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Buzzed on xanthines

Caffeine, a potent neural agent, has become an essential part of the working day. Alf Rehn on how the world's most socially acceptable drug hi-jacked corporate culture.

As I write these words, I can literally feel my favourite stimulant rushing through my veins, tweaking my brain and messing with my neurology. In fact, I've felt this rush every single day for at least the last five years, and I cannot ever imagine living without it. But what if drugs weren't, like heroin for example, seen only as a marginal, dangerous phenomena? If, for instance, the entire corporate world was high all the time, what then? What if we took a liking to a specific xanthine alkaloid and used it for so long that we could no longer see that the use of it is anything except business as usual?

The questions may seem odd, but they point to a specific form of intoxication that is now seen as a normal state for adult human beings, namely chemically aided alertness. A majority of working adults habitually ingest 1,3,7-trimethylxanthine, often in units of about 100 mg at a time. It comes in the form of Italian brews, tea, as well as the dreadful slush in styrofoam cups served in many offices. They are even brewing caffeine beer. As a drug, caffeine is everywhere.

CUP OF AMBITION

Although normally not viewed as a drug, caffeine is in fact a fairly potent neural agent: a nitrogenous organic compound which blocks the action of adenosine, and thus acts as a stimulant. It has been shown to create dependency, it does affect the human brain on a neural level, and there are some indications that prolonged use could have effects on a genetic level. It is also by far the most commonly used drug in the world. The common cup of coffee (or the cuppa tea) is so integrated into the everyday life of organisations that we barely notice it. This does not mean that it is unimportant, something a manager trying to take away our precious caffeine would soon realize. We are prepared to deal with a lot in our day-to-day life, but touch our "cup of ambition" (as Dolly Parton called it in the song '9 to 5'), and we will surely riot.

This said, caffeine is clearly not comparable to heroin or crack cocaine as a drug, and I am not trying to demonize coffee or claim that all intoxicants are similar. But caffeine is an excellent substance if we want to inquire into the way in which cultures live with - rather than fight against - certain drugs. With a "mundane" and subtle drug such as caffeine, the clear demarcation lines between normality and intoxication becomes blurred, and we can start asking some questions about the relationship between drugs and social behavior.

PSYCHOTIC WEBS

When I talk about caffeine I tend to start by showing the results of a study conducted by NASA regarding toxicity. In this, some intrepid researchers decided to subject spiders to a series of drugs, and then observe the way in which this affected their capacity to weave webs. Now, the capacity to make a web is fundamental to a spider, and the spider-web is thus one of the simplest ways to observe deviant behavior in a small animal. The results were very interesting. As one could have expected, LSD, marijuana and benzedrine all affected the spider in different ways. All produced skewed or partially incomplete webs,

which still managed to show the familiar hub-and-spokes pattern of a normal web. However, the results of caffeinating a spider were highly surprising. A spider subjected to a high but metabolizable dose of caffeine would weave a completely disorganized web, where none of the normal regularity could be found. In short, the caffeine made the spider psychotic – if such a word can be used about a spider. Now, behavioural change in a spider obviously cannot be compared with similar changes in a human, but there is still something evocative about the image.

For a person who has never been subjected to caffeine, the first experience with it can be fairly intense, and there are even documented cases of ‘caffeine psychosis’, where a person without a developed tolerance for the substance started showing symptoms of mental illness after taking a high dose of it. Since 1994, caffeine intoxication is also included as a diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which details four caffeine-induced psychiatric disorders. And these are just the extreme results, the ones that can be clearly diagnosed. Coffee has clear physical effects, both neurological and behavioral. Whether we like it or not, caffeine is powerful, for both humans and spiders, and affects our brains in surprising ways. But whereas the social and economic costs of illegal substances are often mentioned in conjunction with the need to combat drugs, the cost that could be associated with caffeine junkies not being able to function properly before their first cup of on-the-job-coffee is rarely addressed.

THE INVISIBLE DRUG

What makes caffeine special, however, is the fact that we barely even notice it. In the Western world, about 80 per cent of adults ingest caffeine in some form and the effects of it are thus so omnipresent that we probably cannot even recognise them. When coffee was introduced in the Western world, the normal state of affairs was the drunken haze. Everyone, including children, drank alcohol and no-one thought this was strange. In fact sobriety, during much of the 16th and 17th century, would have been seen as an in-between state, and what we see as drunkenness would have been more or less the norm. Beer was a drink for breakfasts and later gin and other forms of alcohol were seen as almost a necessary part of working life. With coffee, a novel sensation of alertness became both fashionable and increasingly more normal. If we take a long perspective, we can see how one state of intoxication replaced another, so that the sedation of alcohol was exchanged for the alertness of caffeine.

Today, we view alertness as the only state really fit for working people. Sluggishness is seen as a pathology, curable with the ever-handy cup of java. But clearly this is not a ‘natural state’. Being chemically enhanced by caffeine, and thus unnaturally alert, may *seem* natural to us, but the interesting issue here is how history and culture has imprinted this sense of being caffeinated as natural. All of us have grown up in a world where almost everyone ingests caffeine regularly, the state of being buzzed on xanthines seems like a base-level of normality, the way life should be. Further, the protestant work-ethic and corporate culture have made us believe that being wired on caffeine might even be a necessary part of human life.

We might simply be unable to view caffeine as a drug. Not that we aren’t aware of its toxicology, or its effects on people, or the fact that it creates dependency. We know all these things. Regular coffee drinkers will be familiar with the withdrawal symptoms such as headaches and irritability caused by a lack of caffeine. But as coffee became ever more popular and being on caffeine became ever more prevalent, the very possibility to think outside of the caffeinated state has disappeared. We are now in a situation where we

caffeinate even water (with products such as “Java Joe”) and, somewhat bizarrely, beer (Anheuser-Busch is currently rolling out “B^E”, which has 6,6% alcohol and 54 mg of caffeine – a little less than in a small cup of coffee). Aren’t drugs supposed to be an *alternative* to the mundaneness of everyday existence?

But precisely this makes it important to think about caffeine. Because it is so mundane, we can use it to rethink what we mean by words such as ‘intoxication’ and ‘addiction’. We perceive the state of being buzzed on xanthines as normal, and a heightened state of alertness as morally good, but this has only become possible by living with caffeine for a long time. And regardless of our affinity for it, caffeine is an addictive mood-enhancer, one most of us use daily to rewire our brains. Remembering this might not change the war on drugs, but can still stand as a reminder not to ignore the more mundane aspects of our life with intoxicants.

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