



Narcocapitalism

Laurent de Sutter

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Theory Redux

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Narcocapitalism

Life in the Age of Anaesthesia

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Translated by Barnaby Norman

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‘It’s all about chemicals.’

Andy Warhol

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Prologue

Goin' Down

So. Patent US4848. On 12 November 1846, Charles Thompson Jackson and William Green Morton, from Boston, filed a patent with the United States Patent Office. It received the number 4848, and, as its introduction noted, concerned the ‘improvement of surgical operations’.¹ The improvement in question took the form of a new technique, based on the inhalation of diethyl ether vapours by the patient undergoing the operation, which would produce a state of nervous insensitivity and allow the surgeon to work without causing discernible pain. Even though, as Jackson and Morton acknowledged, this kind of product had been used in the past for various levels of pain reduction, the decision

to use inhalation was still an unprecedented medical move. This was why they were claiming the protection of intellectual property rights for the procedure they had developed; it mattered little that they were only the last link in a long chain of more or less fortuitous discoverers. Indeed, before ether, other forms of inhaled anaesthetic had already been tested – starting with nitrous oxide, used by the English chemist Humphrey Davy in several experiments prior to 1799, twenty years after it had been isolated by Joseph Priestley.² And, as early as 1818, Michael Faraday, the inventor of the cage bearing his name, had demonstrated the anaesthetic properties of ether – although it never occurred to him to file a patent for something that seemed to him to be a natural phenomenon.³ The word ‘anaesthetic’, moreover, did not yet exist, as any reader of Jackson’s and Morton’s patent can see; rather than a precisely defined concept, we find vague circumlocutions and general descriptions. It was Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Boston doctor and conversationalist (whose son would become the greatest ever US Supreme Court judge) who, in a letter criticizing his plan to call his invention ‘letheon’, suggested the word to Morton.⁴ The

PROLOGUE: GOIN' DOWN

reference to Discord, the goddess of Oblivion, daughter of Eris, seemed dubious to Holmes – after all, with the inhalation of ether, it was less a question of amnesia than insensibility, less a case of returning from the world of the dead than of staying in that of the living. No matter; the US Patent Office gave Jackson and Morton the patent they had asked for – and with this, a new age dawned: the age of anaesthesia.

Chapter 1

Welcome to Prozacland

§1. From symptom to syndrome. When Emil Kraepelin published the sixth edition of his *Lehrbuch der Psychiatrie* in 1899, he had for some time already been a model of scientific success – a model, that is, according to the standards of German science of his day.¹ At the age of thirty, he was made Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Dorpat (today Tartu), in what is now Estonia, quickly becoming head of his department, and then of the hospital attached to it, which he led with strict discipline. From the publication of the first edition of the *Lehrbuch*, in the same year as his habilitation,² Kraepelin articulated his programme in a way that left no room for doubt: psychiatry must join the