descriptive summaries rather than synthetic, integrative statements. As such, readers are left to draw their own conclusions and to extract for themselves the main overarching themes that emerge from this history of drugs. In spite of these limitations, the book is well worth reading, particularly for those interested in social control of drug use, the history of pharmacy, and the history of the pharmaceutical industry.

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