The Age of Addiction: How Bad Habits Became Big Business

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The Age of Addiction: How Bad Habits Became Big Business is an expansive and thoughtful account of how the activities or substances that foster addiction have proliferated throughout human history. The book's author, historian David Courtwright, has explored similar themes in his previous works, *Forces of Habit* and *Dark Paradise*, but *The Age of Addiction* stands on its own and develops many of his earlier ideas across a broader array of pleasure-producing activities and substances.

Courtwright argues that the scale and severity of addiction accelerated dramatically during the 20th and 21st centuries as a result of what he calls *limbic capitalism*, a means of doing business that relies on, and seeks to encourage, the excessive consumption of products driven by limbic areas of the brain related to motivation, reinforcement and memory. Courtwright situates limbic capitalism within a survey of the human cultivation, production and consumption of addictive substances that emerged slowly over human history as a result of biological, migratory, cultural, political and economic contingencies. This trajectory begins with an account of how our mesolimbic brain inspired our Mesolithic ancestors to gather honey, despite the risk of painful stings. Courtwright then considers how this same primal urge motivated a sustained human effort to seek out, consume and proliferate new sources of "brain reward" through the emergence of the agricultural revolution, global trade, industrialisation, urbanisation and digital technology.

While history provides the organising structure for the book, it is as much a work of political economy. Addictive products produce an insatiable demand in excess of their utility. This unique quality has facilitated enormous private profit. Pursuit of these profits provided a further motivation to experiment, refine, blend, distil and engineer – either fortuitously or by design – products that deliver increasingly potent doses of brain reward, excessive consumption and return on investment. Courtwright offers numerous historical examples of the purposeful commercial engineering of commodities to increase their

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addictive potential throughout the book. One of the strongest examples is the addiction newcomer: hyper-palatable, calorie-dense foods. Courtwright describes the lengths that food scientists have taken to “maximise palatability at minimum cost”, such as fashioning sodium crystals into “unnatural shapes that cling to every morsel of snack foods [...] to deliver the maximum burst of flavor” (p. 184).

These efforts have been further catalysed by the modern global economy. Technological innovation improved the efficiency and scale of modern production and transport, and in turn the availability and affordability of addictive products. Humanity’s increasingly urban surroundings enabled newfound anonymity and socially permissive sub-cultures, while the normalisation of addictive consumptions could be further pursued through celebrity endorsements, sponsorships and strategic product placement. While a heightened sensitivity to environmental cues, added to the already formidable influence of advertising.

As these means were pursued and perfected, evidence of the rising social costs of the mass consumption of addictive commodities resulted in community backlash and forced governments to restrict or prohibit consumption. Courtwright dedicates two chapters to the push and pull between what he calls anti-vice and pro-vice activism. In the first, he traces key moments within the history of prohibition and public health efforts to stem the tide of harmful over-consumption. He then considers how well-financed public relations machinery has been able to effectively campaign for permissive regulation, and dilute “anti-vice” attempts to minimise consumption and harm. While “pro-vice” activism has been effective on a broad front, Courtwright concludes that with enough political will, and the right combination of historically effective strategies, the harm of habituating products could be contained.

Readers may question whether many of the defining features of limbic capitalism could be extended to almost any industry under conditions of advanced capitalism. The “pro-vice” tactics Courtwright fingers are not unique to habit-forming commodities; many parallels exist elsewhere, from firearms to fossil fuels. But Courtwright’s key insight is that addictive products are not “ordinary commodities” [1]. They are set apart by a serious risk of habituation that propels consumption even in the face of devastating consequences for the consumer and society. Whether all the products Courtwright examines – which

include video games, fast-food and tanning salons – share a neurobiological action that is comparable to cocaine or alcohol, both in kind and degree, is a claim that many still find exaggerated. Courtwright revisits many of the key landmarks of this debate, before ultimately concluding that “the neuroscientific case is less wrong than incomplete” (p.177-83). He stresses that the modern scale and severity of addiction is as much a consequence of *interactions* between the relevant neurobiology and characteristic features of advanced capitalism. Such that products that would otherwise be only mildly habituating, when combined with the modern commercial and technological arsenal, can come to seriously undermine our capacity to make reasonable decisions about consumption, even to the point of financial hardship, angst, unemployment, ill-health and death.

In *The Age of Addiction*, Courtwright provides a thought provoking account of how many of the products that pose a serious risk of habituation and harm are as much a result of economic, as ecological forces. It is essential reading for anyone who accepts the notion that, while the brain must be a crucial pivot point in our understanding of addiction, we will not arrive at a sufficient explanation for the phenomenon if we isolate neurobiology from the contexts in which addiction is expressed and has developed.

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