7

SWEET DREAMS

Profits and payoffs in commodity capitalism

> Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values.
>
> (Marx, *Capital*, vol. I)

SUGAR: PURE POISON

During the seventies, as a watershed of the ecology movement, when health food all but merged with mainstream eating habits, a number of anti-sugar books hit the health-food circuit, then came to the attention of the wider public. One of these is William Dufty's *Sugar Blues*, a century-by-century exposé that attributes all the world's health problems to poisonous refined sugar. These include beriberi, scurvy, schizophrenia, pellagra, lung cancer, and of course diabetes. According to Dufty, the introduction of sugar into people's diets has always coincided with the impoverishment of traditionally wholesome food regimes. Sugar is the alimentary chemistry of colonialism. For instance, the British brought beriberi to Java when their polished white rice and sugar supplanted the nutrient-rich native brown rice, just as the Americans destroyed their allies, the South Vietnamese, with instant Minute Rice and Coca Cola while the Viet Cong prevailed on unrefined rice and a bit of salt.

The common line in Dufty's book, as in all the anti-sugar writing of the period, is heavily moralizing. Not only is sugar shown to be a means of colonial domination, it is also the repository of western guilt: guilt over slavery, guilt over indulgent childrearing practices; guilt over commodity glut and consumption in general. Having a sweet tooth is the sin of the west, while obesity is the bodily condemnation of those who have sinned. One very interesting study of the anti-sugar writing sees it as a backlash against the counter-cultural promiscuity

of the sixties (Mechling and Mechling, 1983). In this case, sugar is the metaphoric replacement for the unnamed modes of disorderly conduct more generally associated with the sixties: drugs and sex. The stand against sugar is, thus, a call for a moral return to social order.

The moral dimension of Dufty's criticism makes his book broadly appealing. It rouses the reader's passion in a way similar to soap opera and romance. Moralizing is the basis of the book's strength, but it can also reveal the shortcomings of Dufty's approach as a method for cultural criticism in general. To show what I mean, I will focus on one of the book's anecdotes. Dufty tells the story of a young man, who, upon graduation from high school, is diagnosed as diabetic. His family had a history of diabetes and hypoglycemia. As a child, he had watched his grandmother giving herself insulin injections. But sugar, as a convenient and gratifying component of the family's daily diet, was something neither he nor his mother ever questioned. Indeed, this young man grew up during the era when children were taught to do their duty to the meat and potatoes on their plates so as to get to the Jello, the pudding, or the Betty Crocker cake. Today, sugar is not confined to dessert, but is available for consumption at all hours: the coffee-break donut, the schoolyard granola bar snack, the McDonald's lunch, the 4:00 p.m. Snickers bar, and late-night TV-viewing munchies.

Dufty's account of the 18-year-old diabetic summons up an image of the nuclear family, a mother who did not work outside the home, and family members who sat down to meals together. The story is poignant for those who feel nostalgia for the nuclear family and guilt over its demise. The story is about a young man, but it is aimed at the mothers of this world. The young man emerges as the embodiment of the larger culture of compulsive consumption and the mother's ignorant dotage. Out of love, the mother and grandmother have fed the young man sweets. They are the perpetrators of his victimization.

Dufty's account of the young man reaches its climax on the evening following his diagnosis. This is the night before he will begin the life-long daily process of injecting insulin. He is about to turn himself into a chemical monitoring system, whose highs and lows have the potential to kill him. On this night his mother visits him in his room and in the context of sorrow, guilt, and Oedipal tensions she gives him a Hershey bar: his last. This is how Dufty hammers home his point about the feminine weakness of people who overindulge in sugar. The moralizing approach to consumption sees the individual as victim, someone out of control and unquestioning. To be a sugar addict is to

be a woman or a child, a guileless dupe, easily led, and predisposed to indulgence. A few tough-minded individuals have the strength to go "cold turkey," kick sugar addiction, and then rebuke the rest of us for our laxity. This, of course, means Dufty himself, who represents the masculine stance toward weakness and overindulgence. His mission is salvation through pedagogy. He will teach us how we too can take control over our lives and become sugar-free.

The moralizing approach reduces everything to the individual. This makes it inadequate as a basis for cultural criticism. Very little attention is given to the social and economic forces that determine what gets produced and sold, how new commodity markets are formed, how these are influenced by the ideology of progress, and the sort of struggles that have erupted over consumption. Instead, consumption is portrayed as a matter of good or bad choices made by weak or strong individuals. Dufty does mention protracted opposition in Britain to the use of sugar in brewing beer, and he describes early legal action taken against the sale of Coca Cola over state lines. But for the most part the consumer is portrayed as a pawn to the sugar industry and the conspiratorial "diseasestablishment" ("That part of the establishment – once minor, now major – which profits directly and indirectly, legally and illegally, from human misery and malaise": Dufty, 1976: 44). This brings us to another aspect of the moralizing approach to cultural criticism: the tendency to cast the forces of capitalism as conspiratorial. This is symptomatic of the individual's initial realization that capitalism puts profits before people. Such an interpretation may serve as impetus to class consciousness as it replaces the individual's sense of particularity and dramatically redefines history as "them versus us." But conspiracy does not provide a means of understanding the complex struggles and social relationships within capitalism that, even though they have promoted profit-making at the expense of the working class, cannot be conceived in a singularly polarized way.

Wholly left out of the moralizing/conspiratorial approach to culture are the social meanings of commodities and the choices we make as consumers. As Dufty sees us, we are all weak but, nevertheless, free to learn how to make proper choices. These require shopping at only the purest health-food establishments (many not so pure ones push heavily brown-sugared baked goods) and generally switching to traditional Japanese cuisine. Dufty does not question the cultural meanings embedded in such practices. In our society shopping in health-food stores and adopting foreign cuisines are activities that are

highly defined by class and that have strong student and professional white middle-class associations. The other area of meaning that Dufty does not confront, although it is implied in his anecdotes, is the powerful cultural connection between sugar and sex; or, in a modified version, between sugar and love, sentiment, nurture, and care. Dufty condemns the Fannie Farmer Cookbook because it taught young American girls that the way to win and keep a man was to bake him delicious pies and cakes. But the moralizing approach can go no further. It dispenses with the complexity of meanings associated with commodities and the way in which commodities enter into human discourse. The mother of the 18-year-old diabetic who gives her child his last Hershey bar is complicitous with the "diseasestablishment." But she is also expressing her love in the standard code of commodity meanings. She might have chosen to give her child a more elite brand of chocolate – say, Godiva – for his last sweet indulgence, but this would have altered their moment of being together. The family has traded and based their communication on standard brand names. The Godiva chocolate would have ruptured that communication by making obvious reference to a social class to which mother and son do not belong. In giving her child a Hershey bar, the mother has chosen the top of the standard line – not the cut-rate bargain variety, or the homemade version (both would have had other social meanings). Her choice is in keeping with her son's past relationship to the food industry and his future relationship to the drug industry (insulin, like chocolate, is marketed as a standard brand).

We all make meanings with the commodities we use and bestow. But the meaning possibilities are already inscribed in the history of commodity production and exchange. The school of popular culture criticism that promotes meaning-making as the redemptive aspect of our relationship to a commodified culture sometimes goes so far as to imply that we can make wholly new meanings. It is as if the mother might lift the Hershey bar out of history so that its only meanings were those that she and son chose to give it. Of course, she might have chosen not to give her son a Hershey bar – not to give him anything at all. Such a choice might suggest abdication to the new commodity – the insulin that they are going to buy in the morning; or it might represent the possibility of an alternative relationship, one where commodities do not bear the burden of unspoken words and feelings. In this case, the mother would have had to go to her son's room empty-handed and ready to talk. For a family whose communication has been mediated by the commodity form, the possibility of an

unmediated social relationship might be terrifying. The allegory of the Hershey bar begs scrutiny of how commodities enter into our most caring relationships and how they condition the meanings we make. The moralizing approach that defines sugar as poison and the "diseasestablishment" as conspiracy recognizes meaning only at the level of choice: brown rice versus sugar; strength versus weakness. It presumes that more complex relationships to the commodity do not exist.

SUGAR: PURE PROFITS

In contrast to the health-foodist critique of sugar, there is another, wholly different, body of research aimed at establishing the relationship between sugar and the political economy of capitalism. This approach uncovers other forms of moralizing and includes its own tendency toward evoking conspiracy. The most comprehensive study along these lines is Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*. Drawing on the work of eminent economic historians, Mintz demonstrates that sugar was crucial to capital accumulation and to the formation of new social classes. The most provocative aspect of Mintz's study is the implication that the erosion of the health of the working class, brought about by the widespread consumption of sugar, was in the interests of capitalism.

At one point, Mintz cites the Atlantic trade historian R. J. Davis, who observed: "By 1750 the poorest English farm labourer's wife took sugar in her tea" (Mintz, 1985: 45). I want to look at Davis' words from a number of angles because a lot is said in this otherwise simple and direct statement. First of all, like everything that pertains to the history of commodities, the rate of sugar consumption in 1750 is not culturally marked. We do not commemorate what may well be the advent of the mass-commodity market. This is not one of those dates we all learned in school, like 1492. Nevertheless, it is as significant in the formation of global capitalism as was Columbus' voyage to the Americas. In claiming, colonizing, and turning the Caribbean basin into what amounted to a factory for the production of tropical commodities, Europe created the wellspring of economic accumulation that was essential to the subsequent development of industry and wage labor in the core states. Sugar consumption defined for the first time on a broad scale a mass market of commodity consumers who were themselves entering the ranks of wage labor, and whose lives and

potential to produce were inextricably linked to the distant, and to them invisible, mass of slave laborers. The lives of the latter were all but forfeit even while their potential to produce was dependent on commodities made by European workers and shipped to the plantations; and while their continued bondage (whether slavery or indentured labor) was ensured by the level of sugar consumption of those same European workers. This is the circuit of global capitalism, where the lives and livelihoods of the least advantaged producer/consumers are interdependent, but not understood by them to be so; and where the relationship between these most disadvantaged sectors enables almost infinite profit-making by a diverse capitalist class, in this case composed of investors, speculators, shippers, processors, wholesalers, government officials, retailers, and plantation owners.

I think it is safe to say that no other single source has generated profits equal to that of the sugar economy, although it may today be rivaled by the drug trade. Even the wealth of Aztec and Inca gold was of less significance to the overall economic transformation of Europe than was sugar and its companion commodities: tea and coffee. There is some dispute between economic historians as to whether or not capitalism existed at the inception of the sugar trade. Some would argue that the capital accumulation produced in the colonies made possible the later advent of capitalism as an industrial mode in Europe. The controversy focuses on the economic status of slave labor. Dependency economic theorists, such as Immanuel Wallerstein, maintain that slavery is indeed compatible with capitalism as the mode of labor control developed in the periphery. Wallerstein emphasizes a necessary link between the highly exploited labor in the periphery and the inception of wage labor in the core, a link that Marx corroborates: "The veiled slavery of wage workers of Europe needed for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the New World."

On a somewhat different line of reasoning, C. L. R. James has pointed to the high degree of organization that typified Caribbean slavery and the exacting temporal demands required in sugar production as initial manifestations of a capitalist mode of production (James, 1963: 392). Both James and Wallerstein agree that large-scale, single-crop production for a global market is a feature that commonly difines the Third World in global capitalism. Contrarywise, the Trinidadian historian Eric Williams takes the more traditional position that capitalism comes into being only with wage labor and the particular way in which "free" labor allows for the creation of surplus value. For Williams, slavery and colonialism generated the

wealth that made it possible for capitalism to develop in Europe (William, 1964).

What I find interesting in the debate over whether or not slavery is a capitalist mode of labor is the emphasis that economic historians place on production and the relative lack of attention they pay to consumption. For in the way that sugar articulates an economic relationship between coerced and "free" laborers, and defines both as consumers of commodities, sugar exemplifies commodity capitalism. That the Aztec gold was of a lesser economic significance to European capitalism has largely to do with the fact that it was a luxury item. It could be hoarded in the hands of the few. It never entered or created a mass-commodity market. In contrast, sugar was immensely profitable and it had a tremendous effect on the structure of European economics precisely because it left the hands of the few and became a commodity for the mass market. A high price paid by the wealthy few does not provide the overall capital gain that a lower price paid by the masses does. Moreover, the wider the distribution of a commodity, the more sites it creates for profit-making. These are the lessons that sugar offered the incipient capitalist classes of Europe. They are borne out in the history of its consumption. Demand for sugar doubled, then quadrupled during the eighteenth century (Deerr, 1950: 532). By the nineteenth century, as Sidney Mintz puts it, sugar had become "the first mass produced exotic necessity of a proletarian working class" (Mintz, 1985: 46).

The notion of an "exotic necessity" may initially seem odd. We might be tempted to think of all the now exotic commodities, such as kiwi fruit, on their way to becoming staples in the mass diet. As I pointed out in chapter 3, this is indeed the case. While all Third World commodities have the potential to become standard fare, sugar went one step further to become a necessity. What seems to be an oxymoron in Mintz's statement is instead an interesting device to focus attention on the historical transformation of sugar from an "exotic" or luxury item available only to the privileged classes to a daily "necessity" of the working class as their main source of calories. We might say that the need for a quantum leap in capital accumulation was met by sugar production, while the greatly increased energy needs of the European workforce were met by the introduction and increasing use of sugar in working-class diets. In detailing the expansion of sugar consumption in Britain, Mintz demonstrates that the general diet of most people was at the same time declining in nutritional value. Throughout the eighteenth century, sugar and a

few other new, but non-nutritional substances (tobacco, coffee, tea) were the only major additions to the English diet (Mintz, 1985: 149). One example of capitalism's exploitation of the wage labor workforce was the failure to expand the production of grains and other foodstuffs, coupled with the use of sugar as a substitute for nutrition and a ready source of short-term energy. White bread and jam, tea and sugar: this was the subsistence diet of many women and children in the mid-nineteenth century. Without the "exotic necessities," their diet would have amounted to bread and water.

Social commentators, many of them clerics, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries generally deplored the eating habits of the poor and working class. Their condemnations are little different from those hurled by William Dufty against contemporary sugar addicts. The eighteenth-century poor were seen as indolent and slothful, too lazy to prepare more substantial food, and too easily led by a passion for sweets. The writing is full of moralizing epithets. Sugar and tea were labeled as "drugs" overindulged upon by the "meanest" laborers and the "lowest of the people" (Mintz, 1985: 114). Mintz cites only one authoritative voice from the end of the late eighteenth century, a cleric, David Davies, who grasped the economic reality that gave the lie to his colleagues' reproachful moralizing:

> You exclaim tea is a luxury. If you mean fine hyson tea, sweetened with refined sugar, and softened with cream, I readily admit it to be so. But this is not the tea of the poor. Spring-water, just coloured with a few leaves of the lowest-priced tea, and sweetened with the brownest sugar, is the luxury for which you reproach them. To this they have recourse of necessity, . . . tea-drinking is not the cause, but the consequence of the distress of the poor.
>
> (Mintz, 1985: 115)

The cleric is indeed astute, for he goes on to reveal one of the central contradictions of colonial economics, when he remarks that the common folk of Europe could not afford to buy the foods produced on their own soil, but could sustain themselves on the non-foods (tea and sugar) "imported from opposite sides of the earth" (Mintz, 1985: 116). The same holds true today as research indicates that the working class and poor consume more sugar than the middle classes.

In the same way that eighteenth-century theologians rebuked the poor for their dietary habits, many commentators today deplore the

cultural choices made by teenagers, women, children, or the mass audience in general. (You will note that men are seldom isolated as a group and reproached in the same way, except by some brands of feminist criticism.) Such groups are credited with having no taste, being easily led, or bought off for the price of a cheap fix. Moralizing finds its way into criticism because culture in capitalist society is lived personally. In chapter 1 I mentioned that it is very difficult to conjure up images of the past without summoning up the bugaboo of nostalgia. Likewise, it is difficult to make observations concerning habits of consumption without triggering a moral response. I admit to stomach-churning revulsion when I walk into a 9:00 a.m. class and find half the students initiating their daily caloric intake with a can of Classic Coke: their only breakfast. I might, like the eighteenth-century clerics who condemned the poor for their dependence on sugar, rebuke the students as junk-food junkies. Such moralizing superiority merely betrays my generation's habits, which were formed by a less developed commodity market than exists today. The point that needs to be made is that there is no appreciable difference between their Coke and my coffee, either in terms of the economics of commodity consumption or the history of addictive commodity stimulants. The original bitter–sweet combination of tropical ingredients in Coke: cola nut, a stimulant; cocaine, an addictive agent; and sugar, habituating, appeasing, and stimulating, simply recreate the well-proven formula for mass market and profits that sugared tea and coffee defined in the eighteenth century. Coke is more modern than its predecessors: a fully processed and packaged commodity whose ingredients, derived from widely separate regions of the formerly colonized world, are mixed by the corporation to standardized specification. Some may interpret Coke's abandonment of cocaine as a choice made in the consumer's interest: but it probably has more to do with the economics of an already established mass-commodity market where there is little need for a more powerful addictive hook than the habit-forming combination of caffeine and sugar. Similarly, Coke's current use of corn syrup as a sweetener rather than sucrose (refined sugar) hardly represents an upgrading of nutritional standards. As Coke sheds its basic ingredients, it becomes a postmodern simulacrum of itself. Decaffeinated and sweetened with Nutra-Sweet, it suits the negligible energy and stimulation needs of a workforce that spends eight hours a day feeding information into a machine. If capitalism was once able to sustain a workforce on a poor diet, rich only in calories, it now does so on a diet diminished in calories.

Without going so far as to call the forces of capitalism a "disease-establishment," Mintz nevertheless describes the deleterious effect of sugar on the health of the working class in such a way that the implication of conspiracy lurks between the lines of his analysis. This he directly disclaims by saying: "There was no conspiracy at work to wreck the nutrition of the British working class, to turn them into addicts, or ruin their teeth" (Mintz, 1985: 186). Indeed, one need not prove conspiracy on the part of sugar brokers, government officials, and plantation owners in order to recognize the profits and payoffs that sugar garnered to capitalism. Understanding the history of sugar production and its role in the formation of a mass market is itself an indictment of commodity capitalism. Conspiracy just is not the right word. Capitalists as individuals did not plot directly – or even covertly – to achieve the well-defined goals that Mintz enumerates. Nevertheless, the forces of capitalism brought about the dependency of the working class on cheap stimulants, the maintenance of working-class energy balanced against the erosion of general health and longevity, and an immensely profitable system of production and consumption. Rather than conspiracy, a better way to conceptualize what sugar has meant to capitalism is to see it in terms of its payoffs. The formation of a mass-commodity market for the satisfaction of daily needs in such a way as to establish the control of the working class is the least recognized and most consequential payoff of the sugar economy.

Sometimes literature can give better insight into the complexities of commodity capitalism than can economic or theoretical analysis. This may be because we as readers are more able to accept and detect multivalent relationships and motives in literary characters than we believe possible in individuals constituted as representatives of particular classes. No one more poignantly portrays the connection between sugar and capitalism and its implications for black Americans than does Toni Morrison.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses sugar to show how the commodity as payoff puts those who are most exploited in a position of being complicitous with their exploitation. In the novel, Guitar remembers his father's gruesome death: sawn in half lengthwise at the sawmill where he worked. What makes the death traumatic for Guitar is, in part, the manner of his father's death, which is Morrison's way of summing up all the violence done to blacks as laborers, and in part, the manner of his burial, "boxed backward" (Morrison, 1977: 224), his father's two halves "placed cut side down, skin side up, in the coffin" (Morrison, 1977: 224); this is how Morrison sums up the

brutal disdain that the class of owners and their institutions have shown to blacks. However, Guitar reserves his deepest horror for his mother's demonstration of complicity. When the millowner offers the widow the cheap compensation of forty dollars to "tide [her] over" (Morrison, 1977: 25), she takes his money and uses some of it to buy each of her children a peppermint stick on the day of the funeral. Revolted by the candy, in which he sees his mother's cowed gratitude for the white man's beneficence and her desire to use the commodity as a means to appease her children's pain, Guitar cannot bring himself to eat his peppermint. Instead,

> he held it in his hand until it stuck there. All day he held it. At the graveside, at the funeral supper, all the sleepless night. The others made fun of what they believed was his miserliness, but he could not eat it or throw it away, until finally, in the outhouse, he let it fall into the earth's stinking hole.
>
> (Morrison, 1977: 227)

Morrison understands full well the widow's dilemma. Should she not allow herself to be bought off? In a highly exploitative labor system where the notion of life insurance for black millhands is a joke, forty dollars is at least something. Should she not attempt to ease her children's experience of loss by the only means that commodity capitalism makes accessible to all? Guitar's disapproval of his mother allows the reader to grasp that her complicity is also her survival. In *Song of Solomon*, sugar as a commodity payoff is shown to be the universal substitute for satisfaction in a situation in which Guitar realizes there can be no recompense. The themes of complicity, the desire for gratification and unmediated communication, refer us back to Dufty's allegory of the young diabetic and his mother. Guitar's refusal to accept the commodity as appeasement and payoff leaves the reader with the unfulfilled desire for social relationships where neither domination nor the commodity would prevail. Morrison problematizes all the meanings present in Dufty's allegory without capitulating to moral quandary.

Toni Morrison's understanding and criticism of the widow's complicity creates another perspective for looking at R. J. Davis' statement. He is not just saying that by the mid-eighteenth century sugar had become significant in the diet of the lowest social classes. Rather, he precisely states that "the poorest farm labourer's wife" had become a regular consumer of sugared tea. There is much evidence to support the fact that male heads of households eat better than their

wives and children. This was true in Britain during the coming into being and development of the industrial workforce and it is currently true throughout the Third World and most probably true in the First World as well. Mintz cites a plethora of historical documents testifying to the fact that during much of the nineteenth century British working-class children could expect bread and jam for two meals out of three (Mintz, 1985: 27). Indeed, "wives and children were systematically undernourished because of a culturally conventionalized stress upon adequate food for the 'breadwinner'" (Mintz, 1985: 130).

The same cultural logic that subordinates women to male nutritional needs also equates them with sweetness and would have all little girls believe they are made of "sugar and spice, and everything nice." Fed on tea and jam twice a day, a little girl would quite literally be made of sugar and spice. What the nursery rhyme expresses in cryptic form is, in fact, the economics of women's entry into the industrial workforce and the social consequences of this. Women who worked outside the home for pay in the nineteenth century were no more capable of putting two to three extra hours a day into preparing nutritional meals for their families than women today who hold down jobs and also raise children. If women's work in the nineteenth century brought more money into the home, the increase enabled families to consume more efficient, high energy foods that were at the same time more costly and nutritionally impoverished. In the nineteenth century this meant bread and jam, tea and sugar. Today we have Frosted Flakes, Pop-Tarts, Hostess Twinkies, Dunkin Donuts, Fruit Loops; the list goes on and on, testifying to an infinite array of equally impoverished quick-energy non-foods. These appear to buy the working housewife time, but do not achieve even that if we allow for the time spent on frequent runs to the supermarket: the shopping, the driving, clipping and sorting those nasty little coupons that merchandisers seem to give only on junk foods and lemon-scented dish detergent.

The moment at which economic integers of lesser importance come to be counted for the first time as consumers is extremely significant. The "poorest farm labourer's wife" may be anonymous, but her entry into the ranks of consumers marks a world historical event. Historically, women and children have been of secondary consequence to the creation of profit based on surplus labor. This was, of course, beginning to change in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries as many industrial jobs were broken down into even smaller units. In one of the key books on capitalist economics, *Labor and*

Monopoly Capital, Harry Braverman details how the division of labor combined with the process of deskilling to open jobs to women and children, while closing down jobs previously defined for more highly skilled and highly paid male employees. We are witnessing the continuation of the same economic process today, except that instead of the fabrication of pinheads that Braverman describes, we have banks and fast-food establishments whose employment ranks are filled by women and 15-year-olds. In the eighteenth century the "poorest farm labourer's wife" would not have counted as a producer. While she might have supplemented her husband's efforts in the field during times of increased labor demands, her primary economic function would have been reproductive: to maintain her husband's productivity and to bear and raise his future replacements. She was only slightly more significant to the ledgers that tabulate profit-making, than women and children in slavery. As long as the slave trade continued to supply a fresh source of male muscle, slave women, and particularly children, were economically expendable. Indeed, the economic significance of a female slave child was in some instances registered only by her death. One such incident opens the slave narrative of Boyrereau Brinch (Prentiss, 1810), who was brought to Jamaica in the late eighteenth century to turn his labor and whatever might remain of his life into sugar. As Brinch tells it, a host of newly arrived slaves had been set to work picking oakum, something to occupy their time and teach them the reality of organized labor before being sent out into the cane fields. Suddenly, for no apparent reason the overseer calls out a young girl slave, rebukes her in front of all the others and begins to beat her mercilessly with his whip. Finally, her belly torn, intestines extruded, the young girl agonizingly dies in the dirt. As the slave narratives make clear, beatings and murders were performed publicly for specific pedagogical purposes. As with all the atrocities committed during slavery, this one demonstrates the life and death authority of the master class. But its specific lesson has to do with the expendability of women. Young enough not to be a strong field laborer and not yet of reproductive age, the young girl had no economic purpose except that supplied by the pedagogy of her death. She was more valuable dead than alive. By comparison, the "poorest farm labourer's wife" is economically more valuable alive than dead. The relative humanity of capitalism's treatment of its economic marginals in the core areas is to redeem them as consumers.

The moment at which children and the wives of farm laborers became regular consumers of sugar truly defines the inception of the

mass-commodity market. The economic importance of these, the people on the lowermost rungs of capitalism's wage and profit ladder, is to function as consumers. To have hungers that can be met cheaply and efficiently, but not substantially; to have desires that can be appeased by substitution: these render the consumer more valuable alive than dead.

CRACK: LIVING IN DRUG CULTURE

Even if we do not buy or consume drugs, we all live drug culture in our daily lives. Newspapers give us a daily dose of front-page drug-related news. Church sermons compete with public-school pedagogy in disseminating the horrors of drugs and the virtues of living drug-free. For children in public schools from coast to coast and as young as those in kindergarten, the first anti-drug lesson involves drawing an anti-drug poster. Most children draw dragged-out, brain-fried images of drug users, usually toting a smoking gun. Over this they superpose the slashed-circle logo, which, ever since the movie *Ghostbusters*, has functioned in popular discourse as the semiotic lexicon for "Don't." This is how young children of the middle classes learn to conceptualize the drug consumer as "other." By comparison, public-school anti-drug lessons in areas of high drug use are very different. Many are conducted by police officers and do not presuppose a distance between the child and drug use as does the poster exercise. Rather, children are often taught to act out a refusal when a peer pretends to solicit a drug sale. For the middle classes, anti-drug pedagogy does not call peers into question. It is, instead, structured on an opposition between "them" (the user population) and "us" (the happy, healthy, normal population). Often children's posters show smiling, well-kept people, mostly in nuclear groups, as the positive alternative to the frowning, brain-fried or dead users. The same young children who learn to separate themselves from the plight of the fantasmagoric drug-using "others" are apt to come home from school one day to report, "I survived AIDS." This is what one kindergarten-age child told me. His comment exemplifies the conceptual distantiation of security that the middle class constructs for itself and its children. Indeed, studies show that AIDS is becoming a disease of the poor, whose poverty-ravished immune systems offer inroads to viral attack. The middle class may well find a way to survive AIDS and it may find a way to keep itself and its children free of drugs. But it is haunted by the seductive fear that drugs might

engulf the suburbs, snaring the wife and children in a $30,000 a year habit. Certainly, the middle class has shown little restraint where other forms of consumption are concerned.

The fear of drugs and the cultural definition of users as "other" brings to light the degree to which the middle class imagines itself as separate from the rest of society. It is as if the class as a whole constructed for itself a protective ideological bubble. Of course, it is all hypocritical because great numbers of the middle class are closet drug consumers. But the conceptual zoning off works in daily discursive practice. Out there are the homeless, the diseased, the unemployed, and, of course, the drug users. Inside the bubble, people live the illusion of unadulterated wholeness and autonomy. Each replicates a plastic-wrapped commodity inside its protective packaging bubble. In conceptualizing itself as separate from a social "other," who is at risk and in peril, the middle class lives the bad faith of its imaginary autonomy. Social disorder and ecological disaster are thought to occur only outside the bubble.

Inside the bubble, the middle class lives by a new code based on space, the policing of space, and the politics of space. Having supplanted an older class ideology based on self, possessions, and private property, the code of space accommodates a professional class whose members spend more time in offices than at home – and are more likely to live in condominiums than houses. The code of space can be detected in children's play: "This is my space, get out of it"; "My body is my space, don't touch it." This is the language that some children of the professional middle class now use. It betrays a fear of social relations and demonstrates control through the creation of boundaries. Any form of intimate contact risks being interpreted as encroachment or abuse. Such children have their own rooms, their own beds; they bathe and dress separately and privately. Out there, people mingle like fruits in an open-air market.

In chapter 5 I mentioned that in the doll's house we see an early form of the transformation of social relationships into spatial configurations. What I am getting at here goes much deeper and has to do with the conceptual enforcement of a class ideology whose end point is to banish all those defined as "other" into what amounts to an asocial no-man's land and to develop a means to control all those who inhabit the socially safe zone. The code of space offers awesome methods of social control. Parents of the professional middle class often oppose childrearing practices that are physically direct. Spankings are out of fashion. Rather, they practice and teach indirect forms of control.

One such parent told me that he and his wife let their two children "interact" so that they can become aware of each other's "personal space." But they (the parents) intervene and encourage separate play or activities when it appears that the children "are pushing each other's limits." Another parent described an "invisible fence" that her husband recently installed to control their dog. The fence is a wire buried in the ground that is electrically linked to a collar that the dog wears. If the dog attempts to cross the "invisible fence," it gets a strong shock. The animal learns its space without the owner having to establish a method of control requiring speech, touch, or gesture. The family and neighbors see the animal respecting its space without anyone having to recognize the existence of the spatial bubble.

If the spatial bubble is social hypocrisy, so too is the distinction that the anti-drug campaign asks us to make between good and bad commodities. This is the same distinction that William Dufty makes when he tells us to throw out all our sugar. Such a distinction is untenable when drugs are compared with the great majority of commodities offered for sale.

Shop at any supermarket in the United States and chances are that the brown paper bag you carry out with your groceries will have emblazoned on it an emphatic anti-drug slogan: "Say no!" This is the message stamped on every chain-store shopping bag from coast to coast. Like the poster exercise for school-age children, this warning is aimed largely at a non-drug-consuming population. It creates a sense of difference between those who see themselves as capable of saying no and their imaginary "other," who by contrast is felt to be weak and easily propositioned into saying yes. "Say no!" is the great white hope that this is all it will take to eliminate the social threat of drugs. Many of the people who carry their groceries home in "Say no!" bags will never be offered a drug in their entire lives. For them, the supermarket full of commodities presents itself as safe normalcy against the threat of unsafe commodities sold on the streets, not advertised, and not guaranteed by a brand name.

Commodity culture tells us to say yes to everything. To question a commodity strikes at the fundamental logic of a culture whose main tenets are: "If it's new, it's good; if it costs more, it's better; if it's sold, it's safe." Not to consume is to fail to exercise one's duties as a citizen. Grocery bags that preach "Say no!" would represent a contradiction in a society predicated on saying yes, were it not for the fact that in this case saying no is taken as a means for demarcating a class. Those who say yes fall to one side of the social barrier and are construed as

lawless, antisocial low life. Those who say no represent social acceptability. The fact that the grocery bag is full of pesticide-laden fruits and vegetables, steroid-fed meats, synthetic non-foods such as diet soda, empty foods such as breakfast cereal and chips, and a general overdose of chemical preservatives – all of it hazardous in the long term – is not in question. To all of this, we say yes. The admonition against drugs precludes the possibility of raising questions about all the other commodities defined as acceptable. We need not question what we consume, or even that we consume. The supermarket has done this for us.

There is another way we all experience the culture of drugs that is just as obvious and little remarked as the "Say no!" shopping bags. I am referring to the absolute, hard-core masculinity of drug culture. Has there ever been in, any episode of *Miami Vice*, a highly placed woman in the drug trade? By comparison with late twentieth-century corporate capitalism, which has opened its doors to women executives, the drug trade appears to be structured like an ancient robber baron state. *Miami Vice* occasionally shows us a sister of one of the main men; there are numerous mistresses; there was even Crockett's wife. But there certainly has never been a "dragon lady" in the cultural iconography of drugs – no female entrepreneurs or sales network (even though there are reports of women's drug-dealing gangs in Los Angeles). Nor has the media shown a highly placed woman in the enforcement network. Can you imagine the czarina of drugs? For the most part women in *Miami Vice* are the undercover agent "whores" who solicit "buys" for the cops. These women are so tightly tethered by their male cohorts that they may as well be working for pimps. If an occasional policewoman is shown to have a bit of initiative and independence, she is done away with in a climactic shoot-out, forfeiting her life so the men can live and fight some more.

In chapter 5 I demonstrated how television's depiction of domestic space and relationships opens the way for the resurgence of masculinity. The forms of male domination found in the sit-coms may be insidious, but they are child's play compared to the unabashed and violent sexism in the media's portrayal of social relationships in a world defined by the drug economy. Its extralegality gives the drug trade a context for imagining the most regressive forms of male domination and portraying these in ways that are currently unthinkable in any other generic universe. Even traditional strongholds of the masculine imagination, such as the mystery, the spy thriller, or the crime drama, cannot get away with the total reduction of women to

sexual objects. The hit movie *Colors* includes one bereaved mother of a slain gang member and one good wife (of the senior cop). All the rest of the women are proven bitches. They are in the movie to ally with the men and follow them around, to be in bed, and to be naked. They are described as "good lays" and except for the fact that men want "pussy" when they get out of jail, the women have no other reason for being in the movie.

Colors is like a science fiction planet where instead of two sexes, male and female, there are two male groups: the cops and the drug-dealing gangs. Contrary to the way we conceptualize the sexes as either antithetical or complementary, the two male tribes in *Colors* are mirror-images of each other. This is a movie about male bonding and male-defined space and activities. Homosexuality is tolerated because it is a version of maleness. So what if one of the gang members fucks a plastic rabbit? There is no difference between his inflated pet rodent and the women defined as sex objects. Similarly, there is no appreciable difference between the gangs and the police task force. Both occupy turf. Instead of pissing to mark their territories, as the man and wolf do in *Never Cry Wolf*, the cops and gangs lay down a spray of bullets. Both invade private domestic space; they take and hold hostages; they kill each other; and they kill people who are not incorporated in the gang/cops social division of labor. It comes as no surprise to the viewer when the senior cop in *Colors* rebukes his young buddy by calling him "a gangster just like them." As the only representative of the erstwhile police ethic that once made it possible to distinguish the good guys from the bad, the senior cop is shown to have no place in the cloned universe of cops and gangs. Hence, he is written out of any future *Colors* social scheme with a bullet at the movie's end. In a larger sense, the elimination of the senior cop, whose more humane, person-to-person tactics marked him as a relic from the past, is the movie's way of depicting what is happening in cities across the country, especially those defined as drug centers, where the police have now become a highly militarized force.

News coverage and press reports on the drug trade give rise to equally potent masculine fantasies. First of all, there is the Colombian cartel, as demonic and macho as anything seen in a Spielberg/Lucas box-office hit. Actually, very little hard information on the Medellin family exists in mainstream journalism. This leaves everything to the popular imagination. Nothing except OPEC rivals the drug cartel as the unknowable, foreign conspiracy of Third World robber barons bent on wrecking the economy, social values, and quality of life in the

United States. Both Arabs and Latins fill the xenophobic bill nicely: properly dark, properly macho, properly ruthless, properly inscrutable. By comparison, the old-style Mafia comes across as familiar, familial, even indigenous – its foreign connections boiled away in the great urban American "melting-pot." The Colombians are the unassimilable "other", the renegade and ruthless businessmen who show no interest in opening a branch office in a multistorey Plexiglas building in downtown Los Angeles like any other respected foreign capitalist.

What is not reported in the mainstream press and is most definitely left out of the media portrayals is that the Colombian drug cartel is economically quite ordinary. It replicates global capitalism entirely. "It is basically an ordinary business that has been criminalized": this is how Mike Davis defines it in his account of the Los Angeles drug gangs (Davis, 1988: 53). According to *Fortune* cocaine trafficking is "a well-managed multinational industry" (Kraar, 1988: 29). Like any other multinational, the cartel oversees the production, processing, distribution, and sale of a cheap, desired, and replenishable commodity. It has its elite line, cocaine, and its mass-market version, crack. The latter, as Davis defines it, is "an absolute commodity that permanently enslaves its consumers" (Davis, 1988: 54). The cartel's primary market has been the United States, but reports now show that it is developing a European market as well, an economically shrewd decision given the forthcoming consolidation of the European Economic Community, whose elimination of trade barriers will make drug trafficking more feasible. In the absence of any other viable employment opportunity, black youths who deal drugs have simply inserted "themselves into a leading circuit of international trade" (Davis, 1988: 52). The drug trade is so clearly structured on existing capitalist forms and so clearly organized around commodity sales that in areas where there is no crime syndicate already in existence to market the product or where youth gangs cannot be organized to handle the merchandise, ordinary small businessmen will satisfy the need for marketing outlets. This is what Pino Arlacchi found in his study of the drug trade in Verona, where local merchants meshed their activities, business skills, and commodity markets with the needs of the drug trade (Womman, 1988: i).

The fantasmagoric proportions that the cartel takes in the popular imagination has its roots in racism and in macho resentment and envy: resentment that a bunch of foreigners has outdone the great heads of legitimate multinational capitalism; and envy for the

reported $500 billion a year drug trade – all of it untaxed and amassed with very little overhead expenses. After all, they do not have to pay benefits to their employees, or exorbitant rents for shopping-mall space, or pay for costly advertising campaigns.

The machismo that fuels the demonic imagination has a basis in the political economy of the drug trade and the sort of social relationships that have developed in economically depressed inner cities. In his book on the economic demography of Los Angeles, Edward Soja traces the movement of jobs and capital out of the black blue-collar areas of the city and the large-scale opening of new industries offering entry-level professional positions to white suburbanites (Soja, 1988). The selective racism and class bias of postmodern economics is obscured by the regional migration of industry. When industry is stationary it becomes the site for class struggle. When industry is mobile, it can abandon the social relations that define a particular area and opt for more favorable ones in another area. In Los Angeles, the wholesale flight of industry out of the black districts has left a wholly under- and unemployed black male population. Black women have fared somewhat better than men as many have been hired in information-processing jobs. While Los Angeles is in the vanguard of postmodern economics, other, more traditional, cities such as New York and Washington, DC, have equally high black male unemployment and equally bleak black employment opportunities. This is the labor pool tapped by the drug trade and at the heart of the macho cultural presence it projects.

In contrast to the roving macho bands of cops and gangs, the inner city as a lived space is depicted in the media as female and victimized. The pleas that go out for help, which the newspapers headline and emphasize as representative of black life, come exclusively from women, invariably single mothers. The inner city, with its dense, decaying projects, is woman defined. Depicted as unable to care for themselves, the women and their spaces are besieged and give way to the male gangs and police task forces. As the culture of drugs has it, black women are in the position of asking that their rights be abrogated for the sake of protection. In relation to the social tensions and resentments generated by feminist demands in the larger society for greater female autonomy and initiative, the drug trade offers the mainstream press an opportunity to portray inner city black women as thoroughly isolated, bereft of supportive female relationships, crying out to men for help, and being victimized by both the gangs and the cops. One could not ask for a better scenario for retrenched

racism and machismo. Black women are seldom interviewed and never quoted in groups, daily-life networks are never shown, instead black women are depicted raising children single-handedly (and badly), isolated in their apartments, in their journeys to work, in their jobs. The only voices recorded are the pleas for help; the only testimonies accepted are those that show women as ancillary to or dependent on men.

Such reportage offers the white middle class yet another way to conceptualize itself as different from its social "other." White professional women can pat themselves on the back each time they read about the plight of black women in the inner city, knowing that they are not dependent on men for gifts or protection. It is not threatening to the white middle class to know that black women are coping against insurmountable odds; after all, this is what they have done ever since slavery. The erasure of urban black women's networks and cultural life provides an ideological support for the conceptualization of feminism as a profession whose jurisdiction goes no further than the office, the university, and the suburb.

CRACK: THE PAYOFF

The advent of crack as a mass-market commodity for the urban underclass has occasioned a range of police enforcement tactics and court actions the like of which have not been seen in this country and are rivaled only in Britain, where anti-immigration sentiment and mobilization against the IRA have produced a similar enforcement and surveillance agenda against a racially defined underclass. The war on drugs commands a big budget, three-quarters of which goes on enforcement, while the scant leftovers get divided up for treatment and education programs (Dillin, 1989: 8). Enforcement is primarily aimed at the street dealers, with massive sweeps that net a thousand or more low-level, replaceable salesmen. The war on drugs defines the city as a war zone, and its residents, if not the enemy then some special class of non-citizens who do not have the rights assumed by those recognized as citizens. What is most astounding, indeed terrifying, is the lack of uproar against current enforcement tactics on the part of any social group except the beleaguered complaints of the American Civil Liberties Union. The all but blatant acceptance of surveillance, curfew, arrest sweeps, identity checks, and illegal searches demonstrates the degree to which people in the inner cities have been defined as "other," even by the black middle class (Davis, 1988: 44). The

mainstream population need not see trends in juridical and police actions as posing a threat to their lives because, after all, members of the professional middle class do not have to make their domestic space regularly available for searches; they do not risk eviction when their sons or daughters are arrested on a drug charge; they are not threatened with prosecution for having failed in their parental responsibilities when their children are under indictment. These are some of the measures being proposed, in some cases enacted, and, in a few instances, being tested in the courts. The only difficulty is imagining the middle class in the position of its social "other."

Mass culture sometimes apprehends social relations in such a profound way as to depict these in all but transparent figurations. Everything that I have been saying about the conceptualization of the drug-using population as "other" is articulated in the movie *Alien Nation*. This is an amazing cultural metaphor. In it the user population is cast as aliens from outer space, whose history includes just enough cultural indices to allow the audience to associate the aliens with black Americans. The aliens, called "newcomers" in the movie, are a society of shipwrecked humanoids, biologically engineered to be slaves. They are highly adaptable and can perform all the menial and dirty tasks that the earth population shuns. They live in "slagtown," the newcomer ghetto, and are generally peaceful until they get hold of the "drug." It is suggested that the newcomers stink and that the males have much larger penises than males from earth. Finally, like the emancipated slaves who were arbitrarily named by Freedman's Bureau officials, the aliens were similarly named by their quarantine officers. The movie's alien protagonist is, thus, Sam Francisco.

The most interesting consequence of the social division between users and non-users is its effect on race relations in the earth population. Once the user population has been completely separated and conceived as alien, the non-user population, which in the movie is the Los Angeles Police Department, is free to develop multiracial and multiethnic relationships. There are blacks and Chicanos as well as Anglos in the social mainstream of the police force – all joined together in the brotherhood of non-users. What is more, the non-users can see themselves as perpetually different from the slagtown "others," forever safe, because the movie's highly addictive superdrug has no effect on earthers, whereas aliens on the drug lose all thought of social life. They think only of obtaining more and more of the drug. And if they ever overdose, they transform into murderous superbrutes.

Alien Nation is not without its liberal solution. Aliens can forsake the drug; and, like Sam Francisco, who makes friends with a white cop, they can look to integrating with mainstream society. Male bonding is the movie's method for bridging social "otherness." Buddies work together, trade jokes, and get drunk: the earther on alcohol, the alien on sour milk. Drinking establishes social cohesion; drugs separate people from monsters.

Prior to the marketing of crack, critics whose aim was to establish a relationship between drugs and capitalism generally sought to reveal the intimate connections between the drug trade and the foreign policies of western nations. The most informative and hair-raising study along these lines is *The Great Heroin Coup* by Henrik Kruger, which supplies information on enough drug-financed covert intelligence operations to keep several TV drug dramas going for a number of years. These operations include destabilization campaigns, arms deals, the infiltration and subversion of radical movements, training camps for death-squad torturers, and political assassination: all of them paid for out of the heroin trade and performed by gangsters simultaneously on intelligence agency payrolls. What Kruger does not set out to prove but nevertheless implies is that the fortunes of left-wing struggles in Latin America have been connected with the control of the underclass in the United States by their curious relationship to the drug trade and to those who run the trade. This is a contemporary version of the eighteenth-century relationship between slaves in the New World and the laboring class in Britain, whose fortunes were interconnected and controlled by the sugar trade. The consumption of the underclass in the First World, which ensures its dependency and impoverishment, also provides a means for exercising control over the underclass in the Third World (whether that underclass comprises eighteenth-century slaves or twentieth-century guerrilla fighters).

Where the global trail of "dirty tricks" financed by heroin establishes a connection between drugs and the foreign policies of capitalist states, crack demonstrates the intimate connection between drugs and commodity capitalism. If a commodity is illegal, is it also outside capitalist economics? One of the residual tendencies inherited from the counter-cultural movement of the sixties is to assume that if a particular object or practice is aberrant – or abhorrent – to mainstream culture, it is also aberrant to the system as a whole. This may have been the case with homegrown marijuana and campus chemistry lab LSD, but it is definitely not the case with crack. No other

commodity marketed today better exemplifies Marx's formula for capitalist economics than crack. "Money begets money" (Tucker, 1978: 335) is how Marx put it when he defined economic exchange as M–C–M (money–commodity–money). The capitalist buys a particular commodity for no purpose other than to sell it at a higher price. The commodity is "nothing but exchange value" (Tucker, 1978: 328). Crack as a commodity could not be better engineered for profit-making, with its cheap, replaceable labor, minimal costs of processing, and a mass market in sales. At $25.00 a hit, sometimes less, crack is truly a mass-market commodity. If in 1750, the poorest farm labourer's wife could afford tea and sugar, by the late 1980s women, children, and the unemployed can be regular drug consumers.

Crack also has important consequences for the definition of use value. Marx conceived of economic circulation based on use value by the formula C–M–C (commodity–money–commodity). If I produce a product, such as embroidered blue jeans – or, in a less artisanal mode, if I produce use value in the knowledge I make available to students – then according to the use value formula, I trade these for money or a salary and with it I buy all the other commodities necessary for daily life that I myself do not produce. What crack means for the street dealer is the capitalization of use value. For the street dealer, crack is devoid of use value. It is only a means of getting money, which is itself a means of getting the real objects of desire, the commodities that are truly felt to have use value: the clothes, jewelry, cars, sound systems, and weapons that are named by every street dealer in every interview as the whole point of dealing drugs.

It is not completely true that crack is "nothing but exchange value" or a means of obtaining commodities. Use value exists in what the consumer sees in the commodity (Tucker, 1978: 328). However, the capitalization of use value extends to the buyer as well as the seller of crack. No matter how intensely desired, no matter how satisfying the "high," crack produces the absolute atomization of the individual. Rather than enabling or articulating social relationships, it eliminates the social and puts the individual in relation to the fetish commodity. The economics of addiction is the negation of the social. Its repercussions are manifest in the growing number of crack-addicted mothers who abandon their children to the care of friends and relatives, and the great number of crack-addicted teenagers who see their parents only as candidates for theft. The morality of child abandonment and theft need not be the only issue. What is at stake is the moment when a

person's relationship to others matters less than his or her relationship to a commodity, and when it is felt that a commodity has the power to gratify in ways that relationships to people cannot.

In 1945 Theodor Adorno wrote *Minima Moralia*, a collection of observations on daily life that are as pertinent today as in the aftermath of the Second World War. The whole of the book is written against "The withering away of experience" (Adorno, 1974: 40). The loss of dimensions, the narrowing of focus that condition our personal relationships replicates our relation to objects. As Adorno puts it, objects have become purely functional, narrowly defined by their specific use. The commodity object is wholly contained in its purpose. It has no other larger use or meaning, no "surplus," nothing that escapes inscription in its commodified functionality. As a drug, crack induces the ultimate "high"; as a commodity, it absorbs the "high" in a serial desire for the next one. Crack is wholly functional. Its pleasure is the duration of the commodity. It is wholly consumed in the moment. There are no leftovers except for the tiny brightly colored caps that come with its packaging. This is not a fistful of "pot" sold in a Baggie off the supermarket shelf. In its packaging alone, crack can be seen as a mass-market commodity. Think of it: hundreds of thousands of tiny plastic-capped vials supplied by one system of production and filled by another. Young children look for the plastic caps in urban playgrounds, on the street, at the beach. They collect them and trade them with their friends, turning crack caps into commodity meanings in the same way that children in the fifties collected and traded bottle caps from Nehi and Coke.