Drugs: The Dark Side of Consumer Culture

The long 1960s saw the peak of the West German “economic miracle,” but prosperity had its dark side: the “drug problem,” an explosion of recreational drug use among youth.[1] Rob Stephens’ new book on this subject—the first in English—opens with the heroin overdose of one Norbert Harmsen and asks “how ... his short life fits into our understanding of German history” (p. 1). Stephens makes a strong case that the increasingly common tale of youths like Harmsen was not an aberration but a clear, if unintended, consequence of the economic miracle and thus muddies the narrative of the Federal Republic as a tale of successful reconstruction and western reintegration. The drug problem was a “complication of modernization” engendered by the maturing of a capitalist consumer economy and the rise of youth as a market force. Stephens focuses on the new drug culture of the sixties and seventies less as a form of crime, deviance, or illness than as a set of consumer practices reflective of broader social and cultural changes.

Hamburg makes a logical focus for this study because it was a crossroads of both international trade and sixties youth culture. Its status as a liberal city-state open to new policy ideas, where the relationship between implementation and local impact is fairly easy to map, also makes it an ideal object of study. The book’s eight chapters situate Hamburg in various temporal and spatial contexts, with sections on the history of drugs in Germany since 1871; the emergence of a global economy of drug production and distribution; political, media, and filmic constructions of the “drug problem,” including its gendered aspects; and various attempts to handle addiction, from federal anti-drug campaigns and state-level programs to alternative models of therapy.

Stephens first offers a useful overview of drug use since the Kaiserreich. German producers and users were central to the first “drug wave” (1880s-1920s), which was marked by the proliferation of patent medicines and analgesics, new injecting technology, and the birth of the modern pharmaceutical industry. The late 1920s and 1930s saw declines in consumption, domestically and worldwide, due to criminalization and abstinence campaigns. World War II wrecked smuggling networks, though it also spawned new abusable stimulants such as methamphetamine (invented by German chemists for soldiers and pilots) and addicted a host of wounded soldiers to painkillers. Plundered military depots and hospitals furnished most of the drugs on the black market after May 1945, as individuals seeking to barter became the main distributors of controlled substances during the “hunger years.” After 1952, the Federal Opium Office stanched the flow of legal narcotics into the underground market, while drug abuse became confined to a shrinking group of aging addicts. By the early sixties, drugs in Hamburg seemed to be “a problem of the past” (p. 34).

But below the radar, amphetamine abuse by young
patrons at bars and Beat music clubs was growing. Stephens links this new wave of consumption of recreational drugs by youth with a decade-old trend toward rising spending by West Germans across the board on Genussmittel, inexpensive treats like tobacco and chocolate. “Prosperity for all” conveyed the message that consumption was good and pleasure a right, even as some commentators fretted about the moral threat to youth of “irresponsible” consumption. As Stephens puts it, the new prosperity brought unforeseeable consequences: “drug consumption represents, ironically, the success of consumerism” (p. 87).

During 1964-68 drug consumption mushroomed, fed by the internationalization of youth culture through rock music and travel, and embodied by the growing transnational tribe of long-haired Gammler (dropouts or hippies). Drug use became a central—though by no means universally embraced—element of this generation’s search for identity and a rejection of its elders. Various sources suggest that those who used drugs in this period tended to be the dissatisfied progeny of “good homes” (working and middle-class), who craved personal fulfillment, “authentic” experience, and an escape from the “ordered life.” While its advocates insisted that this lifestyle constituted an often politicized rejection of “anesthetizing” consumer capitalism, Stephens insists that consumer culture itself made this rebellion possible: “young people rejected consumption through consumption” (p. 78).[2]

Smoking hash or dropping acid in Hamburg fueled the global market in drugs, the subject of one of this book’s most sure-footed chapters. Among those who played a role in supplying German demand for cannabis and later opiates were drug “tourists” to places like Kabul and Morocco, American GIs, and migrant laborers. These connections ran in multiple directions: western users, for example, spread new forms of drug abuse around the globe. Stephens skillfully details this interconnectedness using the case of Iran. Iran’s government encouraged opium cultivation after 1949 but later backtracked; by then, however, trade networks were well established and supplied processed opium from neighboring countries to Iranian users, feeding an indigenous urban addiction problem. When European demand for hashish and opium took off, organized producers and suppliers all over the Near and Middle East simply directed their activities to the West.

The relationship between capitalism, consumerism, and drugs also appeared in the licit trade sector. For example, the explosion in year-round European demand for tropical produce created an infrastructure that accommodated smugglers as well. The Transport International Routier (TIR) treaty allowed perishables to be inspected at their point of origin, then loaded onto sealed trucks and imported without further inspection to their final destination. Half the morphine from Turkey came in on TIR trucks! In one of the great ironies of modern capitalism, West Germany could not halt flow of drugs without disrupting legitimate trade or impeding consumer demand.

German narratives of the drug problem initially ascribed it to the moral deficiencies of individual users. But liberal commentators, New Leftists, and some parents came to see soft drug use as a manifestation of youthful anomie that should not be criminalized. Even a 1969 report by the Hamburg Senate noted that “young and old” turned to drugs to deal with the stresses of modern life (though it resisted decriminalization). In the early seventies, as hard drugs came to the fore, police turned their attention from the Gammler to foreign smugglers. The drug problem was simultaneously reconceptualized as the fault of “evil” foreign traffickers. The profile of the trafficker was now Turkish or Iranian (more recently Kurdish, Ghanaian, or Nigerian), even though the majority of Hamburg’s trade involved ethnic Germans. The press, especially the tabloid Bild, became fascinated by the “spectacular combination of drugs, crime, and ethnicity,” flogging a narrative of Germans as “victims” of foreigners that lent overt racism new respectability (p. 114).

Media interest also turned from tripping hippies to junkies expiring in public toilets, as heroin became the ultimate symbol of “the dark side of modern life” (p. 124). A new group of mostly working-class addicts emerged, as heroin from Southeast Asia flowed in via Amsterdam, courtesy of the Vietnam War. Overwhelmed authorities scrambled to cope, while the private institutions that dominated treatment could not or would not accept heroin addicts. Older modes of treatment, based on a view of addiction as a mental illness requiring involuntary commitment to a psychiatric facility, were ineffective. A 1970 federal action program urged new solutions, such as therapy for users, international cooperation in policing, legislation (passed in 1972) to expand the list of controlled substances and increase sentences but also give judges leeway to dismiss cases of petty possession, and a national preventative education campaign. Some of these education initiatives, such as the comic, “Wowman! The World’s Most Famous Drug Dog,” are detailed.
in the book’s most entertaining chapter. The hapless Wowman! campaign aimed to harness the power of advertising to turn kids off drugs by presenting the adventures of a troupe of sleuthing teens out to snare a ruthless pusher who resembles the stereotypical evil capitalist. Wowman! also appeared in Radio Luxemburg spots, in which he told children how to spot a dealer, explained what a joint is, and then cut to a track by Black Sabbath, authors of the song “Sweet Leaf” (1971). Stephens’ droll assessment—“and this was considered a prophylaxis against drug consumption”—is priceless (p. 277). Young people either saw through or ignored such propaganda, illustrating the limits of the argument that rational actors educated about the dangers of drugs would reject them.

With the federal role limited, the “everyday job” of dealing with Hamburg’s addicts fell to desperate city officials, who were increasingly willing to throw millions of Deutschmarks at anyone who could rein in the drug problem. Between 1970 and 1973 conventional wisdom about drug use and addiction, social structures, and deviance were questioned by many researchers, social workers, and politicians in the SPD and FDP—a process Stephens dubs “the much-subdued remnants of the ... spirit of 1968” (p. 158). Counseling centers, information campaigns, and therapeutic living communities for users sprang up. Stephens details several “alternative” therapy communities led by former users, the most famous of which was Release, which worked to get desperate addicts off the street. The scale of the drug problem appeared so great that the Senate funded such experiments, even when these openly leftist groups bit the hand that fed them. Release and Jugend hilft Jugend had some success in generating sympathy for “flipped out” teens and housing some of the most vulnerable addicts, but internal conflicts and rampant soft drug use undermined their long-term survival. The ax fell during the economic crisis following the oil shock: public funds were slashed in all areas but policing. Experimental groups either evolved toward more structured, professionalized forms of therapy, or they died (Release, for its part, evolved into a New Age center).

By the 1980s the meanings of drugs had clearly changed: they came to symbolize, at best, mere commodities and at worst, degradation and urban decay. Stephens’ epilogue draws this symbolic language out in an analysis of two films in which addiction becomes a vehicle for critiquing Germany’s past and present. The 1981 hit *Christiane F* is a modern morality tale in which the heroine’s path from Berlin’s Gropiusstadt projects to child prostitute at the city’s Zoo Station recapitulates the “slippery slope” argument of addiction: bored youth turn first to hash, then LSD, then inevitably to heroin—an argument that both draws on the counterculture’s critique of capitalist alienation and rejects its libertinist legacy. Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s more complex *Veronika Voss* (1982) depicts a faded Nazi-era movie star in 1950s West Germany, hooked on morphine by a cruel female doctor and her GI henchmen. Voss appears as a victim of corrupt *Wirtschaftswunder* capitalism, while her addiction to drugs is simultaneously an addiction to Adolf Hitler’s Reich—much as German society, in Fassbinder’s view, was incapable of truly shaking off fascism. Stephens argues that neither of these two films could have been made before the 1980s, when drugs had become a universal symbol of capitalism’s dark side and the failures of modernization.

*Germans on Drugs* provides an informative picture of Hamburg’s particularities while linking the local with the national and the transnational. It uses a range of sources to illuminate many aspects of the drug problem, from police and welfare authority reports to United Nations files and the underground press. It conveys a real feel for the counterculture and is written in a style that is very accessible, if not always elegant. And it speaks to many issues in the historiography, including the legacies of 1968, Americanization versus westernization, and the relationships between leisure, consumption, and politics. But the book’s reliance on official sources produces a less full picture of the world of drug users (particularly before the late 1960s) and a framing of drug use solely as a “problem” or a negative response to modernity. Perhaps a deeper reading of less traditional “insider” sources, such as Hubert Fichte’s influential novels (which are only footnoted), would broaden the picture. In numerous places, a cursory reading of a source left me wanting to know more: what about Hamburg attracted so many young dropouts even before The Beatles smoked their first joint? What does one user’s claim that he “would have gone through the fire for Mao Tse-tung, even though I didn’t exactly know what was going on with him” (p. 84) say about the ways in which hippies constructed an alternative commodity culture where Mao and Che were as essential accoutrements as hash pipes? What was specifically German about the Gammlers’ rejection of the culture of hard work or German authorities’ fears about the effects of drug abuse? Even so, the fact that this book made me want to know more reveals the wealth of ideas it contains. *Germans on Drugs* offers much to ponder and constitutes a valuable contribution to the ongoing conversation about West Ger-
many’s postwar evolution.

Notes


[2]. See also Detlef Siegfried, *Time is on My Side: Konsum und Politik in der westdeutschen Jugendkultur der 60er Jahre* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006).

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