

# Fentanyl of the People: What the Opioid Epidemic Can Teach Us About the Suffering Human Body

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## Abstract

The present paper will attempt an examination of the US opioid epidemic in order to contribute to a theory of the living body in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite the ever-growing wave of academic and media reports regarding the increasing rates of overdose-episodes in USA (Hall, & Farrell, 2018) and the chronic pain crisis in Europe (Bosetti, et al., 2018) the issue has rarely been examined from a sociological and philosophical point of view. Starting from a brief discussion of the extraordinary attributes of recent opioid consumption (extremely potent substances, Suzuki, & El-Haddad, 2017; increased availability, Kunnumpurath, 2018; etc.) it will be shown why a theoretical understanding of the opioid epidemic is necessary. The main argument proposed is that the opioid epidemic should, firstly, be conceptualized as an aspect of long and intense addictification processes of Western societies (Loose, 2015) inherently related with transformations in the economical, technological and psychosocial spheres. Secondly, drawing: a) from the work of the French philosopher of technology Bernard Stiegler (2011) who describes late capitalist democracies as *sociétés addictogènes*, b) the argument put forward by Bruce K. Alexander (2008) that addiction can be attributed to generalized ‘social dislocation’ and recent scientific research on the environmental aetiology of substance-use disorders, it is suggested that the US opioid epidemic could be investigated as a psychosocial pathology of the relationship human beings develop with their bodies and their social environment. In this regard the conceptualization of health proposed by Georges Canguilhem will be used in order to approach opioid addiction from a perspective that is not limited by the increasingly evident

problems of the disease-model explanation of addiction. According to Canguilhem (1991), health consists not only in the absence of disease but also in the capacity of the individual organism to establish new norms in their interaction with their milieu. Along these lines, the paper will conclude with two, mainly epistemological, suggestions: 1) the opioid epidemic provides a primary example of the complex ways in which the suffering human body is essentially a social phenomenon, and 2) the living body of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be reduced to its mere biological substrate and consideration of the processes in which it interacts with its environmental milieu is a sine qua non condition of a philosophical study of body and embodiment.

**Keywords:** opioid addiction, suffering human body, body-milieu interaction

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