

## *Altered States*

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*FORCES OF HABIT:*

*Drugs and the Making of the Modern World.*

By David T. Courtwright. Harvard Univ. Press. 277 pp. \$24.95 hardcover,  
\$16.95 paper

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*THE PURSUIT OF OBLIVION:*

*A Global History of Narcotics.*

By Richard Davenport-Hines. Norton. 576 pp. \$29.95

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*OUT OF IT:*

*A Cultural History of Intoxication.*

By Stuart Walton. Harmony. 366 pp. \$24

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*Reviewed by Andrew Barr*

Most of us, according to David Courtwright, are drug users. We may not smoke marijuana or inhale cocaine or inject heroin, but we smoke tobacco and drink alcohol and coffee. The fact that the last three drugs are legal does not make them any less dangerous than the three illegal ones. Indeed, according to an authoritative comparison of addictiveness published in a pharmacology textbook two generations ago, alcohol is the worst of all. In this comparison, points were assigned for a drug's ability to produce (a) tolerance, (b) emotional dependence, (c) physical dependence, (d) physical deterioration, (e) antisocial behavior during administration, and (f) similar behavior during withdrawal. The maximum score was 24, or 4 points in each category. Alcohol scored 21 points, heroin 16, cocaine 14, and marijuana 8. This analysis did not include nicotine, which Courtwright believes would merit a score of 14, the same as cocaine. Caffeine would score 4 or 5.

As Courtwright points out, an entire genre of drug literature assesses the ill effects of different drugs and then professes dismay at their misalignment with law. *Forces of Habit* is not quite in that genre. Instead, Courtwright, a professor of history at the University of North Florida, attempts to explain why we consume the drugs we do—and why some drugs are more legal than others. Alcohol has survived all attempts at prohibition,

he writes, principally because of the economic importance of the drinks industry and the essential contribution of alcohol taxes to national economies. Launched in 1920, Prohibition in the United States was repealed in 1933 because, in the depths of the depression, the government needed the revenues that taxes on alcohol would provide.

Beneath these prosaic explanations lies a deeper truth. Alcohol is legal because it is consumed, on the whole, by respectable, law-abiding citizens. Opiates, cocaine, and marijuana are illegal because their users are not—and, historically, have not been—upstanding members of society. Chinese laborers smoked opium; it was banned. Delinquent youths in big cities took heroin; it was banned. Out-of-control black men used cocaine; it was banned. Though “prejudice alone did not cause the bans,” Courtwright observes, “the smaller and lower-status the target population, the easier it is to enact such legislation—and the easier it is to keep it in place.”

When alcohol was banned in the United States a few years after opiates and cocaine, it, too, was associated with marginal elements in society, principally wine-drinking immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Many native-born Americans, who had long before given up alcoholic drinks themselves, believed that these immigrants would never become true Americans as long

as they retained old-country habits such as having wine with meals. Alcohol was banned to demonstrate the right way of living in their new home.

Once Prohibition was repealed, the drinks industry sought to make drinking beer and liquor a patriotic activity. During World War II, the brewing industry spent a lot of money on public-relations campaigns designed to show that beer was part of American culture and essential to good morale. After the war ended, the brewers' advertisements depicted beer as an integral part of everyday American life.

**B**y the 1960s, alcohol had cemented its place as the legal drug of respectable society—and young people rebelled against that society by smoking marijuana. The National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse reported in 1972 that “use of the drug is linked with idleness, lack of motivation, hedonism, and sexual promiscuity. Many see the drug as fostering a counter-culture which conflicts with basic moral precepts as well as with the operating functions of our society. The ‘dropping out’ or rejection of the established value system is viewed with alarm. Marijuana becomes more than a drug; it becomes a symbol of the rejection of cherished values.”

It was at this point that President Richard Nixon launched the War on Drugs. Richard Davenport-Hines, the author of *Auden* (1995) and *Gothic* (1999), points out in his lavishly detailed *Pursuit of Oblivion* that “as a puritan and as a man perennially frustrated with his circumstances, Nixon detested the hedonism and easy gratification of many young people.” Though he himself was a clandestine addict—dependent on alcohol and sleeping pills—“Nixon’s outlook on drugs was bitter, rigid, triumphantly righteous, and as irredeemably self-centered as only a paranoiac’s can be.”

While Davenport-Hines never omits an opportunity for a cynical comment about the personnel, motives, and progress of the endless War on Drugs, he fails to offer any coherent argument to explain why Western governments should have been so hostile to some drugs yet so tolerant of others. For all its fascinating information, *The Pursuit of*

*Oblivion* provides a classic example of failing to see the forest for the trees.

Only in passing does one encounter here the suggestion that drugs have been banned if their primary goal is to give pleasure to the user. In 1967, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre supported a British campaign to legalize marijuana. Davenport-Hines quotes MacIntyre’s response to the fierce public reaction: “Most of the hostility that I have met with comes from people who have never examined the facts at all. I suspect that what makes them dislike cannabis is not the belief that the effects of taking it are harmful, but rather a horrifying suspicion that here is a source of pure pleasure which is available for those who have not *earned it*, who do not *deserve it*. Pleasure has rarely gone down well with the English and pleasure for which there is practically no cost is the most abhorrent of all.”

Perhaps the best comparison of alcohol and marijuana is to be found in the work of anthropologist G.M. Carstairs, who spent 1951 living in a large village in the state of Rajasthan in northern India. The ruling caste was the Rajputs, fighting men who enjoyed certain prerogatives, notably the right to eat meat and drink alcohol in the form of a spirit called *daru*. They were taught that they must face danger with great bravery. Such danger seldom arose, but every young Rajput lived with the anxiety that he might not prove adequate to the occasion if it came. He was therefore inclined to assuage his worries in the convivial relaxation of a *daru* party.

The members of the other top caste group in the village, the Brahmans, denounced the Rajput habits as inimical to the religious life. “The result of eating meat and drinking liquor,” declared one of them, “is that you get filled with passion and rage, and then the spirit of God flies out from you.” The Brahmans themselves were often intoxicated with *bhanga*, an infusion of marijuana leaves and stems that they believed enhanced the spiritual life. They said that it facilitated *bhakti*, a devotional act that required emptying the mind of all worldly distractions and thinking only of God. The Rajputs did not condemn *bhanga* as fiercely as the Brahmans denounced *daru*, but, as one of them pointed out, *bhanga* “makes you quite useless, unable

to do anything. *Daru* isn't like that, you may be drunk but you can still carry on."

In an article published in 1954 in the *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, Carstairs compared Westerners to the Rajputs. Westerners too, he wrote, were committed to a life of action, were brought up to regard individual achievement as crucial, and found the experience of surrendering their powers of volition through marijuana to be threatening and distasteful. Like the Rajputs, they could drink alcohol yet remain in control.

Most consumers of alcoholic drinks manage to remain in control because they are able to measure quite precisely the amount of the drug they have ingested. The concept of moderation is very important in maintaining the social status of alcohol—which is why Stuart Walton, the author of *Out of It*, disapproves of the idea. In his well-argued if slightly self-indulgent thesis, wine writer Walton suggests that intoxication is an essential form of release from the pressures of existence, "the opportunity for a temporary

escape from the moderation that the rest of life is necessarily mortgaged to. It is the one aspect of our daily lives . . . that allows us radically to question the point of moderation as a desirable goal in itself."

Walton deems intoxication "a biological necessity, otherwise it wouldn't be so continuously prevalent in all human societies." As he points out, we possess an innate drive to alter our normal consciousness. Children spin round and round until they are giddy, and hold their breath until they feel thoroughly lightheaded. Holy men and women can lose themselves in meditation, but most adults cannot do this for themselves, or cannot be bothered to learn. "Drugs," summarizes Courtwright, "are powerful chemical shortcuts to altered states of mind." Whatever measures are taken to regulate or suppress the trade in them, their popularity is unlikely to diminish.

>ANDREW BARR, the author of *Drink: A Social History of America* (1999), is writing a social history of food.

## ARTS & LETTERS

### *THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES IN SCIENCE FICTION.*

By Justine Larbalestier. Wesleyan Univ. Press. 295 pp. \$50 hardcover, \$19.95 paper

My fondest hope for Larbalestier, identified on the jacket of this, her first book, as a research fellow in the Department of English at the University of Sydney, is that she get out of academia. A smart, assiduous writer with a good eye for telling detail, she uses her talents well in laying out the science-fiction landscape from the 1920s to the 1990s and in tracking the contributions (sometimes disguised) of women writers, ranging from the relatively obscure to such superstars as Marge Piercy and Octavia Butler.

Larbalestier focuses on battle-of-the-sexes stories, which ran chiefly in SF magazines beginning in the 1930s and feature pretty much all the variations you would expect—

worlds where men are subservient, or women procreate parthenogenetically, or indeterminate creatures morph seasonally into one or the other sex. Her brief summaries of the stories and her commentaries on their publication (and the public's reaction) are amusing, in a dry sort of way, and provide a nice antidote to the genre's tendency to take itself too seriously. But just when she's hitting her stride, you can almost feel the academic gear kick in. Instead of rattling on about the stories themselves or the pulp magazines (such as *Amazing Stories*, *Astounding Science-Fiction*, and *Wonder Stories*) that ran them, she falls back into murky jargon that seems designed to wow some tenure committee.

Which is a pity, because under the forbiddingly abstruse prose there remains a good story about the participation of women—as writers, editors, even readers—