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Intoxication Culture

A Straight Edge Anarchist Critique

Flower Bomb

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Most people (including many anarchists and leftists) are unaware of the role alcohol, tobacco and opioids played in building colonial empires around the world. For example a major part of the Triangular Trade between the 16th and 19th centuries was the use of sugarcane rum — produced in the Caribbean and utilized as a universal currency that tied European nations, African slave markets, and the colonies together in a global economy. Tobacco served as a vital cash crop and economic foundation in places like Jamestown in the 1600s, fueling the expansion of slavery.

Around the world colonizers deliberately used intoxication as a weapon to weaken indigenous populations. Addiction created the conditions for internal conflict, violence, and social breakdown within every indigenous population.

While colonizers were profitting from this chemical warfare the relationship between indigenous people and the wild world around them rapidly deteriorated as the killing of non-human animals for furs and skins increased alongside the growing chemical dependency.

With indigenous people suffering from the effects of alcoholism, it wasn't long before colonizers realized the exploitative advantage of using alcohol to sway negotiations in favor of securing long-term land treaties that would eventually lead to genocidal displacement.

But today most people will say "it's just a beer". Here in America, capitalism demonstrates the power of alienating the consumer from the knowledge of where or how a product is produced. The meat and dairy industries are an example of this. Alcohol, tobacco and marijuana are no different. If a product is profitable then there is a clear motive to conceal any and all present or historical background that might negatively impact its saleability. It is much easier to make a purchase when the social power and control of the product itself is unknown to the consumer who experiences a sense of power and control in purchasing it.

Ignorance is bliss, and the ability to destroy ones self is one of the very few forms of power and control capitalism allows us to have.

Straight Edge: I don't care if it's also used by conservatives, fascists in Europe, religious zealots, or if some use it as a pathetic attempt to elevate themselves above others. I call myself Straight Edge because I detest intoxication culture – an arena of consumer activities that center surrendering one's mind and body to alcohol, smoking, and drug use. It's all just a "good time" – till someone gets hurt. Around 490,000 people die every year from smoking, and about 19,000 people are killed yearly from second hand smoke. But people like Jorge Araya (CEO of R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company) don't give a shit. These deaths are nothing more than business as usual for making bank with every pack of cigarettes sold to just about anyone – from the wealthy nicotine addicts working on Wall Street to your average tattooed punk in a denim vest. In 2024, the tobacco industry in the United States alone made around \$20 billion. I don't care if I'm "just one person". I'm not trying to

start a movement or a revolution. My repulsion for industries like this isn't driven by the number of people who agree with me.

I also call myself an anarchist. I despise authority – including the authority that intoxication culture maintains through both peer pressure upon the Individual, and with its high-demand for natural resources. Intoxication culture isn't just a static population of people enjoying some brews; it requires resources in order to produce the commodities necessary for sustaining its profitable popularity. Intoxication culture includes a variety of addictive commodities that require the exploitation and degradation of what little remains of wild habitats. In order to manufacture alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, and so on, a complex chain of production must be established. On average, 18 million acres of forest are destroyed every year for the manufacturing of alcoholic beverages. Since 80% of the planet's terrestrial wildlife live in forests, alcohol production means warfare against the wild. The environmental impacts of alcohol can be seen across the entire production chain, including the depletion and degradation of water resources, and an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, soil and air pollution, and waste production. If that wasn't fucked enough, every year the tobacco industry kills more than 600 million trees and consumes around 4 million hectares of land. Environmentalist hippies who love to "toke up" rarely consider the environmental destruction associated with their celebrity plant: Cannabis. Marijuana is not only a mono-crop but comes with high demand, making it a source of profit at the center of violent narco-states and corporate-dominated agricultural systems that prioritize yield over environmental protection.

Environmentalism aside, I reject drugs, alcohol, and smoking because I refuse to physically (and mentally) subject myself to industrial society's settler-colonial project of domestication. My mind and body are already fucked up as it is from breathing in a lifetime of industrial pollution and consuming drink-

ing water contaminated by microplastics. I have no desire to cause any more damage than what's already been done, nor spend my time preoccupied with one chemical dependency or another. I'd rather be focused on developing the skills needed to help navigate personal struggles and survival. There isn't a single product of chemical escapism capable of healing or fixing the problems of everyday life under capitalism. Any monetary transaction I make involving alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, or drugs would only be a voluntary payment to those who specialize in chemically altering my connection to primal reactions — reactions that I find valuable in maintaining decent judgment and alertness, especially while carrying out illegal activity.

I would be lying if I said I didn't envy those who are able to freely surrender themselves to intoxication culture without second thought. I often wonder what it would be like to dance in oblivion — to celebrate habitual self-destruction after having seduced an initial hesitation to it. I make no judgments of those who indulge in intoxication culture. To judge them is to assume there is a "right" or "wrong", "superior" or "inferior" way to live. These binaries are only useful for those interested in seeking control over others. I do not look down on, or pity those who enjoy themselves with intoxication. Such judgment is, in practice, moralist, over-simplistic, and fundamentally useless for any meaningful critical examination. The fact is industrial society provides *ample* reason for one to desire chemical escapism which is — in my opinion — a natural, reasonable reaction. Self-destruction for its own sake makes sense in an environment that provides little to no joyful experience.

I would also be lying if I said there weren't any class war benefits to being Straight Edge. When the wealthy stumble from their upscale bars or restaurants, quite often their wallets are as loose as their lips! The drunken bourgeoisie make lousy fighters when attempting to cling to the valuables I opportunistically lift from them!

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As much as I value destruction toward the creation of joyful rebellion, I refuse the self-destruction created by intoxication culture – a form of self-destruction driven by the inherent power imbalance between an individual and the (mental and physical) demands of a chemical addiction. I refuse to surrender myself to consuming alcohol, smoking weed or cigarettes, and drug use because of their notoriety for maintaining controlling relationships with their consumers. Whatever benefits they may offer me are not worth the risk of my relationship with them turning from casual to life-long control and abuse. Because at the end of the day who uses who? Does an individual use the drug? (Or the bottle or cigarette?) Or do these vices use the individual – slowly increasing one's dependency over time and therefore increasing one's desperation for money in order to purchase them. Is it not the drug that punishes the individual with withdrawal symptoms when that individual tries to leave the relationship? Does the alcohol not demand involvement in one's attempt to enjoy an evening at home after work? To socialize? To make new friends, or even make love? How often does nicotine successfully coerce one to stand outside in freezing weather to take a puff – or in some cases search the ground for half-used cigarettes that a stranger has discarded?

My potential for joyful experiences can only be *limited* by intoxication culture based the effects I have seen it have on others: the stumbling stupor from inebriation, the apathetic incoherence of being high, or the tease from a mere temporary state of relaxation manufactured by a thousand chemicals pumped into my lungs from a single puff of a cigarette. Total sobriety provides me razor-sharp clarity and connection to my emotions, keeping my senses engaged at all times. All the pain and misery in life experienced without a filter is a firm reminder of the world I live in and the reality of its industrialized atrocities. I prefer this harsh clarity. I prefer supreme control over my mind and body because that power and control belongs to no other than myself. Just as I'd never give such power

to cops, capitalists, the Church, or politicians, I'd never give it to a culture dictated by the commands of chemical addiction.

Like all labels, Straight Edge is not the sum total of my individuality; it is merely a useful tool against society's attempt to chemically subordinate and alter my perception of reality. Straight Edge as a label also serves as a way to communicate these ideas while opening up the possibility for connecting with others who relate. For the same reason I call myself an "anarchist", "nihilist", and "vegan", *Straight Edge* expresses my hostility toward a world where addictive chemicals are consumed with regularity, reinforcing the colonial project of civilized conformity and domestication.

I am what I choose to be as long as it serves me. I am a nihilist insofar as nihilism refers to the rejection of morality, as well as the civilizing role of law and order by which morality is used to uphold. There is no *inherent* meaning to Straight Edge because there is no universal consensus on exactly what it means. And even despite a *general* consensus on the definition of Straight Edge, every individual has unique life experiences that ultimately influence and shape their relationship to it. Therefore it is necessary to define Straight Edge from *my own* understanding of its history, and how that history relates to me in the present. From a nihilist, egoist, anarchist perspective, Straight Edge is the rejection of any and all cultural values, norms, and traditions attributed to chemical intoxication. I resent the capitalist manifestations of intoxication culture (liquor stores, bars, smoke shops etc) because the consequences of their marketed accessibility and appeal poses a threat to my survival; drunk driving fatalities (which average 11,000 deaths a year) are on the rise. The air I breathe is polluted with cigarette smoke (secondhand smoke kills over 41,000 non-smoking adults and 400 infants in the US annually), the soil littered with cigarette butts (which can take up to 10 years to break down), and there's always concern surrounding doped up or drunken anarchists who either break basic security proto-

col or turn snitch against others when caught for drug-related offenses. It seems nobody wants to openly talk about these things, including when there's unpredictably violent behavior exhibited by individuals struggling with opioid addictions in anarchist spaces.

I don't believe in shaming or banning people struggling with substances of any kind. I believe the survival of anarchist activity (and anarchist individuals) necessitates more discussions toward creating recovery support networks rather than pretending intoxication culture isn't a problem. I don't believe in referring to individuals who struggle with addiction as "addicts" or "junkies" because these terms often seek to demonize and reduce a person to a one-dimensional being defined only by what they struggle with. There is plenty of examination on why people participate in intoxication culture, and why many become addicted. There is very little energy put toward discussing ways to survive (and fight back against) industrial civilization without the use of intoxication culture, and even less toward helping anarchists who seek recovery from addiction.

Growing up in poverty and seeing what intoxication culture has done to people past and present motivates my refusal to consume alcohol, suck on a cigarette, or engage in recreational drug use. Calling myself Straight Edge simply underlines my determination to remain sober and feral – especially in the face of a civilization that prefers me incapacitated with chemical dependency. I refuse to participate in a culture designed to act as a wolf-in-sheeps-clothing chemical solution to the misery civilization creates. Through understanding the colonial history of how inebriation was (and in many ways continues to be) a tool methodically used toward the creation of settlements (alcohol, tobacco, and opioid plantations), these mind-altering distractions quite simply have no place in my appetite for anarchy.