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# **The American Dream: Do Capitalism and Drug Abuse Have a Part to Play?**

## **Drug Abuse and the American Dream: By-Products of Capitalistic Ideology in the United States**

Money has a pervasive role in shaping controversy - from Coca Cola paying Harvard researchers to skew findings, the tobacco industry continuing to promote and sell cigarettes despite the fatal health consequences, to nay-sayers of climate change promoting environmentally toxic but inexpensive non-renewable resources. In each case, money is the motivation that persuades those in power to compromise humanity's best interests in favor of material gain. Money is an insidious force that deepens the divide between selfish and altruistic intent. At the heart of this elusive chase for more material lies capitalism.

Capitalism is an economic system that emphasizes the privatization of trade and industry rather than government control. Capitalism functions by "laissez-faire" policy, by which the government allows private businesses to control their own means of production. The United States does not operate on pure capitalism, but rather has a mixed economy in which capitalism predominates with some government regulation and oversight. However, capitalism is the prevailing economic system in the United States, and it has manifested into a political and social structure that has wider implications on ideology, specifically by creating the myth of the American Dream.

The American Dream is the ideal that anyone can attain success if only they exhibit enough hard work, determination, and initiative. Success in the United States is measured in material, namely money which indicates status, an inherently capitalist ideal fueled by the overwhelming presence of consumerism. Underlying the American Dream are two core capitalist ideas: 1) materialism and 2) the illusion of equality. The American Dream relies on Americans overvaluing material success and assuming that everyone has equal access to and potential for success. Lack of government regulation allows capitalists who are already wealthy and powerful to take advantage of their laborers, consequently leading to a greater disparity between the rich and poor. The American Dream encourages us to overlook perpetuated inequality between capitalists and their laborers, and instead categorize the poor as lazy and even criminal people who choose not to unlock their potential for success. Materialism and the illusion of equality, two factors that ultimately stem from a capitalist ideology, underlie the American Dream myth and are strongly linked to the presence of drug abuse in the United States.

Drug abuse has existed throughout history, but the problem has never been as widespread or severe as in the present era. Drug use becomes drug addiction when the use of the drug becomes compulsory and the user loses autonomy over the body in a state of physical dependency. Though the overall rate of addiction of illegal drugs has decreased in the past decade ("Nationwide Trends"), the number of deaths by overdoses involving prescription painkillers has quadrupled since 1999 (Elkins). This suggests that though we are more responsible regarding the use of illegal drugs, Americans are not aware that legal drugs are equally dangerous and addictive.

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Throughout this essay, I will argue that drug abuse in the United States is sustained by capitalistic ideology, specifically materialism and inequality, and by the interference and non-intervention of capitalist governments that reflect those values. Similarly, the American Dream is an overly simplistic misconception based on capitalist values that glorifies materialism and undermines the existence of inherent inequality. The American Dream allows drug abuse to thrive by overshadowing the targeted drug policy in the War on Drugs and prescription drug abuse facilitated by Big Pharma. In the first section of this essay, I will discuss the American Dream and its relationship with capitalism, materialism, and inequality. In the next section, I will discuss inequality, drug abuse, and the American Dream by analyzing the War on Drugs in the United States. Then, I will discuss the relationship between materialism, drug abuse, and the American Dream by describing prescription drug abuse, which is enabled by the capitalist interests of big pharmaceutical companies.

## **The American Dream and Capitalism**

In 1931, James Truslow Adams was the first person to name the American Dream in his book *Epic of America*. His famous quote describes “that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world” (Meacham). Although the specific phrasing was new, the idea that all Americans should have equal access and potential for success has existed since the writing of the Founding Fathers. The Declaration of Independence supports the American Dream in the familiar quote:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

The Founding Fathers officially expressed that the individual’s desire to pursue happiness was not self-indulgent, but necessary to foster creativity and ambition. In legally protecting the right to pursue happiness, the Founding Fathers implemented an attractive society for those in search of a better life. Additionally, the Founding Fathers believed that excessive taxation would reduce entrepreneurial spirit (Amadeo). The Declaration not only set an official precedent for the American Dream, but stated that free trade, which is the cornerstone of capitalism, is necessary for the nation’s economy.

Capitalism in America has transcended from an economic system into a pervasive ideology that has given birth to a culture of materialism through excessive commodification and consumerism. Commodification is the transformation of goods and services into items that can be exchanged. When an item becomes a commodity, it enters the economy by being traded for money and competing with similar commodities. The excessive competition among and between certain commodities drives consumerism, a system that promotes and prioritizes purchase, perhaps to a superfluous extreme. Because marketing and advertising have become widespread, aided especially by ubiquitous technological devices and social media, people have become unconsciously indoctrinated with the idea that they should constantly purchase more flashy products, leading to an increased, almost reckless desire for pleasure and enjoyment only satisfied by commodities. This obsession with commodities, fueled by capitalist trade, is known as materialism.

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Materialism not only explains the way people interact with commodities, but also manifests in broader societal expectations. We ask our children “what they want to be” when they grow up, as if five-and-six-year-olds should already be thinking about how they plan to make money in the future. We teach them that the most successful people in the world are the richest. In the United States, the highest paying jobs require education beyond high school. As such, increasingly more people graduate high school and many more go on to pursue higher education with the hopes of earning the qualifications to occupy those lucrative positions. The long-term goals that drive Americans are often those that are motivated by the prospect of making money or are linked to some other form of material. The “success” to be attained as cited in the American Dream and the “pursuit of happiness” as cited in the Declaration of Independence are oft marked by monetary success - this pervasive societal expectation is symptomatic of deep-rooted materialism.

In alignment with materialist ideology, drugs allow the user to escape the immediate pressures of life by forcing the body into a psychoactive state. As the user consumes the substance more frequently, the original elevated effect becomes increasingly more difficult to achieve because of increasing tolerance, a defense mechanism to protect the body against toxins. Consequently, the chase for pleasure traps the user into a cycle of drug addiction, in which the user becomes physically dependent on the substance and loses the ability to achieve external goals. Drugs also serve an auxiliary function as a social indicator of status, whether it be the rebellious connotation of cigarettes or the anti-war “hippie” association with marijuana. Materialism not only creates a culture conducive for addiction, but also treats drugs as a commodity to boost social status. To discuss drug use and addiction without addressing the underlying materialist ideology is to lack a critical understanding of why drug addiction has become so prevalent in American society (Bjerg).

In addition to perpetuating a materialistic ideology, the American capitalist system feeds its consumers with the idealistic notion that anyone who tries hard enough to reach their goals will do so - this is precisely the cornerstone of the elusive American Dream. The competitive nature of a capitalistic economy promotes the idea that one's success is inherently proportional to the amount of effort that one exhibits. As a result, upon facing setbacks and obstacles, an individual is quick to blame him or herself rather than identifying the underlying social limitations. For instance, inequality exists inherently across race, socioeconomic status, and gender, yet the American Dream insists that members of marginalized groups only have themselves and their laziness to blame if they do not succeed. Similarly, the history of drug use and abuse in America has been characterized by the targeting of vulnerable groups of people, both by the shaping of ideology and the invasive interference of self-interested governments.

## **Inequality**

Throughout American history, drug criminalization has been employed as a political tool to target marginalized people. Anti-opium laws in the 1870s were written to ward off Chinese immigrants who were caught in opium addiction due to decades of British supply in China. Anti-cocaine laws in the early 1900s were enacted to incriminate black men during the racially tense Jim Crow era. Anti-marijuana laws in 1910s and 1920s were established to incarcerate Mexican Americans (“A Brief History...”). Today, Latinx and Black Americans continue to be subjected to disproportionately higher rates of drug enforcement and incarceration (“Marijuana Arrests by the Numbers”). Throughout American history, the government has criminalized specific drugs

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with the intent of crippling groups of undesirable people. Patterns of arbitrary drug policy suggest that criminalization has been used as a tool to perpetuate the oppression of marginalized groups. Incriminating these often immigrant and working class groups is a method by which capitalists subdue their labor force to continue exploitation without protest.

When analyzing the history of drug policy, it becomes evident that the legal status of drugs affects the way society perceives their use, but whether they are legalized or not appears to be determined arbitrarily. For instance, alcohol and tobacco are legal, but cause more deaths than marijuana, which is the drug for which people are criminalized most often (“Nationwide Trends”). Before amphetamines were used for therapeutic purposes, people consumed them recreationally. In fact, they were even used during World War II to boost soldiers’ morale (“ADDICTED TO PROFIT”). Cocaine used to be a key ingredient in Coca Cola, but today the drug is considered highly illegal. The arbitrary nature of drug legality suggests that government criminalization of drug use is not an accurate measure of the inherent danger of drugs, and in fact, criminalizing certain drugs has been used as a political tool to target vulnerable groups and perpetuate capitalist ideology.

The War on Drugs began when President Richard Nixon declared the campaign in 1971. The government stated that its primary goal was to reduce the illegal drug trade by establishing policies that discouraged the production, distribution, and consumption of illegal psychoactive drugs. The campaign was established in the context of the 1960s, during which drugs were a symbol of rebellion and political dissent. Among other substances, marijuana was placed in the most restrictive category of drugs. Barely a year after the war on drugs began, a push for the decriminalization of marijuana began and was largely ignored by the government. Even years after Nixon’s term, President Ronald Reagan expanded the War on Drugs and led an extensive incarceration effort against drug crimes. Incarceration skyrocketed, and although drug policies have loosened only slightly since then, prison populations continue to increase over capacity today, over forty five years later (“A Brief History…”).

The drug war has produced drastically different outcomes across racial boundaries. Although black and white people are equally likely to use marijuana, black people are four times more likely to be arrested for possession. The disproportionately higher rate of drug criminalization among Latinx and Black communities is not indicative of more illegal drug use, but of disproportionate law enforcement in communities of color and low-income communities (“Marijuana Arrests by the Numbers”). While systemic racism existed far before the War on Drugs, the zero-tolerance anti-drug campaign deepened the racial divide in drug possession incarceration. There is evidence to suggest that the increased incarceration of people of color was an intentional consequence of the War on Drugs. In a 2016 interview with Harper’s Magazine, John Ehrlichman, domestic policy chief to President Nixon, said the following statement (LoBianco):

The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people... We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.

Contrary to popular belief, the War on Drugs was not a zero-tolerance anti-drug campaign

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intended to end drug abuse, but was specifically directed to cripple communities of color and other groups that opposed certain government actions. Socioeconomically disadvantaged people of color are the most affected by the drug war and are viewed by capitalists as the lowest levels of workers. To suppress their autonomy by criminalizing drugs and targeting those communities is to weaken their will to fight for equality in labor and other social rights.

The War on Drugs was implemented amidst the turmoil of the Civil Rights era, during which people of color, most notably Black communities, fought vehemently against discrimination and for equal rights. The concept of equal rights is in direct opposition to capitalism, or at least in the way that it has manifested as an unequal power struggle in the United States. Capitalism thrives the most when the capitalist can exploit their workers into overproduction because the capitalist only pays the same wage for a surplus of labor. When people of color gain equal rights, the value of their labor increases, and the capitalist loses the profit which had been procured through exploitative practices. The War on Drugs was an effort to label people of color, specifically Black people, as drug addicts in order to maintain power during an era in which racial equality loomed as an imminent threat to capitalists who were able to take advantage of people of color.

The Nixon administration used drug policy to detract attention from the racial inequality that they strove to perpetuate, which even domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman explicitly stated. While the American Dream boasts that all have equal access to success, the government actively strives to incapacitate people of color by criminalizing them. The inclusive idealism of the American Dream and the racist intent underlying the War on Drugs stand in direct contrast with one another. In many ways, the American Dream and similar idealistic mantras act as a facade covering an immoral undercurrent sponsored by the United States government.

## **Materialism**

The American Dream, a problematic ideology that endorses inequality, as shown through the War on Drugs, is also complicit in promoting materialism. A key component of the American Dream is its focus on success and the claim that everyone is capable of attaining it. However, our notions of “success” can be ambiguous. Author Johann Hari asserts that we are trained to aspire for goals that lead to things that we can buy and consume (“Johann Hari & Naomi Klein”). In alignment with mainstream American ideals, many Americans define personal success in terms of monetary gain, often through a lucrative career. That so many consider gaining money and material as their ultimate life goal is a telling symptom of the capitalist mindset that our society has adopted.

Capitalism in the United States has extended beyond an economic model into a monolithic structure that shapes ideology, and more specifically, societal ideas of success as being ultimately material. An unhealthy emphasis on material manifests not only in our long-term goals, but in our attitudes about clothing, food, and entertainment. We buy things that hold a certain value in order to fulfill some sort of compelling desire. We overindulge and over-consume material because it grants us inordinate joy. This unnatural pleasure that we derive from material is a direct product of capitalism, and it explains why prescription drug abuse has become a concern of national importance.

While overall illegal drug use has decreased in recent decades, the use of prescription drugs

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such as opioids has increased rapidly. Americans consume 99% of the world's Vicodin, 80% of the world's Percocet and OxyContin, and 65% of the world's Dilaudid (Elkins). Evidently, Americans are not aware that legal drugs can be just as potent or addictive as illegal drugs. This widespread lack of knowledge about the dangerous potential of all drugs, as opposed to the select few that the government chooses to declare illegal, is a misconception intended by capitalist pharmaceutical companies to continue the use and abuse of prescription medicines so that they can profit from consumers' dependency.

The Organic Consumers Association (OCA) has boldly claimed that the drug industry has singlehandedly "fostered the opioid addiction epidemic." In 1996, the manufacturing company Purdue created OxyContin, a long-lasting opioid with nearly identical chemical structure to heroin. In fact, many heroin addicts claimed that OxyContin provides a better high than heroin, and it has been identified as a major gateway drug. Despite lack of scientific knowledge regarding the efficacy or safety of opioids, companies like Purdue promote drugs like OxyContin to doctors and patients without providing warnings about their addictive qualities. Furthermore, the effects of OxyContin last for a much shorter duration of time than advertised and result in withdrawal symptoms such as body aches, nausea, and anxiety. Painful withdrawal symptoms and the recurring initial pain begin to feed the cycle of addiction that has crippled millions of misinformed Americans (Mercola).

Since OxyContin was introduced into the market in 1996, its manufacturer Purdue has profited over \$31 billion from sales. While Purdue pockets billions of dollars, prescriptions for opioid painkillers like OxyContin have risen by 300%, and Americans now consume 80% of the world's opioids. In Alabama, the state which has the highest opioid prescription rate in the United States, 143 prescriptions are written for every 100 people. As a result, overdose deaths from painkillers far surpass those from illicit street drugs (Mercola). The drug industry is the main culprit in spreading prescription drug addiction, and it feeds off of society's need for material pleasure, which is also perpetuated by capitalist industry. In this way, industry and addiction form a feedback loop in which industry perpetuates drug addiction which allows industry to thrive. The drug industry relies on advertising that downplays or even disregards addictive side-effects so that users unknowingly become physically reliant on their substances and are forced to continue purchasing the drugs. Drug abuse allows the capitalist to grow stronger and everyone else to weaken due to the physical trappings of addiction.

### **The Los Angeles Times wrote a critical piece on Purdue, exposing their knowledge of OxyContin being sold illegally (Mercola):**

[F]or more than a decade, Purdue collected extensive evidence suggesting illegal trafficking of OxyContin and, in many cases, did not share it with law enforcement or cut off the flow of pills. A former Purdue executive, who monitored pharmacies for criminal activity, acknowledged that even when the company had evidence pharmacies were colluding with drug dealers, it did not stop supplying distributors selling to those stores.

Purdue claims that it complied with the law; however, drug companies are required to report suspicious drug activities to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and reject orders if they suspect that they will be fueling the black market, neither of which the company did. Unfortunately, the government does not actively enforce such behavior. Instead, they have passed laws that focus on the treatment of addiction and the availability of non-addictive drugs.

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While this may seem like a benign or even beneficial tactic, drug companies like Purdue that are fueling addiction are the same ones who are creating “non-addictive” drugs for the treatment of drug abuse. In the end, the drug industry only benefits from the government’s intervention and treatment policies (Mercola).

Big pharmaceutical companies are ultimately more interested in gaining profit than treating disease. They colluded in creating the prescription drug addiction epidemic by obscuring the truth about the risks of their products and purposefully creating addicts out of their consumers. Furthermore, they created the treatment for the drug addiction that they caused so that they could make even more money.

But who can blame them? Big pharmaceutical companies are just like any other capitalist industry. Those who support capitalism are against regulations because they stand in the way of progress (or profit?). Lack of regulation leads companies to compromise ethical obligations in order to make money, as Purdue has done in promoting highly addictive drugs that resemble heroin. Big pharmaceutical companies’ role in drug addiction is not only indicative of the ethical compromises made when capitalism predominates, but also of the pervasive materialism on both sides. On one side, people in a capitalistic society perhaps are more vulnerable to drug addiction because we are taught to consume material without question. On the other, the drug companies’ greed manifests in their harmful actions that compromise ethical concerns for material gain.

The materialistic basis that underlies both the greed of major drug companies and the vulnerability of drug users’ to addiction is remarkably similar to that which underlies the American Dream. We are all taught to value money inordinately and strive to earn more money, yet we criticize the drug companies for doing the same. We all have unhealthy relationships with commodities, whether iPhones, food, or alcohol, yet we look down upon people who succumb to drug addiction. The American Dream indoctrinates us with the idea that we should all strive for success through productivity, initiative, and ambition. However, when we accept the American Dream as our own vision, we can easily become harmful to others through greed or vulnerable to substance abuse through values that glorify material. The ideas underlying the American Dream facilitate a breeding ground for greedy capitalists and people susceptible to drug abuse, and they stand in direct opposition to the happiness and justice that the Founding Fathers originally fought to protect.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, drug addiction is not a pathological problem, but rather a social concern that stems from capitalistic values. Drug addiction is strongly linked to the myth of the American Dream in that capitalism is the mechanism that fuels both through the perpetuation of inequality and materialism. The American Dream essentially says that all Americans are able to succeed, given enough hard work. The use of the phrase “all Americans are able” renders all Americans equivalent, regardless of the inherent inequalities across race, gender, and socioeconomic status that make it exceedingly difficult to succeed for those belonging to marginalized groups. In the discussion of the War on Drugs, we see that the United States has intentionally targeted marginalized groups in order to maintain power. The criminalization of potentially less dangerous drugs like marijuana did not necessarily increase the instance of drug abuse, but rather placed a label of addiction on certain groups, which has produced equally harmful

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effects.

The phrase “to succeed” reflects the role of American capitalism in shaping our ideas of achievement, which is influenced heavily by material and especially money. The epidemic of prescription drug abuse in the United States is only one instance in which the temptation of money has compromised the actions of companies that are ultimately intended to help people. At its core, the goal of business is to create profit, and this goal stands in direct contrast with the specific aims of corporations, like drug companies that produce medicine. Ultimately, the lure of monetary success outweighs the drug industry’s commitment to helping patients to their full capacity.

Throughout this essay, materialism and inequality have been analyzed separately; but in fact, they are inextricably linked. The War on Drugs was motivated by distrust of the anti-war left and black communities, but the campaign was able to succeed in targeting and incarcerating millions of people by taking advantage of the drug use that was already present throughout the United States. Drug use is one manifestation of materialism, by which people rely on substances to provide pleasure or, perhaps, even relief from difficult circumstances that already afflict marginalized people. Through the interplay of materialism displayed in drug use and discrimination against marginalized groups, the War on Drugs easily succeeded in deceiving Americans about its true intentions and goals.

Similarly, the epidemic of prescription drug abuse does not only involve the greedy materialism of the drug industry capitalists, but also reveals more evidence of racial inequality in the United States. Unlike past drug epidemics, the current wave of prescription drug addiction is plaguing young white Americans disproportionately more than minority populations. Dr. David Rosenbloom, professor of health policy and management at Boston University’s School of Public Health, believes that minority populations have been less affected by this drug epidemic as in the past because people of color have been historically undertreated for pain. The prescription drug abuse epidemic began with the rise of Vicodin and OxyContin, which are more often prescribed to white people than people of color. In fact, one JAMA study conducted in 2008 found that white people are more likely to receive opioid pain medication than people of color in the same emergency situation (Johnson). Racial prejudices underlie the outcomes of the prescription drug abuse epidemic, in tandem with materialistic greed.

Drug addiction is often regarded as a purely physiological problem; however, recognizing broad trends and the social context of an epidemic allows a clearer image that may inform remedial actions. Throughout this essay, the capitalistic ideology that underlies American thought, evidenced by the American Dream myth, has been revealed to create and intensify drug use and addiction, specifically in the War on Drugs and the prescription drug abuse epidemic. By definition, capitalism advocates the idea of individualism, which, coupled with the mirage of prospective success under the American Dream, enables the exploitation of our intrinsic needs for materialistic pleasure that manifest in drug abuse and addiction. Perhaps it may be unrealistic to suggest that abandoning capitalistic ideology is the only way to prevent drug crises from recurring in the future. However, awareness of the harmful implications of capitalistic ideology may be a start to tackling drug addiction on a social rather than physiological frontier.