

Book Review

De Sutter, Laurent. 2018. *Narcocapitalism: Life in the Age of Anesthesia*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Tracy Brannstrom
University of Chicago



I happened to be browsing old advertisements of pharmaceutical drugs – yes, a typical hobby for a student of medical anthropology – when the essence of Narcocapitalism became clear: in order to produce a kind of subject that may be governed without much difficulty, many of the drugs that permeate our lives work to render us lifeless, to move us away from unmanageable states of irrationality and ‘excitation.’ We must not deviate from a neatly cohering inner world, like the subject of an ad for the antipsychotic Zyprexa – a woman who lives as an incomplete jigsaw puzzle and whose family is told, ‘you’re trying to piece her life together. She won’t swallow it.’ Her fragmented self is forbidden, but the impetus to ‘put the pieces back together’ is not just about improving her quality of life, bringing her to a state of normalcy, or initiating a cure. In Narcocapitalism, de Sutter suggests that in the ‘age of anesthesia,’ it is the calculated sedation of the individual and the collectivity that works for the logics and labor forces of capitalism.

The book is a playful mosaic of events, actors, drugs and other phenomena – a short text that considers bits and pieces of many objects’ histories. De Sutter, a

scholar of legal theory at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, traces the concept of ‘excitation,’ beginning in the 19th century and linking it to the present moment. He shows that these objects – anesthetics, antidepressants and oral contraceptives, for example – are not simply about reducing pain, curing disease, or halting reproduction. Through the techniques of modern chemistry, they transform us into a particular kind of *self* – namely one that serves capitalist interests through the control of our bodies and psyches. ‘To become the subject of an operation,’ he writes in relation to the first chemical anesthetics, ‘is to become, therefore, more or less organized matter, a material mass of organs and flesh available for fixing, repair, amputation, observation and so on’ (109).

Chapter one, *Welcome to Prozacland*, is most clearly linked to de Sutter’s overall thesis on the relationship between politics and metaphysics. He takes readers through the 19th century development and use of the anesthetic chloral hydrate. Those who sought to overhaul psychiatry with materialist notions of disease used the chemical to treat manic-depressive psychosis (what may now be called bipolar disorder) by inhibiting manic states that were seen as ‘being flung out beyond the limits of one’s being,’ (13) and ultimately, a ‘rupture in the world order’ (9). Even if all enjoyment was eradicated in a patient and a state of depression is what remained, the medical establishments’ fear of the manic, unpredictable subject was too great to refrain from sedating them.

To return to the image of the puzzle, the following chapters explore many seemingly disparate pieces: the development of cocaine products; the use of chloral hydrate to combat insomnia; the way that public street lighting systems were installed as a means to police what goes on at night; the reinvention of sleep cycles which opened up new markets for the proliferation of night clubs; oral contraceptives as a means of deactivating and de-exciting hormonal processes and sex drives; ideas about the potential irrationality and danger of crowds, and a turn to the term ‘masses’ as a way of rendering them as objects for more efficient manipulation. But readers need not feel disoriented, or any pressure to conjoin these pieces with a seamless fit. The text will be a delightful, experimental device for some, and undoubtedly a maddening, garbled mess for others. For me, it was the former, and I see *Narcocapitalism* as a work that one can extract what’s useful for one’s own projects and curiosities, and as a text to return to, again and again, in seeking to comprehend its entirety.

In the concluding chapter, *The Politics of Overexcitement*, de Sutter’s thesis reaches its height of clarity: in narcocapitalist states, the anesthetized, controlled subject is key, but de Sutter is as concerned with metaphysics as he is with politics. The unexcited category of being that he spends a majority of the text illustrating is the very foundation on which the logic and enactment of capitalism can flourish. Being excited is seen by those in power as a dangerous exit from one’s self, and their anesthetic formulas are posed as a kind of solution that would allow us to find ourselves – a return to *being*. Ontology is the branch of metaphysics concerned with

the nature of being, and de Sutter's ontological project is to examine the conditions in which human beings are allowed to exist within narcocapitalist societies.

I did not have a difficult time accepting de Sutter's claim that many pharmacological products of the past and present are working to sedate us as a means of control, or that drugless social phenomena like crowd control are part of this overall anesthetized culture, or that endeavors to depress and deaden our bodies and minds will continually shape our fluid subjectivities. But I wonder whether the de-excited subject is really as productive for capitalism as he makes it out to be. What are the limits of a labor force composed of individuals who are taken over by apathy and other states of depression? I had a hard time, too, with the concept of *psychopolitics*, which is underdeveloped and yet, appears as a central theme that would tie everything together.

In the end, de Sutter suggests that what may provide solace in contemporary times is a return to experiences and perceptions that animate us, and propel us beyond ourselves – that we might 'finally come to terms with what forms the mad foundation of every human grouping – a madness which is the only thing that can give us hope' (107). Submitting to the madness in each of us may be a way that we can better understand ourselves and locate new social and political possibilities. But I'm not sure what these encounters would look like, and how they might vary among each of us, or how we might draw the line between forms of psychic excitation that are, on the one hand, creatively productive, and on the other, dangerously destructive. There are certainly instances in which self-exit can have harmful outcomes, and a more nuanced discussion about what kinds of exit-facilitating contexts are worthwhile could be of help here.

That the book raises such questions is enough to champion what de Sutter has put forth. It has an open-ended philosophical spirit that I love but is born from something even more experimental than a philosophical work, which can tend toward overly exerted arguments and a squeaky-clean fit between the thesis and the evidence that supports it. This text would be of interest for those drawn to studies of the body, mental health, subjectivity, pharmacology, and politics more generally. And especially for those who are open to an offbeat account of how chemical technologies have shaped, and continue to shape, who we are.