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Narcoarchy:
Opium as the source of hegemony

Intersections. EEJSP
12(1):206–210.(2026)
10.17356/ieejsp.v12i1.1734
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Amitav Ghosh: Smoke and Ashes. Opium's Hidden Histories. John Murray, 2024. 397p, £22

On November 16, 2024, Joe Biden and Xi Jinping attended the third (and last) US-China presidential summit under the Biden administration, which could be seen as a follow-up event to a similar meeting in mid-November 2023. The presidential readout published by the White House underlined the need for "responsibly managed competition," the current buzzword in US-China relations, and reflected on the areas of cooperation. One of these areas that President Biden prioritized is counternarcotics. Seemingly, *control over narcotics* is of utmost concern for the global hegemon; the US is even ready to enhance great-power coordination with its greatest competitor, China, in this area. According to the readout: "On counternarcotics, both sides affirmed the importance of continued coordinated law enforcement actions, information exchanges to identify new and emerging drug trends, and regulatory actions. President Biden welcomed the PRC's scheduling of 55 dangerous synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals, closure of online platforms and companies that supply precursor chemicals, and arrests connected to the illicit chemical industry, and he called for additional steps in the period ahead." The immediate context of these efforts against drug trafficking is manifest in the high demand for synthetic opioids and precursor chemicals (of which China is the world's leading producer) in the US. The flourishing of the illegal drug trade, especially of illegally produced fentanyl, can be directly connected to America's prescription opioids crisis (such as the painkiller *OxyContin*, produced by Purdue Pharma) and the related overdoses that occurred between the 1990s and 2020. The origins of the crisis are rooted deeply in the inner tensions in the structure of American society, such as the tendency for health insurers to refuse to pay for costly regenerative treatments; thus, patients with chronic pain may easily end up being the victims of the aggressive marketing strategies of pharmaceutical companies such as Purdue Pharma, owned by the wealthy and powerful Sackler family, who persuaded physicians to prescribe highly addictive opioid-based painkillers. Nevertheless, the dominant framing of counternarcotics is still centered on the illegal activities of foreigners or people of color, completely diminishing the very real role of the Sackler family and the managers of Purdue Pharma in the opioid crisis, as well as the historical role of privileged upper-class white Americans in drug trafficking.

This is exactly one of the key points of reference in Amitav Ghosh's *Smoke and Ashes. Opium's Hidden Histories*. This book is a summary of the archival and historical re-

search done by Ghosh for his acclaimed historical fiction on the Opium War, the *Ibis trilogy*. Unsurprisingly, the historical analysis presented in *Smoke and Ashes* also revolves around the complex relations of the Guangzhou-Calcutta-London and New York axis during the nineteenth century.

The book covers many aspects of international relations, as Ghosh gives a detailed account of the often overlooked social, economic, and cultural exchanges that arose from both colonial and commercial cosmopolitanism, as well as their continuing effects. In this review, I focus mainly on *how a specific narcotic substance*, i.e., opium, *was able to reinforce or undermine global hierarchies*. Ghosh sees opium not only as an instrument of power, but also as a historical actor in its own right. He highlights that opium plays an ambiguous role in human history: it has been with us since ancient times as a medical substance, but because of its extremely destructive power, it tends to contribute to the rise and fall of powerful socio-political constellations in cyclical waves. Furthermore, despite the abundant historical encounters with the might of opium, various embodiments of the substance have always posed challenges to states and to systems of governance. This potency is expressed in the neologism – *narcoarchy* – I introduce in the title.

The book starts with the well-known context of the Opium War: everything began with the British addiction to Chinese tea. By the end of the eighteenth century, tea had become the national drink of the British Empire and, as such, the prime source of revenue of the British East India Company. However, intensive trade relations with China – being among the top four trading partners of Britain – created a balance-of-trade problem for the British economy, since Chinese merchants were more interested in silver than any other foreign product. The British resorted to tried-and-tested imperial practices to stop the bullion outflow: 1) the long-term plan was to replace tea production in colonial India by simply stealing *Camellia sinensis* and the knowledge of the Chinese on how to cultivate the plant properly, and in the meantime, 2) commercial warfare, based on the circulation of opium in Southeast Asia and China. Opium was first used as a strategic resource by the Dutch merchants of the Indian Ocean, who realized that there was a market for *chandu*, or smoking opium in East Asia, and that because of the addictive nature of the substance, demand would grow exponentially once supplies were made available. After 1830, when the British Empire began to flood China with opium, *the opium scheme became an instrument of state policy*. This "economic policy" turned out to be a great success since "it solved the East India Company's balance of payments problem" (p. 257). To guarantee supply, the British East India Company set up a highly racialized mode of opium production, enforcing a system of unfree labor on the farmers of East India; furthermore, they established the Calcutta-based Opium Department, which was devoted entirely to the control and surveillance of the production and distribution process of the drug. After the expansion of the opium market, native business communities of the western and central Indian Malwa region entered the industry too: ironically, "clandestine opium trade thus became an instrument of resistance, a means of preventing the colonial power from appropriating a vitally important source of income" (p. 109).

Ghosh offers a detailed description of the supply chain: "[O]pium was administered through the so-called 'farm' system, wherein the right to import raw opium belonged solely to the colonial authorities; the rights to process and sell the drug were periodically auctioned off to local bidders. [...and the place] where the raw opium was distilled into smokeable *chandu* was the farm [many of them located in Singa-

pore and the island of Java]" (p. 155–156). Interestingly, most of the opium farms in Southeast Asia were run by diasporic Chinese syndicates, whose consumers were also largely Chinese plantation workers and miners. Hence, opium "became a very important source of capital accumulation for diasporic Chinese elites in Southeast Asia" (p. 157), or the so-called "bamboo network," which later (in the 1980s) invested heavily in the People's Republic of China, thus contributing to its unprecedented economic development. This insight underlines Amitav Ghosh's argument that *the history of global capitalism is strongly intertwined with the history and the development of the opium trade*, the success of which depended on coerced labor, smuggling, and black markets.

However, undeniably, the most obvious beneficiaries of the commercial activity centered around opium were the Western imperial powers, since an indispensable share of the revenue of the British, the Dutch, and the French empires was generated by the opium trade. Post-colonial studies have long drawn attention to the exploitative practices of classical imperialism and to the observation that the more economically fruitful (i.e., cruel, oppressive, and morally questionable) the socio-economic practices of this period were, the more intellectual capital was mobilized to legitimize and normalize them. Ghosh, deploying a high level of intellectual sensitivity about colonial knowledge production, reviews opium trade-related imperial discourses. Accordingly, one of the discursive strategies of the Dutch and the British was the denial of responsibility for the proliferation of the drug trade in Southeast Asia and China. That strategy rested on false arguments about the inherent weakness of native character, and on the related claim that merchants merely fulfilled existing native demand for the substance. Another strategy of concealment was the propagation of *the myth of free trade,* which was regularly promoted by colonial officials who claimed that *any attempt to regulate the flow of opium was completely futile because of the divine rationality of the invisible hand*. Of course, as highlighted by Ghosh, freedom of trade for Western powers was guaranteed, in most cases, through violent means, since business opportunities and favorable market conditions were created by the armed forces of the colonial empires.

Nevertheless, the "China trade" was not just a playground for imperial great powers; the proliferating opium traffic was seen as a promising business opportunity by the emerging American economic elites as well. The second largest beneficiary of the opium trade was the United States. Opium revenues had an immense impact on American national development during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, since the young economy of the newly independent country desperately needed trade partners and capital. Relying on academic resources and archival research, Ghosh has insightfully reconstructed how venerable families of the American elite, such as the Forbes, the Peabody, and the Delano families, were involved in the opium trade. Since American merchants were excluded from the market controlled by the British East India Company, they bought the relatively cheap raw opium from Izmir, Turkey; thus, they could bring opium to the Chinese market at a competitive price. The business flourished so well that American merchants quickly monopolized the shipping of Izmir opium to China, and by the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century, American commercial activity was responsible for one-third of the opium consumed in China.

American businessmen and officials, the Guangzhou-based Russell and Co. – the company that served as the center of the American opium trade to China – did not develop legitimizing ideologies about the drug traffic they maintained, but applied other

strategies to attempt to offset the fact that they inflicted harm on other peoples: they deployed a great missionary zeal in China and became eager Christians and morally impeccable citizens back home; additionally, they never discussed the real source of their fortunes. "Essentially it was because colonialism had created a structure of power in which Euro-descended elites and their allies among Euro-adjacent diasporic groups enjoyed absolute dominance [...] that virtuous young Americans could commit their crimes in faraway countries and return with whitewashed hands to their homes to be celebrated as heroes for their role in building the American economy" (p. 210).

Thus, undoubtedly, of all the actors that provided the Chinese market with a seemingly unlimited opium supply, some maintained drug trafficking networks as a form of imperial economic policy that kept the balance of trade constantly on the positive side, while others rapidly enriched themselves and invested the accumulated capital in the domestic development of their country. Meanwhile, the Qing Empire, which represented the demand side in this thriving trade, faced a multidimensional crisis in the nineteenth century. The main factors in this crisis include the militarily burdensome encounter with the West (defeat in the First Opium War); the unstoppable influx of opium, which created unfixable breaches in the bureaucratic system of the paternalistic state, the effectiveness of which was a source of legitimacy for the imperial court; and the resulting domestic political crisis, which immediately manifested in the Taiping Rebellion, an upheaval against the Qing. Furthermore, on the societal level, opium addiction destabilized the traditional Confucian family, the base of Chinese society, and consequently, the sense of Chinese (civilizational) exceptionalism, as well as the world economic centrality of the Chinese empire, was deeply undermined.

Amitav Ghosh reconstructs the different actors' positions, their gains or losses, and reveals the central role opium played in Western powers' penetration of world markets and in the advancement of global capitalism. However, I think we can confidently assert that what is described by Ghosh – in a somewhat mystifying manner – as the *historical agency of the substance* (opium), i.e., its power to raise and destroy socio-political formations, is in fact an example of how capitalism works. If we recall how Marx described the general law of capitalistic accumulation, it is easy to see the parallel, as he noted in the first volume of Capital: "[A]ccumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole." And since economic might is the basis of political and military power, from there it is only a minor step to a maxim of great-power politics based on the narrative presented by Ghosh: *control over drug use and rule*; this may be the essence of a narcoarchy.

In *Smoke and Ashes. Opium's Hidden Histories,* Amitav Ghosh connects the nineteenth-century opium crisis to the multidimensional crisis of the opioid epidemic in the US. Unsurprisingly, the uncontrollable surge in the use of synthetic opioids (among the white urban lower-middle class) cannot be separated from the mechanisms of the global capitalist system and the ongoing power struggles of international politics. Besides the role of Big Pharma in popularizing prescription opioids in the 1990s, the backdrop to the consecutive waves of the opioid epidemic was the financial crisis of 2008 and its long-term effects, such as the economic restructuring that resulted in massive unemployment in the heartlands of the United States. The regions most affected by the cutbacks were home to a relatively high number of traumatized young people who had returned from overseas military interventions conducted under the banner of the "War on Terror." The debatable success of this

international adventurism and the structural transformations of the international system, mainly the rise of China, have gradually eroded people's sense of exceptionalism and primacy, which were traditionally crucial aspects of American identity.

Some argue that Donald J. Trump's second presidency is partly due to his political discourse that addresses the effects of this "multidimensional crisis." The American opioid epidemic is still far from resolved; even after the sea change in politics, counternarcotics remain one of the items at the top of the agenda. On 1 February 2025, Donald J. Trump announced that the American government would impose tariffs on imports from Canada, China, and Mexico; he claimed that the rationale for the tariffs was partly the health crisis caused by drugs, such as the "deadly fentanyl" flowing from/through those countries to the US. Control of drug use is arguably still a central element of power politics.

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