

# Introduction

## Sighs of the oppressed

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*Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.*

These words were first published in Paris in 1844 in a journal as obscure as it was short-lived. They were part of a critique of the philosophy of Georg Hegel, and while writing this, the 25-year-old author continued his development of a theory called communism. This theory would shape the global political divide and profoundly affect world affairs for more than 100 years after his death in London in 1883. Yet for many, Dr Karl Marx is simply remembered for the epigram: ‘Religion is the opium of the people.’<sup>1</sup> As a vituperative one-line appraisal of the befuddling nature of religion, its place in history seems guaranteed.

But what of the analogy with opium? If people — the ‘masses’ — were in need of religion to make life bearable, who was using the opium? How would Marx’s contemporaries have understood the expression? Much better than most of us today, it turns out, as a great many citizens of the mid-19th century used opium on a fairly regular basis. Indeed its use then was so prevalent as to

warrant the considered view of one of the more distinguished scholars of the period, Virginia Berridge, that 'opium itself was the opiate of the people'.<sup>2</sup>

In England in 1844 almost 15 tonnes of opium was consumed and, during the 19th century and beyond, yearly consumption reached far higher levels.<sup>3</sup> Given that a medical analgesic dose was 1–2 grains every six hours,<sup>4</sup> and each imported tonne contained 15,432,358 grains, opium use measured in tonnes represents consumption of considerable significance. By the first year of the 20th century the amount of opium legally imported into England, mainly from Turkey, had reached 378 tonnes.<sup>5</sup>

Opium was readily available and readily used throughout the 19th century, commonly in the form of laudanum, a preparation made by mixing opium with distilled water and alcohol. Its primary use among the working class was as self-medication. According to a contemporary observer, working people did not go to skilled physicians when they were ill because they were unable to pay the high fees the doctors charged. The result was high use of quack remedies and patent medicines prepared with opiates, such as Godfrey's Cordial.<sup>6</sup> The huge quantities consumed suggest that dependence and addiction were not uncommon,<sup>7</sup> although, with the exception of references to celebrities, evidence seems largely anecdotal.

Recreational use (known in the 19th century as 'luxurious' or 'stimulant' use)<sup>8</sup> wasn't unknown, but it appears to have been much more the preserve of the well-to-do than of the working class.

The distinction between self-medication, recreational use and dependence wasn't always clear cut. The opium use of Thomas De Quincey is a case in point. Born in 1785, the son of a Manchester merchant, De Quincey first used opium as a 19-year-old to alleviate a painful gastric condition and recurring anxiety states.<sup>9</sup> He went on to use it recreationally and became dependent on it. In 1821, an account of his early life and

opium addiction was serialised in *The London Magazine*; it was published as a book, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, the following year. The book aroused considerable interest and is credited with both popularising and demonising the recreational use of opium.

The 'luxurious' use of opium in the 19th century was particularly prevalent among writers and poets. Byron, Keats and Shelley were all recreational users. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was an opium addict in denial, and his famous poem 'Kubla Khan' is said to have been the creative product of his taking two grains of the drug.<sup>10</sup> The poet laureate, Robert Southey, took opium for sleeplessness, as did Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Sir Walter Scott, author of the Waverley novels, partook of both laudanum and opium, initially prescribed for a stomach complaint. The novelist Wilkie Collins similarly began taking laudanum for a rheumatic condition and continued its use throughout his life. Opiate use was central to a number of his novels, including what is perhaps his best known, *The Moonstone*, said to be the first English detective novel.

Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who famously gave us the line 'the pen is mightier than the sword', was, somewhat unusually for the time, an opium smoker. Both Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde were users of opium who went on to write about the drug in a sensationalist way in, respectively, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

The English monarch George IV, who died in 1830, was a big consumer of opiates, as was the anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce. The famed nurse and hospital reformer Florence Nightingale was a more moderate consumer. Among politicians, the four-time British Prime Minister William Gladstone was a user of laudanum who thought that the drug assisted his public-speaking demeanour, while across the Channel the former French Prime Minister Louis Molé died of opiate addiction in 1855.

So there was certainly enough opium about when Marx first wrote of it, and it is not implausible that he was aware of the class dimensions of its use. For the proletariat it was a self-administered medicine; for the bourgeoisie, or some of them at least, it was also a recreational drug that, like religion, was capable of disguising the reality of the present.

Further reference points for Marx were the Opium Wars between Britain and China, the first of which was fought between 1839 and 1842. Marx wrote about the opium trade for the *New York Daily Tribune* during the second Opium War (1856–60). The wars were about the prohibition of the opium trade in China (see Chapter 6). The way in which the trade was carried on — monopoly production and restrictions on wholesale purchase and transportation — meant that it was dominated by a small number of large players. Had the trade been legalised at this point these interests could have been expected to dominate given their entrenched position, but others would have been able to enter the trade if they had enough capital and were prepared to risk it. A legal trade would have invited competition, which could have resulted in reduced prices. The larger companies would have resisted this, but it would certainly have been preferable for them not to trade at all.

These wars were among British imperialism's more shameful episodes, being fought in the name of 'free trade' at the urging of the first drug barons, William Jardine and James Matheson, so that Indian cultivators could be kept in penury and forced to grow opium for the Chinese, whose government had declared its importation illegal. Free trade in opium was about profit, pure and simple. There was more money to be made in the opium trade than in any other, particularly in China, because it was illegal.

Jardine and Matheson made their fortunes smuggling Indian opium into China from early in the 19th century. By the 1830s

their opium imports amounted to something like one-third of all China's foreign trade.<sup>11</sup> At the conclusion of the first Opium War, Jardine was well pleased that the Chinese authorities still refused to make the trade legal. This meant that 'men of small capital'<sup>12</sup> would continue to be excluded from 'the safest and most gentleman-like speculation that I am aware of', leaving the companies that dominated the trade, including his, safe from competition.<sup>13</sup> Both Jardine and Matheson eventually took themselves and a considerable amount of their accumulated capital back to Britain. Jardine became a landowner in Scotland and a member of parliament in London. Matheson also became a landowner in Scotland, spending over half a million pounds buying the island of Lewis in 1844. After Jardine's death, Matheson took over Jardine's parliamentary seat, sparing himself the inconvenience of having to find one of his own, and was made a baronet some years later.<sup>14</sup>

The political history of opium since Marx first wrote about it in 1844 is replete with irony. The British doctrine of free trade pressed opium on the Chinese and created an addict population of more than 13 million who were smoking their way through more than 39,000 tonnes of opium at the beginning of the 20th century. The political fragmentation of China, in which opium played an important part, spawned a nationalist movement, the Kuomintang, whose leader, Chiang Kai-shek, fought his communist allies to take control of Shanghai in 1927. The Kuomintang also took control of the opium industry. By this time opium had long met modernity and given us morphine and heroin, as well as the syringe with which to administer them more efficiently.

In the late 1930s, there were some 40 million opiate addicts in China. After the communist victory of Mao Tse-tung in 1949, Kuomintang insurgents who had fled to Burma captured the opium-producing industry in the region which has become known as the Golden Triangle. Chinese gangsters who had

flourished in Shanghai before fleeing to Hong Kong turned that opium into high-grade heroin. From 1970, this was consumed in large quantities by US troops fighting in South Vietnam. They took the habit home with them, and heroin from the Golden Triangle supplanted that supplied to the United States by the 'French Connection' in Marseille. The Marseille trade itself had been made possible by the defeat of communists in that city from 1947 to 1950 in one of the earlier struggles of the Cold War.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, what began as a war against communism in Afghanistan fuelled the expansion of that country's opium and heroin industries and led to the rise of a terrorist organisation called al-Qaeda, whose opium is religion of a particularly virulent and fundamentalist sort. One of the most fascinating aspects of the drug trade from the second half of the 20th century on is the regularity with which wars fought against communism coincided with rising levels of heroin and cocaine use.

The most obvious difference between the use of opiates and other recreational drugs today and in 1844 is their legal status. With the noticeable early exception of China, opiates and other drugs that have come to be used recreationally, such as cannabis and cocaine, were legally available and widely advertised in most countries in the 19th century. Today these drugs are almost universally classed as illicit. But just as it did in China in the mid-19th century, the illicitness of drugs today increases their profitability. The international illicit drug trade has an annual turnover in excess of US\$400 billion, which, at 8 per cent of world trade, is on a par with the tourist and oil industries and greater than the world's iron and steel or motor vehicle industries.<sup>16</sup>

*Consuming Pleasures* traces the history of licit and illicit drug use, examining why we consume and what we consume, as well as the way in which consumption is regulated in the era

of global free trade. It also looks at drug use from an Australian perspective, going back to our own opium-growing industry and the racist origins of our drug laws. In doing so it considers the paradox of contemporary white Australian identity: on the one hand an image of fit, sun-bronzed athletic types at home in the surf; on the other a nation of people whose per capita drug consumption often equals and more often than not surpasses that of most other nations.

The first two chapters link the origins of global drug control to the early development of the medical profession and the pharmaceutical industry, and examine the influence of each on the Australian and international drug markets as a consequence of the legislative limits placed on self-medication. The next three chapters describe the history and present market conditions for the licit drugs alcohol, tobacco, caffeine and sugar, as well as some of the more popular, and illicit, hallucinogens and stimulants. Chapters 6 to 9 look at opium and its derivatives, morphine and heroin, from a similar perspective, and examine the role of the Cold War in assisting the expansion of the world opiate and cocaine markets and the development of Australia's heroin market. The final chapters explore the dynamics of the drug market and the rationale for state intervention and control before drawing some conclusions about the collapse of communism and the role of religion in the 21st century.

If Marx were around today he would no doubt be intrigued to see how the drug market has developed, and fascinated by the insights its history from the mid-19th century provides — as well as a little perplexed about how it illustrates the efficiency of the free-market economies that defeated the command economies established in his name.

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## Doctors, quacks and self-healers: Drug use and the medical profession

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In 1925 the International Opium Conference convened in Geneva by the League of Nations introduced the first effective global controls on drugs. The controlled substances were opium, morphine, heroin, cocaine and cannabis (described at the time as Indian hemp).

When the League of Nations became the United Nations following World War II, it extended its reach beyond the 36 nations that had attended the Geneva conference — most notably, it now includes the United States.<sup>1</sup> In the second half of the 20th century controls became more stringent and the controlled drugs more numerous.

The most striking outcome of the prohibitionist policies adopted at Geneva was an environment that allowed the growth of an illicit industry that was to become one of the most profitable the world has ever known. Along the way, prohibition put hundreds of millions of consumers on the wrong side of the law, incarcerated millions of them, created a new class of ‘narco-rich’ and corrupted law enforcement agencies, judicial officers, banking institutions and politicians at all levels of government. What were the circumstances that