



Interview

Interview with Laurent de Sutter, author of *Narcocapitalism*

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TB: Can you tell us about your background, and the way that this work fits within, say, ideas and bodies of literature that you have been exploring over the years, and your own body of work?

LdS: I am a survivor of law school, having been trained in classic civil law, but also legal theory and legal sociology. In 2000, I did my PhD on the constitutional principle of representation and how it was challenged by the then-new institutional experimentations in popular participation to political decision-making. This was part of a bigger research project involving several universities in France and Belgium, which gave me the unique opportunity to work closely with Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, who have contributed immensely in shaping my intellectual world. At that time, I was also into Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou and film critics like Serge Daney and Louis Skorecki.

Rather than attaching myself to one or two personalities, or to accept being the representative of any discipline, I have always taken great care in building what I could call ‘ad hoc knowledge’ – that is, a type of knowledge driven by the objects and problems that I encounter on my journey, and not by the requisites of any intellectual program or worldview. This is why my own body of work, counting almost twenty books written over a ten-year period, appears so disconcerting to many: since it is the object that always decides where I go, and since I don’t have a preconception about what counts as an object, I will take the opportunity to think through *anything* that arises. Here, I have written a book born out of encounters with images, texts, persons, bodies, pills, institutions, rules, fictitious characters, and so on. Whereas theory does everything it can to secure the solidity of its position of making knowledge, my own position consists in giving up theory (and

judgment) through a post-critical gesture that nullifies the subject and puts the object up-front.



Laurent de Sutter © Géraldine Jacques...

As a reader, it's intriguing to find these seemingly disconnected 'encounters,' as you put it, within the same story. How did they come to fit together for you? What was the process?

My first intuition was that the description of the world that critical theory is defending is utterly wrong. If you read the way that social life of individuals is dealt with in critical circles, you can't help but notice how grim the portrayal is: human beings are manipulated, humiliated, made sick or depressed by abstract social powers wanting something from them. In particular, I was surprised by the insistence of ideas of mobilization, acceleration, excitability, and distraction, that lead to sketching a vision of human beings as laboratory rats whose conscience was prevented by the very processes keeping them too busy or too distracted to think. I then thought: what if the defining dimension of contemporary life is not excitation, but depression? What if what we lack is this 'excitation' that everybody is denouncing as alienating, pressuring, as a burden rendering our lives impossible? So, I decided to go down this road, and soon realized that there had been a specific moment in time when the idea arose in intellectual and public discourse.

This moment took place roughly around 1870 and saw the burgeoning disciplines of sociology and criminology walk hand-in-hand with the first experiments in psychoanalysis and the development of contemporary chemistry and surgery. From the invention of the first anesthetics to the fear of the masses, from female hysteria to the discovery of the power of drugs like cocaine, this moment seemed to me like a crossroads bringing together some of the most dramatic economic, political and technological changes in Western – but not only Western – history, with a series of devices, mostly chemical, aimed at fighting ‘excitation’ in every form. So, I decided to offer a very small, fast mapping of this moment and its consequences, gathering together a series of vignettes, hopefully helping the reader to see how this suspicion of excitation was used.

What kind of history, or counter-history, is one of narcocapitalism? In thinking about the histories that have been told about pharmacology, sedation, and political-economy, what is unique here?

To be fair, the original French title of the book is *The Age of Anesthesia*. Polity wanted me to change it into something more ‘conceptual’, and as I use this neologism in the text, I said, ‘Why not?’ But I have decided to write about ‘narcocapitalism’ because I didn’t want to speak about capitalism. I am a bit fed up with the laziness with which critical theory tends to designate enemies so abstract that they can put almost everything to their credit: capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and the like. I think that these concepts render us blind to the actual agencies of logistics, technique, chemistry, etc., that define the frame within which we evolve. I wanted to speak of ‘narcocapitalism’ not as the enemy that we should fight, but as the definition of a moment when the functioning of the world was deemed to require the taming of ‘excitation.’ Why is it ‘capitalism’, then? Simply because this appeared at a moment when the true issue behind the fear of excitation was that things wouldn’t *work* – individuals would become dysfunctional, masses would go crazy, the work of surgeons would be made impossible, and so on.

Now, is it unique? I wouldn’t know. I believe that what is interesting, new or unique in a book is never the book itself, but how it allows those who encounter it to develop their own path, ideas, and practices. As a book, it only formulates a proposal, not a program, but I don’t ask that it be applied, followed, believed, or trusted – but, to be useful as a tool in the toolbox of those who find it interesting. Some readers have compared my book to the work of Foucault, but it makes me cringe, as I don’t like Foucault, who has always seemed to me a paradigmatic figure of the thinker who *knows* – who put himself in such a position that everything seems small compared to his almighty, all-encompassing gaze. If my book is Foucauldian, then it is a failure. I haven’t tried to provide the ultimate explanation for a given phenomenon, or the key to finally understand a specific time period, but a hint at the possibility that we take so much for granted.

How can we think about your use of narco in this text? At times, you seem to be drawing on both drugs and sleep. Is there a double meaning here?

Yes, there is. As you know, ‘narcosis’ describes the result of the anesthesia of a person, as a state. The fact is that most drugs belong to the realm of anesthetics. As I explain it in the book, cocaine, the alkaloid of coca leaves, was first commercialized as a local anesthetic allowing for the performance of small surgical operations on patients that had to be kept awake. It is the paradox of a drug like cocaine that it puts you in a state of frenzy *while* being an anesthetic, and, taking cocaine doesn’t affect your capacity to work the following day. Sigmund Freud, when he was young, experimented with cocaine with this specific purpose in mind, praising it for its remarkable efficacy. Well, my idea is that *efficacy* is precisely another name for *anesthesia*, because it is always in the name of efficacy that anesthesia has been promoted – first as an aid in surgery, then as an aid in keeping psychically ill patients quiet in hospitals, up to the proverbial broker relying on ‘cocaine and hookers, my friend,’ as Matthew McConaughey says in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, in order to produce wealth.

The idea behind the history of anesthesia, as it materialized in a whole series of products, is that a good subject is a sleeping subject – playing its role, staying in its place on the surgeon’s table, in the psychiatric unit, at work, as a woman, etc. For me, the most important character in this story is none other than the inventor, in 1899, of the nosographical category of the ubiquitous category ‘manic-depressive psychosis’ – Emil Kraepelin. In his then world-famous *Manual of Clinical Psychiatry*, he describes what should be done in cases of ‘excitation’ (*Irresein*, in German) in a manic-depressive psychosis, which he thought should be avoided at all costs. The solution was a powerful sedative, chloral hydrate, used until the 1950s despite its terrible side effects. For Kraepelin, it was crucial that patients would not wander outside of the frontiers of their being, and this is what ‘excitatio’ means: *ex-citare*, in Latin, being ‘called out’, taken out of the reassuring limits of your home or your inside.

You argue that a certain version of selfhood is enforced within capitalist ideology and practice. Do you see this work as contributing to a lineage of ideas about subjectivity, in addition to politics?

I suppose it does, yes. You know, I started my theoretical endeavor in a context where the critique of subjectivity was an integral part of what was considered cool, because those who wanted to defend the primacy of the subject seemed so boring and paternalistic, pushing many in the other direction. Althusser’s anti-humanism, Barthes’ death of the author, Lacan’s divided subject, even Foucault’s death of man, are all part of my default setting. I continue to think that our insistence on trying to ‘be’ something is the source of many of our conceptual mistakes, and of the failures of the societies in which we live. Thinking of oneself as a

consistent entity whose core would remain ‘me’ is not only a metaphysical aberration, but it also is a complete denial of the fact that everything that allows ‘us’ to ‘be’ comes from the outside.

Much of contemporary leftist politics tend to forget about these lessons and has put identity at the forefront of the agenda. In the self-help sections of bookstores, you will notice that the very first suggestion is to ‘be yourself’ – to stop getting lost. In the Leftist world, this is translated as: be a woman, a queer, a black, a transgender, claim your ‘self’ in front of all those who are denying its expression and recognition. To me, this is a terrifying nightmare because there is nothing to recognize. I am not myself, but I’m *already* differing from myself, *becoming*. Well, it is my wager that the true political struggle has to take place not in the useless defense of what we would supposedly be, but where we can go.

In the end, you write that the unstable state of excitation, which is reduced under capitalist order, is ‘the only thing that can give us hope.’ Is this a comment on what you see as public indifference and disengagement – a kind of sedation – with politics today? And if so, what would a return to states of excitation look like in the political realm?

What we need is not more integration, organization or rationalization, but rather the opposite: disintegration, disorganization and irrationalization. What we need is to take human beings seriously for a change. I would never accept a claim such as the one stating that people are indifferent or disengaged with politics today. If politics is a matter of affection, then it is *everywhere*, and the issue is to find a way to transform our intellectual tools of perception in order to put us in a position where we could listen to it, or see it, or smell it, etc. Shifting towards ‘excitation’ is a mere suggestion – a way to put forth one possible tool of that kind. If we look at the world through the lens of a possible reconciliation with excitation, more things become imaginable than not: we can imagine a way out of being, a way out of work, a way out of organization, and a way out of theory as ‘the practice of those who know.’

In my book, I give some examples of people having embraced excitation, in getting rid of the self in order to experiment with what it means to move beyond our limits: the drug experiments by Timothy Leary and his friends (which eventually ended up badly, but that is another story) and the xenofeminist hacking of hormonal programming through DIY pills. When xenofeminists say that we don’t need less alienation but *more* alienation, I can’t help but agree: we need to equip ourselves with all the means at our disposal to open up ourselves to our own alienation, our becoming-alien – allowing our lives to become experimentation rather than an attempt at building up a fortress within which we would, at last, be safe.

The book is written in short, non-linear acts. Why did you choose to write the book in this style?

My goal is to ignite your mind as fast as I can, by taking you on a short ride in a fast machine, to quote John Adams, and to force you to stay alert during the whole journey. Like Jorge Luis Borges, I don't see the point in producing thick books just for the sake of it. If you can say what you have to say (or, rather, what your object is telling you to say) in a couple of pages, stick to it. Today, there is no justification for seeing yourself as so fascinating and interesting that you could monopolize the attention of your readers. I find it utterly rude, and still relying upon an understanding of knowledge that goes back to the 19th century. Plus, I live in a culture (the French-speaking one) where knowledge still is a public issue, meaning that theory, philosophy and concepts are still part of the public debate, and are echoed in media. When I write, I don't write for academics alone, but for every person, be it an artist, a retired public servant, a high-school teacher on holidays, an architect, and whoever feels the tickle of curiosity about the world they inhabit. In a culture like the Anglo-American one, where knowledge and theory are debated in rarefied circles of professionals sharing the same *habitus*, things are different. But it is not the one I find myself at ease with, so I'll stick to my weird little paragraphs.