

*Review*

# **The (Capitalist) making of an addict: A Marxian and Durkheimian perspective on modern manifestations of addiction**

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Received 7 September, 2021; Accepted 11 November, 2021

**The manifestation of addiction in modern day American society is novel in its materialization. Marxist concepts of self-estrangement and alienation provides a frame for viewing the way market capitalism and the way labor distribution negatively impact individuals because it supplies humans with false needs and a sense of disillusionment. The utilization of labor as identity and emphasis on profit creates a divide between a person and his self, a disconnect that ultimately causes an overarching culture of dissatisfaction in multiple areas of life. Durkheim's conceptualizations of anomie theorize the classification of addiction as a form of slow suicide due to external social forces, and the functionalist theory of society serves as a frame for the purpose the addict identity as deviant plays an important role in instigating and upholding certain ideologies of capitalist control and individualism.**

**Key words:** Marx, Durkheim, addiction, capitalism.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The way addiction has manifested itself within modern American society is incredibly distinctive not only in its materialization, but in how it reveals the emotional and psychological harms perpetuated by the modern day capitalist market economy. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Karl Marx and Emilé Durkheim provide perspectives and a basis for these conceptual analyses. Capitalism defines our needs for us, but in a way that is in terms of profit, rather than in a method that actually supports people; with labor as the expression of human life, life itself becomes a means of production solely

(Marx, 1844). Essentially, existence becomes one's work. By promoting the notion that humans will achieve satisfaction through the dynamics of the market economy in terms of competition with one another not only rids society the importance and critical connection of cooperation with others, but it is very reductive for the human experience as a whole. Capitalism does not allow for people to develop and express themselves emotionally in a healthy manner due to its repressive nature, and division of a person from themselves (Paulose, 2000). People therefore are forced to abandon

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a portion of their whole selves, rendering a psychological disconnect from one's body. This is an important theorization because addiction itself is embodied; it affects every part of one's being (Bjerg, 2008: 15).

Psychological and emotional issues have been historically framed as individual afflictions and moral failings under capitalism. The framing of mental health under capitalism does not take into account that human emotion and behavior varies on a spectrum; it is framed as a distinct binary, black and a white vantage point. Behaviors are divided into normalcy and the abnormal, rendering people's identities as such. In actuality, the conceptualization of mental health is derivative of the conditional experience of being human, as described by Fromm (1990): the ability to love and create, cultivating one's own sense of experience based and subjective identity, and creating a sense of reality through existence (69). The strict anthologizing of lapses in emotional development and regulation displays how there has been a complete loss and misunderstanding of humanness, of basic human nature, bringing about a mass epidemic of fatal addiction in modern American society.

## **DRUGS AS DISRUPTION**

Firstly, drugs and drug users disrupt core ideologies of capitalism, and addiction as it manifests in modern society is unique to the particular modes of production. We are constantly bombarded by messages that push us to "buy more, consume more, enjoy more" (Bjerg, 2008: 10). What enjoyment actually is though, and who can enjoy what and how much is outlined by society. Bjerg (2008) states, "There is an explicit imperative saying, Enjoy!, and an implicit standard for the appropriate ways of pursuing enjoyment" (6). Drug users interrupt the flow of consumption. Due to the insatiable nature of an addiction to drugs, the only end game is the high, the drug itself. This renders all other products useless and their need to consume is limited to one singular commodity. "Drugs...provide access to the absolute enjoyment which ordinary merchandise only promises to deliver" (Bjerg, 2008:16). In turn, this disturbs and unravels the conception of enjoyment instilled. We are to gain pleasure by consuming, but we will never actually be fulfilled. This fantasy of completeness is a non-existent ideal (Bjerg, 2008: 15). Drugs unsettle this however, because they are actually able to provide people with the euphoria that other products can only promise, but never deliver in actuality.

## **LABOR AS EXPRESSION**

In a capitalist market economy society, the concept and

utilization of labor ends up defining human relations (Marx, 1844). Labor has been rendered the ultimate expression of human life, and through labor the human relationship to nature is changed, therefore through labor human beings change their reality and themselves (Paulose, 2000). Marx's theories on alienation and estrangement are especially applicable to the social occurrence of addiction and the ways in which the economic structure contributes to its manifestation.

If the modes of production define human relations, and therefore human nature, it thus defines how people relate to themselves. Capitalism defines our needs for us in terms of profit, how much a person can manufacture, therefore creating a schism between human's labor and the product of their labor (Marx, 1844). With labor as the expression of human life, life itself becomes a means of production solely (Marx, 1844); people simply work to live and to be able to obtain basic necessities. The type of labor they partake in classifies people; rhetoric surrounding and the classification of unskilled versus skilled labor is very much elitist. Specified jobs, even though they are necessary to the everyday functioning of society, are demeaned and therefore the people completing these jobs are demeaned since people are so closely associated and linked with their labor or occupations. Types of work available to the majority or as Marx refer to the Proletariat, are not significantly meaningful but generate profit for the elite. The majority has very little agency in the type of labor they engage in, lacks access to what they produce, and is producing for the advantage of another who is manipulating and exploitative (Riha, 1994). Durkheim's vantage point on labor is analogous with Marx's. "It has often been accused of degrading the individual by making him a machine" (Durkheim, 1933: 371). Individuals under capitalism are more or less mechanized. People complete certain functions and actions day in and day out, actions that are not connected to one's well-being directly and that are not particularly meaningful. "Every day he repeats the same movements with monotonous regularity, but without being interested in them, and without understanding them" (Durkheim 1933: 371). There is a complete embodied disconnect between oneself and the way one is supposed to spend the majority of their livelihood doing.

Capitalism is built for machines rather than living breathing human beings, because production at the highest capacity is the fundamental purpose of existence, of identity. Ultimately, this strong emphasis on work in society and being successful in terms of wealth and profit bestows the emphasis on material external needs, in turn diluting a person's sense of self through meaningless labor and fosters unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as excessive drug/alcohol usage, in order to deal with unmet

psychological and emotional needs.

### THE CULTURE OF OBJECTIFICATION

Capitalism pits person against person based on competition needs and causes people to viewing others through the rudimentary lens of simply their labor, resulting in a culture of objectification (Marx, 1844). This quote stood out to me particularly in relation to the ways in which people are encouraged to relate with one another, “Every man speculates upon creating a new need in another to force him to a new sacrifice, to place in him a new dependence, and to entice him into a new kind of pleasure and thereby into economic ruin. Everyone tries to establish over others an alien power in order to find there the satisfaction of his own egoistic needs” (Marx, 1844). By promoting the notion that humans will achieve satisfaction through the dynamics of the market economy in terms of competition with one another not only rids society the importance and critical connection of cooperation with others, but it is diminishing for human relationships altogether.

People are diminished to their usefulness for another person’s gain; people objectify one another which results in abusive and harmful interpersonal relations. The lasting effects of market relations projecting onto human relations is more than evident by simply analyzing the way people are categorized hierarchically and the insistence on competition. There is always a push to be the best, absolutism. There is very little room or even patience for mediocrity on a systemic level. If you are not vying to be the best, in terms of over exertion and constantly working within a system that exploits you, then your inherent value is diminished. Our worth is measured on productivity and how well we compete in this system, which is rigged in favor of the elite (upper class).

Essentially, the objectification of one other bleeds into all types of relationships throughout the collective (Riha 1994). This concept of the ego as understood by Marx is interesting because he denies individualism; he claims the ego can only be understood in its relation to the collective, society and the individual are indivisible from one another (Riha, 1994: 67). So, as a whole, human relations are unfulfilling and encouraged to be in opposition to one another, leaving masses of people with little idea or skills to create types of relationships that support their true selves and overall well-being. This is not anyone’s fault necessarily, because people act on what they are taught, and society teaches us so many falsities about ourselves and how we are supposed to function (Riha, 1994). With a lack of satisfying relationships and the emotional distress that results, it is common for people to search outside of themselves in order to satiate this need.

### THE FUNCTION OF SOLIDARITY

“Functional diversity induces a moral diversity that nothing can prevent, and it is inevitable that one should grow as the other does” (Durkheim, 1933: 361). Collective sentiments serve the purpose of bonding a group of people together, but the increase of functional diversity perpetuates a greater division, which in turn weakens these collective sentiments (Durkheim, 1933). The world we live in has grown to be significantly diverse simply based on sheer numbers; the population has exploded exponentially, and people develop and grow in an infinite number of ways that are dissimilar. In order to cope with this reality that is structured by the economy due to labor relations, people turn to substances that overtime evolves into misuse and abuse. Consequently, it can be interpreted was that if society values one thing, it is incredibly arduous for an individual to go against this particular value because people are inextricably tied to the collective mass. So pursuing needs outside of what is deemed acceptable will undoubtedly marginalize a person, and humans already exist in an incredibly subjugated reality that is modern American society. Capitalism does not allow for people to develop and express themselves emotionally in a healthy manner due to its repression and separation of a person from themselves, the self-estrangement Marx discusses (Paulose, 2000). Therefore, capitalism paves the way for a variety of mental and emotional issues which have been framed as individual afflictions, but applying Marx to this theory of individualism demonstrates the contradiction: if society cannot be separated from the individual, then the individual cannot be blamed for an affliction that distresses a large portion of society.

Durkheim’s framework gives a basis of understanding for the fabrication of opposing groups of people. Certain violations stimulate negative reactions by the collective due to their adherence to their socially constructed norms; they are a threat to the norms set in place, which is ultimately a threat to society’s functions as a whole, so the offenders are met with great disdain and thus punished (Durkheim, 1933). This is a basis and reasoning for the criminalization/demonization of certain behaviors, such as illicit drug use; those who use in this manner are incredibly likely to be incarcerated and classified as “on the fringe of society” (Kang and Thosuwanchot, 2014). The “fringe of society” is amplified when someone suffers not only from addiction but holds another marginalized identity, such as being a person of color or being in a low socioeconomic status (Kang and Thosuwanchot, 2014). Exploring the construction and rhetoric used to classify and describe these specific groups plays into what society views as the other in binary terms, and why we collectively feel the need to

punish, and specifically label, these groups. Durkheim (1933) explicates that there is a need for an “other” in order to produce a sense of social solidarity; the suppression of individual dignity by a collective essentially decides the characterization of criminals (Durkheim, 1933; Kang and Thosuwanchot, 2014). There needs to be another in order for a group to feel as though they are entitled to the label of normalcy; without this distinction, the elite or normative group has no substantiated footing to stand on and nothing to drive their ego. This social solidarity in industrialized nations, such as the United States, is a difficult concept to come by and experience because of the lack of community and individualistic tendencies that manifest, in saying this meaning that there are essentially an infinite number of directions people’s lives can run (Kang and Thosuwanchot, 2014). Anyone can be anything, the American dream. Yet, this leaves massive amounts of people feeling like they do not belong and alienated from their world as a result of this unbounded choice. Finding where one belongs and an identity become of utmost importance, because without this there is a sense of loss. Groups need solidarity to dispel the discomfort of feeling this loss, as well as needing a group classified as “other” in order to justify their elite-ness, or even simply their normalcy.

### **IDENTITY AND PATHOLOGY OF ADDICTS**

Identity is deeply and inextricably connected to capitalism. Capitalism promotes freedom and individualism. Addiction is designated as a total loss of freedoms and one’s will. This is because addicts go against the way that the market economy wants individuals to consume. Deviation from the guidelines of consumption results in a condemnation of abnormality, and any deviation results in an anthropologizing of that behavior, resulting in the label of addict, alcoholic, eating disorder, etc.

The classification of the addict as deviant is developed because of the addict’s failure to abide by the collective values and morals surrounding substance use. This categorizes the addict as the “other” in modern American society, which is also in part due to the influences of Protestant Christianity in relation to a person’s morals and acceptable behaviors, essentially reducing the behavior individual and moral failing. The addict is then further excluded and marginalized from society due to the lack of social integration based on their misuse. There are specificities and rules to what types of substances are socially appropriate to use and how they are used; social rules are “inscribed upon everyone’s consciousness”, so everyone is aware of them and feel

they are founded upon truth and morality (Durkheim, 1933: 34). Addiction is a social fact, and rates of addiction transform and vary over time due to the fluctuating collective beliefs (Skog, 1991: 196). When a person violates these beliefs, allowing this use is unacceptable and there must be repercussions; those most harshly condemned for their use are marginalized users. It is no coincidence that those who are poor and/or non-White are the most criminalized and blamed for their misuse, as well as for the drug problems that run rampant through the United States; marginalized drug users are the most at risk for homelessness and contracting HIV and Hepatitis-C, and the least likely to receive adequate care for any of these related issues (Gomez et al., 2009: 143).

Consequently, those who use substances in a manner deemed socially unacceptable are labeled “alcoholics” or “addicts” that need to be reprimanded for their use or misuse, because society relies on this punishment in order to uphold itself (Durkheim, 1933: 44). The production of the “addict” was based on certain interests of industrialism and modern medicine in order to label and therefore create a justification for (Reith, 2004: 290). “The DSM has contributed to the medicalization of human nature and the medicalization of human nature and everyday life” (109); the DSM “depoliticizes mental health”, regarding mental illness as a singular incidence for the affected individual (Ferguson, 2017). Modern medicine is highly concerned with symptoms of disease, rather than the actual disease itself. Osborne (1998) presents these questions probing this concept: “The question posed by modern medicine is not ‘how do you feel?’, nor even perhaps ‘what have you got?’, but ‘what have you become?’” (Osborne 268). Regarding this conception, the identity of the person becomes completely overtaken by the affliction; it has demolished the possibility for one’s choice over future options, and therefore of change in any way (Reith, 2004: 293). The classification of a person as an addict interrupts their entire identity due to society’s desire for vilification and conceptualization of freedoms. Drug addiction qualifies as pathology because it is connected to a “fundamental collapse” in this societal conception of identity as a whole (Bjerg, 2008: 14).

### **IDEOLOGY OF CONTROL**

Addiction itself, as an occurrence and instance of human behavior, is fetishized (Reith, 2004: 298). The way addictions manifest are in complete opposition to the ways in which individuals are “supposed” to act according to acceptable societal standards of human behavior. Drugs/alcohol lowers inhibitions, which therein result in

behaviors such as promiscuity, theft, violence, etc. All these are behaviors that earn the label of shameful. What does shame actually denote though? Excess? Depravity? When looking at behaviors especially theft and violence, these are actions that the majority of under-privileged groups must partake in for means of survival. In terms of promiscuity, or going even further and focusing on the stigmatization of sex work, the act of excessive sex, excessive denoting sexual experiences outside of a hetero-normative marriage, is condemned. Open, fluid sexuality has always been denounced in American society dominated by puritanism and hypocrisy, designated for bearing children only, when safe consensual sex between adults is a healthy signifier of expression. Sex is signified by an emotional exchange, but capitalist society is emotion-less, anti-emotion as one may have it. Sex is commodified and serves a functionality as well; ideologies and categorization imprisons people and denies them of their bodily autonomy (Collective GL, 2018: 10). The functionality of sex has been to perpetuate the nuclear family model and organize people under a set of values, and types of sexual expression do not reinforce this (GLC, 1980). This repression of love and the perversion of erotic expression deprive people of reaching a certain level of fulfillment in their life undertakings due to emphasizing profit as opposed to human need (Lorde, 1978). Therein lies a denial of internal knowledge and a reliance on external factors that cause persons to then conform to profit based structures (Lorde, 1978). Lorde describes a “principal horror” of the capitalist system that therein denies the erotic value and power that plays into one’s work (1978: 3). So, specified and quote-on-quote other uncontrollable behaviors spurred by drug use are equally as stigmatized as the drugs themselves.

Treatment programs and AA/NA programs play heavily role in the relinquishment of control. The second and third steps of AA proceed like this: *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity and Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him* (Wilson, 1976). The God that is restorative of this sanity is also heavily predicated on proto-typical Christian values. Individuals are encouraged to formulate their own meaning of spirituality and a sense of “higher power”. The rhetoric of lack of control though is what stands out in relation to capitalism; people are only out of control when in a certain specified context.

The disciplinarian method of treating these illnesses/disorders is designed to emphasize specific values such as self-control and morality, ultimately focusing on building up one’s own discipline and control over themselves; essentially, when people are labeled as out of control, institutions are then brought in to encourage

and do it for the masses (Reith, 2004: 290). Addicts serve the function of a scapegoat, an answer to a multitude of society’s problems, and then labeled as deviant but somehow becoming cured after “finding God” (Reith, 2004: 290).

The labeling of certain behaviors as shameful or deviant is for mass control, and the intense scrutiny and state issued control over drug/alcohol treatment exemplifies the tension that ascend from the inherent contradictions of self-control as equivalence to freedom, within a system where people’s freedom is in actuality highly limited. Thus the stigmatization and institutional regulation serves the purpose of upholding the feigned systemic construction of one’s freedom.

## FUNCTION OF BELONGING

Durkheim’s theory of functionalism demonstrates how drug use serves a function for individuals in multiple fashions, these functions including: euphoric effects for users, sources of income for drug distributors, and occupations for those involved in the criminal justice system that surround the illegality of drugs. Specifically, functionalism is utilized as a framework for assessing the structural conditions that contribute to people using substances to cope with the circumstances of their lives that are shaped by systemic oppressions. Looking at the oppressiveness of capitalism for instance, the division of labor in modern societies triggered the transition to organic solidarity, where social diversity increased causing a lack of collective interest among people inducing more individualistic social codes (McNeill and Dawson, 2014: 895). This emphasis on individualism leaves people emotionally and psychologically unable to handle and cope, which perpetuate strong feelings of shame and guilt for “having done or not done something” (Moore, 1995: 103). Additionally, the function of illicit drug use as a community plays into this as well. A feeling of belonging is so crucial to a person’s fulfillment (Moore 1995).

Drug and alcohol use serves as social and bonding mechanisms for groups, and can solidify a sense of belongingness to one’s peers. Those that use substances inappropriately though, are excluded from normative social circles, resulting in a drug use sub-culture/community. Those who are IV drug users and are homeless, for example, create their own groups to serve this socialization necessity. In order to feel that sense of relation, individuals must find others who are also using as they use. If a person already feels as though they do not belong in normative society, these communities can feel like a place where they feel acceptance and maintain group membership (Moore, 1995).

## SLOW SUICIDE

“The propensity for self-murder is not within the individual but lies without and is the result of certain social forces” (Durkheim, 1933). Durkheim explicates that the “stronger the forces throwing the individual into his own resources, the greater the suicide rate in the society in which this occurs” and addiction itself is a form of slow suicide (Durkheim, 1933; Moore, 1995: 105). Durkheim’s theoretical framing of suicide highlights the effects of integration and regulation, and the degree to which each of these are carried out will affect an individual’s self-value (Thorlindsson, 1998: 95). People partake in all kinds of dangerous activities and self-destructive behaviors in order to make themselves feel superior and/or accepted. The search for external desires to satiate one’s internal discontents is never-ending and extremely representative of capitalism. Constantly seeking external comforts results in a denial of the self, a denial that over time ruins one’s perception of their own emotions and needs. We have felt this denial on a mass scale. In 2018, over 67,000 people died from overdoses and over 95,000 from alcohol related causes (cdc.gov; niaa.nih.gov). An addict described his first drug use experience as such: “Oh my God, I had found what I had been looking for. . . . I remember consciously having that thought the very first time. So I believed inside my heart that like the first time I used I was addicted. Like, you know, it was the feeling that I had been searching for” (Trujillo, 2004: 173). The relief found from drugs outweighs the propensity to deal with reality, thus resulting in masses killing their souls, and eventually their bodies, for moments of euphoric reprieve.

American society as it exists does not equip people sufficiently with adequate coping mechanisms to deal with feelings of worthlessness and loneliness, and the feeling of being high constitutes a feeling of completeness, a feeling of finally having found something which one has futilely searched for in the figurative sense (Bjerg, 2008: 10). Therapy in practice is highly individualized and very rarely takes into account systemic factors. The medical treatment of addictions, as discussed previously, focuses heavily on the individual, whether that be their “disordered” thoughts or “dysfunctional” emotional regulation ability; I put those words in quotes in order to highlight the fact that these only hold this meaning under modern medical diagnoses. There are two attributes that are heavily represented among groups of people that are classified as having a substance misuse disorder: thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness (Silva et al., 2015). A thwarted sense of belonging is defined as an “unmet need to belong to a valued relationship or group of people, while a sense of perceived burdensomeness

results from the view that one’s existence burdens family, friends, or society” (Lamis and Malone, 2011: 544) and perceived burdensomeness is misconstrued emotion, a “cognitive distortion precipitated by the individual’s internal attributions of ineffectiveness and incompetence” (Lamis and Malone, 2011: 544). These false perceptions are often instigated by traumas that deeply affect how people view themselves and their ability to regulate their emotions, spurring these feelings that one’s self and being is unacceptable, a core belief that one truly does not belong. All sorts of mental disorders are diagnosed based on the very inability to regulate, i.e. borderline personality disorder, bipolar, depression, etc. (Gomez et al., 2009). It is a much easier feat to place blame and work with afflicted persons on changing their coping mechanisms and thought patterns, than it is for overarching systems to take responsibility for the psychological abuse they inflict.

A high degree of integration creates important social bonds and collective values; therefore society regulates an individual (Thorlindsson, 1998: 95). Therein, poor integration, or the very lack of, fosters negative and shameful reactions that have the propensity to snowball out of control. The world we reside in leaves people with these overwhelming feelings of shame that a slow death via poisonous substances feels like a viable option, because of the ways we are all dehumanized and devalued by external social forces.

## CONCLUSION

In culmination, capitalism forces people to leave themselves, encouraging people to suppress and diminish aspects of their humanness in order to survive within this system. Incorporating the Marxist concepts of self-estrangement and alienation provides a frame for viewing the way market capitalism and the way labor distribution negatively impact individuals because it supplies humans with false needs and a sense of disillusionment. The utilization of labor as identity and emphasis on profit creates a divide between a person and his self; a disconnect that ultimately causes an overarching culture of dissatisfaction in multiple areas of life. Durkheim’s conceptualizations of anomie theorize the classification of addiction as a form of slow suicide due to external social forces, and the functionalist theory of society serves as a frame for the purpose the addict identity as deviant plays an important role in instigating and upholding certain ideologies of capitalist control and individualism. Addiction, as we know it in this social context, is heavily influenced and constructed by capitalist values and principles, resulting in an abnormal and dangerous manifestation of society that reveals itself within and on an individual’s very body, mind, and soul.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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