High Time for a Change in Drug Policy

A Review of

High Price: A Neuroscientist's Journey of Self-Discovery That Challenges Everything You Know About Drugs and Society

by Carl Hart


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Reviewed by

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On a rainy Sunday morning in a tough Miami neighborhood in the early 1970s, seven-year-old Carl Hart was at home with his parents and five sisters. His mother was enjoying Al Green on the record player when, on an extension phone, she accidentally overheard Hart’s father talking to a lover. After heating maple syrup to a boil in a pot, his mom strode into the bedroom and heaved it at him. Hart’s father chased her outside, wearing only his Fruit of the Loom underwear. Had he not slipped on the wet grass, he may well have killed her. Instead, the incident permanently ended a marriage long fraught with conflict.

No drugs were involved in this episode. Indeed, crack cocaine didn’t hit the streets until almost a decade after this occurred. And yet a national mythos has arisen whereby crack and other drugs have been repeatedly blamed for poverty, child neglect, unemployment, violence, and a host of other conditions in the African American community that often preceded the so-called crack epidemic chronologically and have less obvious causes.

In his compelling book High Price: A Neuroscientist’s Journey of Self-Discovery That Challenges Everything You Know About Drugs and Society, Carl Hart recounts dozens of such tales, depicting the minefield of obstacles he had to navigate to eventually become the first tenured African American science professor at Columbia University. But this is far more than a Horatio Alger story. Hart’s goal is to offer his own fascinating life narrative and a plethora of underreported research evidence to overturn widely held assumptions about addiction, poverty, and race in America.

“Most of what we think we know about drugs, addiction, and choice is wrong,” he writes (p. 5). Do crack and methamphetamine permanently ensnare everybody who tries them? No: 75 percent of those who use common illegal drugs never become addicted. Does methamphetamine turn all who try it into half-crazed demons? Actually, cognitive test results of those using it are inside the normal range. Is cocaine so addictive that rats prefer it to anything else? Surprisingly, 94 percent of rats would rather drink water sweetened with saccharin.
Common misconceptions about drug use tend to ignore the context of drug-taking behavior in favor of pharmacological explanations, Hart argues. For example, rats living in enriched social environments self-administer only a miniscule fraction of the amount of cocaine used by those in social isolation (Puhl, Blum, Acosta-Torres, & Grigson, 2012). In his own research Hart found that, given the opportunity, chronic users of cocaine and methamphetamine would frequently choose cash rather than a hit of the drug, demonstrating that they were not hopelessly in thrall to cravings and could make rational choices. Furthermore, during several weeks of inpatient testing, none of his participants became violent or displayed the crazed behavior associated with drug addiction in the public mind. In fact, staff at the hospital where the experiments were conducted couldn’t tell Hart’s participants apart from those there for studies on diabetes or heart problems.

The public’s faulty understanding of drugs becomes especially damaging when substances like crack cocaine are blamed for poverty, family dissolution, and widespread unemployment among African Americans. One of the strengths of the book is Hart’s willingness to share his own life experience, demonstrating that many of the problems in the Black community preceded the so-called crack epidemic and have a variety of other not-so-obvious origins.

Hart describes being raised by an undereducated family suffering from poverty on a daily basis. His mother had dropped out of school in the ninth grade. He and five siblings shared a single bedroom. They were afraid to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night in a house crawling with spiders, rodents, and scorpions. The family was so poor that his mother could barely scrape together the annual $20 fee required for him to play football in the Optimists League. Their circumstances had nothing to do with drugs.

So what was to blame? Hart points to many factors. For example, Hart and Risley’s (2004) classic work demonstrating that, even before they enter school, children of professional parents have heard 32 million more words than have children from families on welfare. What’s more, the former group hears five words of praise for each discouraging one, whereas the latter hears two “no’s” for every positive expression. Similarly, Hart notes how his family fit into the pattern identified by Lareau (2003). Rather than encouraging him to question authority and engage in moral reasoning, as middle-class parents are apt to do, Hart’s parents whipped him with belts and tree branches when he disobeyed. He was, like so many children of the poor and working class, unintentionally “being trained for life on the bottom” (p. 37).

Still, Hart’s circumstances didn’t lure him into a life of drug addiction, and the burglary, shoplifting, and marijuana sales in which he engaged were not to support a habit. As he writes, “we stole because we didn’t have what we needed or wanted; we stole to resist, to not be suckers” (p. 109). He forcibly and repeatedly rejects the simplistic idea that crime in the African American community is an outgrowth of drug addiction or that addiction itself is entirely due to the supposedly overwhelming pharmacological properties of any given drug. Instead, drawing on basic Skinnerian theory, he points to the relative lack of competing reinforcers in America’s poorest communities that makes addiction there more likely. Those with higher socioeconomic status actually use drugs at about the same rate as do those with lower status but are less likely to become addicted due to greater access to alternative sources of power, enjoyment, and meaning, as well as basic mental health services.

Hart himself was fortunate to avoid arrest, which could have easily ended his climb from underprivileged circumstances (just as it could have for Barack Obama, as Hart points out).
Michelle Alexander (2012), whose book *The New Jim Crow* is an appropriate companion to this volume, has drawn attention to how felony arrest leads to a lifetime of legalized discrimination in employment, housing, student loans, and so on. This problem is dramatically worse for African Americans, who in some states are over 50 times more likely to be sent to prison on drug charges than are Whites. Shockingly, this has resulted in more Black men behind bars now than were enslaved in 1850. Hart’s own stories of being subjected to institutional racism cast a harrowing personal light on statistics like these.

Throughout the book, Hart invites readers to challenge assumptions that drug addiction differs fundamentally from other patterns of repetitive self-defeating behavior or that any drug exploration is necessarily perilous. His counterexamples are fascinating: For example, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approves the use of methamphetamine to treat narcolepsy and ADHD. Hart also draws attention to a critical but underrecognized point: The reason certain drugs (e.g., alcohol and tobacco) are legal and others (e.g., cannabis and cocaine) are not has less to do with their pharmacological dangers than with history, including scurrilous press campaigns associating currently illegal drugs with purported heinous crimes by racial minorities (Musto, 1999).

All this has created a cultural climate in which accurately assessing the danger and value of drugs has become very difficult, even when the debate is informed by science. Because the National Institute of Drug Abuse underwrites over 90 percent of major drug research and its mission is to study abuse rather than simple use, “the overwhelming majority of information on drugs published in the scientific literature, textbooks, and popular press is biased toward the negative aspects of drug use” (p. 306).

This cultural climate transcends our shores. For example, a British advisory board examining the health implications and social harms due to alcohol versus cannabis recently reached the conclusion that “alcohol was considered to be more than twice as harmful as cannabis to users” (Weissenborn & Nutt, 2012, p. 218). The same article reported that alcohol is responsible for 4.6 percent of the global disease burden, with 11.6 percent of this burden in Europe alone. In other words, a substance known to cause over two million deaths worldwide each year is being described as more than twice as harmful as one that a recent systematic review failed to link to increased risk of mortality (Calabria, Degenhardt, Hall, & Lynskey, 2010). This is rather like describing a hydrogen bomb as more than twice as harmful as a cantaloupe.

No one book can cover every aspect of a topic. Although Hart briefly mentions that humans have used mind-altering substances as long as they have been on the planet, he doesn’t delve into the astonishing depth and breadth of our species’ relationship to psychoactive plants and their central role in societies worldwide for millennia (Escohotado, 1999; Winkleman, 2010). Nor does he recount what historian David Courtwright (2001) dubbed the *psychoactive revolution*, “one of the signal events of world history” (p. 2), in which the entire modern era can be viewed as a progressive expansion of the availability of increasingly potent mind-altering substances even in the face of brutal attempts at prohibition.

Instead, Hart offers a courageous, articulate, accessible book that is a breath of fresh air in a drug debate rife with hysteria and inaccuracy. It has significant implications for the “war on drugs,” which in 40 years has failed to reduce daily use of cocaine, heroin, or cannabis despite a 3,500-percent increase in spending and a 700-percent explosion of the U.S. prison
population. His willingness to reveal potentially embarrassing aspects of his personal life is especially admirable, as these humanize and universalize his story. This book should appeal to a broad public and hopefully will be the harbinger of more such efforts to come.

References


