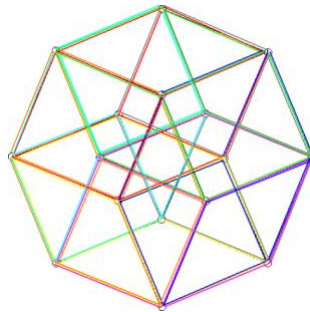


Part 4 – The Shift from an Industrial to a Planetary Civilization: The Global War for Drugs

by William Irwin Thompson

“We Irish think otherwise” Bishop Berkeley



* I am indebted to Karen at Oddity Journal for this wonderful image of the tesseract.

If artists are often about forty years ahead of the time they live in, politicians seem to be about forty years behind. It is now almost two generations since politicians decided to fight the problem of addiction by criminalizing it and declaring a War on Drugs. And now we do indeed have global drug wars from Ciudad Juarez to Afghanistan.

With a mind to the failed strategies of the past, some conservatives are now proposing that we spray the poppy fields of Afghanistan in the way we sprayed the jungles of Viet Nam with Agent Orange. The latter strategy produced wide-spread birth defects among the Vietnamese, and health problems for our own soldiers. But we soldier on, spraying in Peru, hoping to cut off the funding for guerillas, and proposing to spray the poppy fields of Afghanistan, hoping to cut off funding for the Taliban and the international Islamist insurgents of Al Qaeda.



Afghan poppy field

The criminalization of addiction does accomplish one thing: it serves as a form of Congressional subsidy to criminals in support of their high street price of drugs. It also serves to shift funding from public education to our police and military forces, turning, for example, the Los Angeles Police force into an army of occupation in the guerilla territories of the gangs in the LA basin; and LA, Baltimore, and Kabul begin to become a global collage of cultural shrapnel and moral fragments in no-go zones.

The gangs in LA support themselves through the sale of drugs, just as the guerillas in Colombia and Peru do, not to mention the war lords in Somalia and Afghanistan. In all these pre-industrial societies, there are no jobs for young men without education or skilled training. Since a gang member in LA can make several orders of magnitude more money as a dealer than as a busboy in a fancy restaurant, watching how the upper third lives, it is a small wonder that few young men prefer to work as busboys and go to night school to get ahead in the American Dream.

England rose to the pinnacle of world power in the Victorian era by serving as a national drug dealer to China. Since China refused to trade tea and silk for cheap factory-made British junk, but demanded payment in gold, Britain could not support its addiction to tea with a such a gold-drain, so it grew poppies in its colony India and shipped them to China. The Opium Wars was the result, and the long-lasting Chinese hatred of the foreigner. Modern China wanted Hong Kong back because it had been the infamous financial capital of the opium trade. And here one should stop to remember that it was not just polite society drinking tea in porcelain cups that was the driving force for the addiction to tea; it was the long 12 hour work day of the coal miners and factory workers that needed their cheap black tea to keep awake while serving the machines. In the previous century, both England and the United States gained power through economies of addiction, but there the drugs were not opium, but sugar and rum, and the sustaining force was not the Royal Navy, but the army of slaves working on the plantations.

At an internet Town Hall meeting this year, President Obama chuckled at the absurd suggestion that medical marijuana should be legalized. He is not about to risk his presidency by being hipper than thou, especially since he took enough heat for admitting in his book that: "I blew a few smoke rings, remembering those years. Pot had helped, and booze; maybe a little blow when you could afford it." (Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), p. 93.) So it is clear we will be injecting the middle class hypocrisy of the War on Drugs for another generation.

A disclaimer: I don't like recreational drugs. I have smoked pot perhaps only four times in my life, and I have never taken acid or ecstasy, mushrooms or ayahuasca. I am very square and straight, and prefer orthodox yogic meditation to any psychedelic substances. I quit smoking cigarettes on December 24, 1964 in Dublin, and I found that staying off tobacco was one of the most difficult accomplishments in my life—even counting working forty hours a week in college while majoring in three subjects at the same time.

The United States is an addictive society. Rush Limbaugh, the mouth in residence for the Republican Party, is or was addicted to Oxycodone. Normal doctors are now drug pushers for the pharmaceutical corporations. Doctors are given free winter trips for medical conferences in Maui where specialists report on the wonders of their new products and give them free samples for their patients. One neurologist, after I suffered from nerve damage in my left hand—a side effect from the injection line for the anaesthesia for open-heart surgery—gave me Neurontin, without telling me it was a nasty psychotropic drug. My physician in the hospital in Santa Fe gave me Lorazepam without telling me, or warning me that it also was a psychotropic drug. I got off the Neurontin instantly, and refused the Lorazepam, just as I had refused Percodan after open-heart surgery. In our society, our doctors create middle class addicts, just as our high school counselors create young victims by pushing drugs and ordering Ritalin for children who dare to question their authority or their amateur diagnosis of ADD. Adolescents whose frontal cortex is in a process of critical development are given strong anti-depressants. Science now has absolutely no idea of the effects of adult anti-depressants on adolescents. And it should give us pause to realize that in several of the school-shootings, the teenagers were on anti-depressants. The mothers are on relaxants; the fathers are on stimulants; the hedge fund traders are on cocaine, the athletes are on steroids, the rural poor are on crystal meth, and the Senators are on Viagra. And the good old-fashioned conservative Cops and Congressmen are still your common household variety drunks.

And now there is a new generation of drugs on the horizon—cognitive enhancers. Soon middle class parents wanting to get their kids into an Ivy League school will encourage them to take these drugs before they take the SATS. What side-effects these drugs will have we will never know until the wide-spread damage is already done—as was the case with the Thalidomide babies.

Wars on drugs give money to dealers and cops and our overflowing prisons. Demonizing grass with the Rockefeller laws was the attack of one class on another in defense of its own preferred White suburban culture of addiction.

It is time to think otherwise and give the money to medical research on addiction. All addictive substances should be under uniform legislative control. The government should put

the high-priced dealers out of business to buy grass, leaves, and poppies directly from local farmers in support of local communities in Northern California, Maui, Kentucky, British Columbia, Latin Colombia, and Afghanistan. (And here one should pause to remember that the small family farms in Kentucky my friend Wendell Berry celebrates in his fine novels were made possible by the cash crop of tobacco. And the earnings from tobacco also made Duke University possible—not to mention that the fortune that made the Kennedy Government Center at Harvard possible was made by Joe Kennedy from rum-running during Prohibition.) Since the United States is addicted to oil, it is perhaps appropriate that all our opiate derivatives like Codeine are now artificially synthesized from petroleum, so, perhaps, buying Afghan poppies would be more organic and less harmful to the environment and more effective in earning American respect than killing Afghan citizens and spraying their fields.

The American addict, Republican or Democrat, should register with his or her town or city and go to a local pharmacy or clinic to get a fix or small stash, but should be required to have a prescription from a doctor registered in the local clinic that would be supported by the government's purchase and sale of legal and inspected organic grass, leaves, and poppies. The big pharmaceutical companies should be invited into Afghanistan to give futures contracts to local farmers and the local communes of elders in support of their economy. Flying over their fields and spraying them all with toxic chemicals as a way to eliminate addiction is insane. Sending hundreds of thousands of troops to Americanize Afghanistan is a good way to help Al Qaeda in recruiting Islamist guerrillas and terrorists for world-wide campaigns. In the nineteen-thirties it was fashionable for Leftist intellectuals to go off to fight fascism in the Lincoln Brigade in the Civil War in Spain. We are now making it fashionable for unemployed young men in Islamic countries to go off to fight the Great Satan of the American Empire as what we call terrorists and they call martyrs and freedom fighters.

In Viet Nam our soldiers were introduced to South Asian grass as a way of dealing with "the horror." How many of our soldiers do you think will discover opium in Afghanistan as a way of dealing with fear and the brutalization of their souls in a war of insurgency in which you can't tell the good guys from the bad?

We tried prohibition, and it didn't work, but organized crime grew and prospered. Then we legalized alcohol and taxed hard spirits heavily to produce government income. So now we should recycle the funds to create NIH centers of research on neuroscience and addiction, and as well create local clinics where addicts are supervised and are not forced into crime to feed their habit.

When I look at all the teenagers smoking on the streets of my city, and I remember how hard it was for me to quit smoking, I lament to see a new generation willingly take it on again, and I realize how basic addiction is to human evolution. As I have argued before in my books, evil is often the annunciation of the next level of order, so things like transnational acid rain indicate through pollution the emergence of a polity beyond the borders of the territorial nation-state. In much the same way, addiction with its global economy of drugs and guns is an indication of the shift from the territorial nation-state to the noetic polity where identity is based upon states of consciousness. Pollution is like a stain that makes an invisible emergent structure visible. If you have an agricultural society, you have agricultural pollution. If you have a landed industrial society, you have atmospheric industrial pollution. If you are a chemically or genetically engineered society, you have evolutionary pollution. If you are a

noetic polity, you have noetic pollution in the form of millions of addicts on multiple forms of substance abuse.

Even without legislative support, our psychiatrists themselves have already muscled their way into the drug trade and have become pill pushers, much in the same hypocritical way the Victorian British did in the era of the Opium Wars. But while we wait for human nature to change, we need to know more about the cognitive science of neuroreceptors and how throughout human evolution different cultures have bonded with different substances and plants. The shadow-side of our wonderful human brain is that it works through a delicate chemistry and is highly open and susceptible to chemical addiction.

Let us hope that we are seeing the beginning of a shift in thinking otherwise in the Attorney General's recent announcement (*New York Times*, October 19, 2009): "It will not be a priority to use federal resources to prosecute patients with serious illnesses or their caregivers who are complying with state laws on medical marijuana," Attorney General [Eric H. Holder Jr.](#) said in a statement accompanying the memo, "but we will not tolerate drug traffickers who hide behind claims of compliance with state law to mask activities that are clearly illegal." The next step will be to put criminal drug distributors out of business. If chemical factories are not allowed to distribute their toxins in the air, but are subject to strict controls and oversight, then so should licensed farmers, pharmaceutical companies, pharmacies, and clinics.

Medicalizing the drug problem, of course, won't eliminate evil—indeed many doctors themselves became secret addicts—but criminalizing it just doesn't work. It is an interdiction that actually stimulates its growth, and all the violence attendant to it. *

_____*Note an earlier and shorter version of this essay was published in March for WRR's blog *Wild Finance and Politics*, but I wished to bring it up to date and show how thinking otherwise on the global war on drugs is one important step in the shift from an industrial to a planetary civilization.