

# Coffee Keeps us Rolling

Into work and disease

Tomega Therion (Peter Werbe)

1981

‘Pour myself a cup of ambition’

—Dolly Parton, “9 to 5”

And we pour cup after cup of coffee to the tune of almost 16 pounds per person a year for the 100 million coffee drinkers over the age of 18. This works out to a staggering consumption rate of 800 cups annually and that’s only the average. The *Statistical Abstract of the U.S.* (100<sup>th</sup> Edition) shows that 40% of us (I’m drinking a cup while writing this) drink 2 to 5 cups a day while 11% get really whacked out on six or more per day.

Coffee is pervasive to the point where it seems available almost everywhere and many people cannot imagine arising in the morning without a cup or ending a meal minus the stuff. Many restaurants pour you a cup upon your arrival and when you finish your meal, the waitress universally inquires, “Coffee?”

Coffee cultivation goes back thousands of years and has often been associated by the ruling authorities with vice; it was banned, for instance, in Mecca during the 15<sup>th</sup> Century on religious grounds and the European coffee houses have always had a slightly unsavory reputation beginning with their establishment in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

To most of us, though, coffee has lost any of its exotic qualities associated with its origins and is just a delicious, warming drink which possesses the added benefit of a slight (or not so slight dependent upon consumption level) “pick-me-up” feeling. It enables us to get going when we feel we can’t or keep going when we know we have to. It is this latter function that deserves discussion along with the physical conditions produced among coffee drinkers.

## High in the Andes

As children most of us were fascinated by the work-a-day world of our parents and thought it very exciting to watch our fathers go off to the factories or offices and couldn’t wait until we were old enough to do the same. Although work presented itself with generally positive images, there were several laboring situations that appeared as quite unappealing such as slavery or prison labor.

There was one special image, though, that always made me wince and it was that of Bolivian Indians trudging through the thin atmosphere of the Andes mountains beneath the huge packs on their backs. The only way they could continue in this arduous toil, we were told, was through the continued chewing of coca leaves which provided the stimulation necessary for their task’s completion. The question even then arose in me, “What taskmaster could be so cruel as to force human beings into labor which required constant drugging?”

Well, by now the analogy must be obvious, though I suspect it may appear as either silly or unimportant or both. But how important is our daily dosing of ourselves with the-drug caffeine, and what is its social function and its medical effects?

## Caffeine's Physical Effects

Let's ignore for now the complex economics of coffee cultivation which amounts to millions of tons harvested annually in 3<sup>rd</sup> World countries and its appearance on the world market as a major trading commodity (a story in itself) and instead concentrate on what it does when it is consumed. Some of coffee's most deleterious effects are well known to most of us, particularly as it relates to insomnia, nervousness and, most importantly to heart ailments. The latter problem has been directly linked to heavy coffee consumption, but much of what else coffee produces in us is unknown to the majority of its users.

The caffeine in coffee is legitimately considered a narcotic, being a member of the same alkaloid chemical group as morphine, nicotine, cocaine, and strychnine—all having addictive properties. Daily use creates a tolerance to its effects and our glands gradually come to lose their ability to act naturally. We literally need caffeine's stimulation to awaken fully or to eliminate (in the latter case it is caffeine which stimulates glandular secretion which in turn signals the bowels—without coffee, constipation sets in).

Coffee consumption can reduce Vitamin B1 levels in the body by as much as 50% and seriously cut into Vitamin C and thiamin retention. Coffee can unsuspectingly be the cause of a plethora of mild aches and pains, upset stomachs, rapid heart beats, increased breathing rates, blood pressure and body temperatures as well as create nervousness, irritability and other personality distortions, particularly in heavy users. Ignoring coffee as a potential culprit in the above ailments, most of us see them as part of the human condition which are to be endured along with the rest of life's problems. Isn't everyone constipated, afflicted by headaches, stomach aches, tension, and insomnia, etc.?—just look at the ads for their remedies on TV.

Coffee also produces long range and insidious consequences such as the link of caffeine to cancer. Caffeine has been tied to responsibility for bladder cancer because of its potential as a carcinogen since over-roasting of the bean produces a dangerous nitrosamine. Also, no country which grows coffee enforces any regulation on the type or amount of chemical pesticide that can be used on the coffee fields. In fact, large U.\$. chemical corporations which have had their products banned from use in domestic agriculture, have shipped surplus stocks of lethal pesticides to coffee-growing nations where it is used without restriction. Caffeine has also been indicated as responsible for miscarriages and problem pregnancies in women who are heavy coffee drinkers.

Hey, how about decaffeinated coffee? Sorry, but that might even turn out to be worse than what it replaces since it contains the chemical trichlorethylene, a solution used mainly as a degreasing agent in the metal industry and as a solvent and dry cleaning agent in the clothing industry. It is a close chemical relative of vinyl chloride and is used to extract the caffeine from coffee. Its carcinogenic properties are highly suspected as a cause of liver cancer.

## Coffee's Social effects

I like to sleep to ten each morning

But it makes my boss so annoyed.

Thanks to the good taste of Maxwell House,

For getting me going, and keeping me employed.

—coffee ad jingle

What does coffee do for us that makes its use so widespread despite its obvious negative features? It does taste good, and most of us would agree that a nice hot beverage is a pleasant way to finish a large meal. Still, the larger function of coffee consumption is not in its taste, but in its ability to relieve drowsiness, mask fatigue, and to create a general sense of well-being. The question then arises, apropos of the Bolivian Indians, what is the nature of our social and work life which requires these qualities to be induced rather than occurring as a result of joyful, creative labor and a society in tune with nature?

Obviously, neither of these states exist under modern capitalism and coffee is simply a chemical agent which becomes part of the process by which the animal is kicked out of us each day to be replaced by a modern citizen in tune with the rhythms of production rather than one's own body. Most of us accept the humiliation which comes with the ringing alarm clock each morning as if it was as natural as the sun rising, and although we may be tired and our bodies react negatively to being awakened on a schedule, the first cup of coffee quickly ends the body's revolt against being awakened when sleep is still desired.

At work, the monotonous routine of machines or the shuffle of paper for projects we have no interest in other than the weekly paycheck, bring an almost somnolence that often can only be relieved by a quick jolt of caffeine. One secretary told me, "I swear every morning that I'm not going to drink any coffee, but by mid-morning I'm afraid I'm going to fall asleep right in my chair while I'm typing; so it's off to the coffee pot."

Coffee, in fact, is the one item universally available free in most work places and nothing can produce a crisis faster than running out of it. "I think capitalism would collapse if coffee disappeared. There's no way I could do my job without it," the same secretary said, "and I'm sure it's the same at most jobs."

Maybe it would collapse, who knows? In this epoch humans spend more time at labor than in any other era previously and it seems clear from both biological and anthropological evidence that the body and its capacity for activity is geared both to certain periods of the day and to the seasons. In Paleolithic societies, only a few hours a day in most cultures were necessary for food collection and hunting and much of the afternoons was spent sleeping or lolling about. Even agricultural society, with its labor intensive nature, allowed whole seasons off from toil in the fields and most provided for long afternoon siestas and the like.

The collapse we begin to feel on our modern jobs is not some "problem," but rather a natural reaction our bodies experience. It's hard to say what to do in this situation; it's not like television where one can simply shut the set off. Many of us are forced to work at the rhythms established by capital so coffee addiction becomes part of our survival ability—we can't work without it and wage work is the only way we can survive at this moment.

None of us can live truly healthy or balanced lives in a society that poisons us at every level of our existence and makes social harmony impossible. Still, don't we have an obligation, as people committed to changing that state of affairs, not to be personalities dominated by addictions? The commodities of intellectual and physical illness—TV, junk food, cigarettes, alcohol, and coffee—are part of the larger mechanisms of control which keep all of us shouldering the pack up the Andes without complaint.

We have a responsibility to both our ideals and to ourselves to be as strong and healthy as possible. The dichotomy of health and strength versus illness and weakness is by no means always a determining factor but it can either be part of the matrix of submission or part of your desire to be free.

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