

Choosing Crack: An Introduction

A BLACK MAN WHO HAD SERVED ALMOST A DECADE in the penitentiary came home to the South Side of Chicago in the mid-1980s. He watched young men – at first just a few – set up shop on the corners in his neighborhood. They were selling crack cocaine.

He was tempted – to buy, to sell – but he steered clear. Still, he understood the draw. From his own younger days and from his years in prison, he knew the men who organized the operations that moved the product from wholesale purchase to hand-to-hand sale. In his estimation, these were righteous men, men whose names he did not discuss, knowing full well what it would mean if he used their names with the wrong people. These were men that, he understood, “had to make their choices. And they made ’em.” Improbably, given where they began, these men had made money, lots of money, and not just for themselves. They also made money for “the nation.” That’s how this ex-offender, who had found a new religion behind prison walls, thought of it.

Wrong or right, what the young ones did made cold, hard sense. The teenage boys who leaned against the walls of

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Chicago's high-rise public housing projects were caught in a situation he well understood. And in response to those who clucked their tongues at these young men's misdeeds, he just shook his head: "What do you expect, when you've got a whole subsection of unemployed people? When the mills is closing down? When General Motors and Ford is acting crazy? They got kids at home and here comes some white gold. What do you think they are going to do? Man, they are going to take it and they are going to sell it. And try to provide for their families and their kids."

This "old head" was not naïve. He knew there was more to it than that. He saw the "flossing," the mad desire to have and display. And he gently mocked: "I want a gold chain, I want a Cadillac." "I know," he said, "about that greediness and showing off." But he insisted that before the avarice took hold and before the dog-eat-dog violence came it had all "started with the underprivileged and the poor people that couldn't pay their bills." This man had used his time in prison to read and educate himself. Crack dealers, as he saw it, were just the refuse of Reaganomics. Crack distribution, he believed, was a criminal industry tailor-made for poor black people by a merciless white America that left those who were locked out of its go-go post-industrial economy to fend for themselves.¹

In 1984 Ronald Reagan, old pitchman that he was, hit his marks and told the American people that the United States was open for business: "It's Morning Again in America." Capital, lifeblood of the marketplace, was flowing. Financial deregulation and tax cuts had turned on the money spigot. As economists would say, people with the right "animal spirits" emerged; "creative destruction" ruled the day. Money men

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were reinventing whole sectors of the economy – the airlines industry, trucking, financial services – tearing apart old sclerotic corporations to salvage profits wherever they could. On occasion, these debt equity vultures, leverage buyout artists, and bare-knuckled speculators crossed what blurry financial lines remained; a few even went to jail. But most of the new breed of CEOs and financiers stayed within Reaganomics’ buccaneer rules, and a broad array of Americans cheered the uptick in GDP, productivity, and overall job creation. In November 1984, nearly 60 percent voted for Ronald Reagan, celebrating the end of Big Government and the glory of free markets.

For people who lived in the “other” America – the poorer, inner-city America never pictured in Reagan’s pastel-colored campaign advertisements – capital did not flow. Investment did not come. Instead, President Reagan oversaw governmental disinvestment in their corners of the nation. Jobs continued to move outward from city centers to newly capitalized suburban office parks, exurban freight depots, and anti-labor Sunbelt states. Ever more sophisticated global supply chains and international logistical networks allowed for offshored manufacturing and assembly plants. The working-class jobs that had brought poor people, especially poor African Americans, from the south to the northeast, midwest, and California in the 1940s and 1950s dried up under the fierce rationalization that savvy capitalists brought to the transitioning economy of the 1980s.

Still, opportunities in the old big cities and dying industrial towns did exist. They just were not always legal ones. The “animal spirits” that led people to take risks and bet their

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lives on untested market opportunities ran up and down the economic ladder. And just like some of the new sectors that were invigorating the national economy, these extra-legal opportunities similarly depended on international economic interdependence, global supply chains, and cross-cultural business relations. Best yet, they offered a chance for the undercapitalized little guy who was willing to do what it took to prosper.

It was in 1984, at the dawn of Reagan's "Morning," that crack cocaine first became widely available in the United States. Crack depended on global supply chains: The cocaine from which crack was made came from South America. Colombians dominated the coca production and international distribution end of the business. A host of Latin American and Caribbean people managed the trans-shipment, with much of the cocaine in the mid 1980s coming to the United States through the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and various corrupt entrepôts in Central America. US-based kinsmen and countrymen of these initial distributors and smugglers then sold off the bulk cocaine. But the men who turned that powder cocaine into crack and sold "rocks" at the local level were, disproportionately, low-income African Americans. Deviant globalization had arrived in America's economic wastelands.

To become a crack dealer at the local level took very little upfront capital. A relatively small supply of powder cocaine could be made into a tidy amount of "rock," which could be quickly turned over, allowing for a rapid cash flow – a fast nickel, in other words, beat a slow dime. Crack cocaine was a business tailor-made for ambitious young people willing to

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operate outside the law in return for a high rate of return on a limited investment.

Crack was nothing more than cocaine mixed with baking powder, then cooked down to a hard pellet – a “rock” – that could be sold for as little as \$2.50. As a commodity, crack was the perfect drug for people who lived dollar to dollar but were desperate to escape, as often as possible, from the drudgery, pain, boredom, or sadness of their lives. Lots of drug users smoked crack; a majority were white. But crack’s core customers were disproportionately low-income African Americans who were already disconnected from the labor market.

A potentially explosive demand existed, and servicing this need became a major market opportunity for young black men in inner-city neighborhoods. These were young men with initiative who had not found their main chance in Reagan’s America; the official unemployment rate of black teenagers in 1984 hovered at around 40 percent. In the crack business, these young men saw unprecedented and easily accessible opportunity to gain economic security and even riches, the consequences for their communities and even for their own long-term futures be damned.

In the United States, in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, crack cocaine shattered lives – and disproportionately, black lives. Crack poisoned bodies, ravaged minds, ripped apart families, and tore jagged holes in communities. Politicians on both the left and right offered no solace for those whose lives, families, and communities had been torn asunder; instead they poured gasoline on the fires of despair and anomie that had sparked the crack outbreak. They did not treat crack use as a public health crisis – as a later generation

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of politicians would treat an opiate epidemic of the twenty-first century that primarily affected white communities. Instead, policymakers condemned users. And they slammed the prison door shut on the legions of young black men who had, in search of steady income and with dreams of wealth, distributed crack cocaine. Public figures legitimated this fierce punishment regime with tales of doomed “crack babies” and uncontrollably violent “crackheads”; almost all of these accounts later proved exaggerated or even flat-out wrong. The ways that powerful Americans responded to the rise of crack use in poor communities, especially poor black neighborhoods, turned the ravages of the crack epidemic into a national tragedy of racial injustice and cruelty.

It is critically important to recognize the punishment-begetting hysteria and sometimes-racist charges that characterized the public’s responses to crack use in poor black communities. But at the same time, it is also critical to recognize that there *was* an inner-city crack crisis, and that it produced tragic outcomes in poor black neighborhoods during the 1980s and early 1990s. Between 1984 and 1994 the homicide rate of young black teenagers doubled. The number of black children in foster care also doubled. Other markers of despair and destruction directly linked to crack use, such as fetal death rates, or to crack sales, such as weapons arrests, soared. White neighborhoods felt none of these changes.

The explosion of crack users and the proliferation of distributors gave the lie to so much that so many Americans wanted to believe. Two decades after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, white Americans wanted to believe that racial injustice was on the wane and that equal opportunity was real and that

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America was no longer divided into two Americas, one white and one black. In the midst of the Reagan “recovery” and then the economic boom of the Clinton years, many Americans wanted to believe that the American dream was alive and well, accessible to anyone who wanted it.

This historical context helps to explain why so many contemporary Americans, black and white, responded so angrily and punitively to those caught up in crack use and distribution. Americans then, along with scholars today, ask: Why were so many habitual crack users black in a period of economic prosperity and racial progress? Why did so many street corners in inner-city black neighborhoods become war zones with rival crews killing one another in the fight for the right to sell cheap rocks to their desperate neighbors? Why, then, did so many people in America’s inner cities turn to the crack pipe, exchanging a short rush of euphoria for almost certain personal devastation? What had brought so many so low, and what was it about crack, in particular, that met the specific need of so many people at that time and in that place? What was it about Reagan’s “morning in America” that fueled the fury of crack?

To an extent, *Crack* is a history of what some social scientists and journalists at the time called the “underclass,” inner-city residents who did not and could not escape the ravages of racism that structured their lives and who did not have the means to – or chose not to – adapt to a mainstream world in which their skills, their codes of conduct, and their ambitions were either unrewarded or disdained. Members of the underclass, according to the sociologist William Julius Wilson, were not simply individuals who had lost their way. During the

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1970s and early 1980s, he observes, the number of black households with incomes over \$25,000 increased dramatically, but so did the number of black households with incomes under \$5,000. A rapid decline of manufacturing jobs during those years, work that had provided decent incomes for relatively unschooled men and women, says Wilson, played a major role in the large and growing number of black Americans who lost their foothold in America's economy, pushing them into what he dubbed "the underclass." While the term is deeply problematic – and will be discussed and critiqued – it helps to explain the large market of poor people, disproportionately African American, who would find crack a balm for their troubled, insecure, and often desperate lives.²

While Wilson stresses the structural forces that knocked people out of the labor force and into troubled lives, Philippe Bourgois's masterful ethnography of crack users and crack sellers adds another dimension to this story.³ Uneducated men of color in particular, Bourgois argues, struggled to adapt to the service-driven, social and cultural capital-intensive demands of the "new" economy that was producing so many of the jobs in financial and legal services, healthcare, and sales in the 1980s and 1990s. Left out of, or refusing to abide by, the codes of middle-class demeanor and civility these sorts of jobs demanded, they chose instead to embrace the rough life of the streets. Street culture reveled in intoxication, violent sexual behavior, and general lawlessness; it offered a way of life that too often put no stock in the promise of a meaningful future. Buying, using, and selling drugs was integral to this present-tense way of life. Crack, with its fifteen minutes of wildly intense, euphoric and

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sexually exciting high, fit these anomic souls' basest needs and grandest expectations.

The crack crisis is the dark side of the Reagan–Bush–Clinton years. An accounting of it necessarily foregrounds the lives of desperate people, both the most habituated users who believed they had to smoke crack to find pleasure and release from their dire circumstances and the hardened distributors who saw in the destruction of their neighbors and their community the quickest route to their own desires.

But the story of crack is also a history of neo-liberalism and its cousin, economic globalization, from the ground up. In a de-industrializing America in which market forces ruled, service industries abounded, and entrepreneurial risk-taking was celebrated, the crack industry was a lucrative enterprise for the self-made men – the “Horatio Alger boys” of their place and time – who were willing to do whatever it took to improve their lot in life. These crack distributors took a South American commodity, often trans-shipped through Mexico, Central America or the Caribbean, added value to it through a low-tech manufacturing process, and then deployed a networked, community-based sales force to create a remarkably innovative and lucrative enterprise. These young, predominately male African American entrepreneurs were profit-sharing partners in a deviant, criminal form of economic globalization. From their perspective, distributing crack was a smart play in a bad hand.

While many condemned these “ghetto” globalizers, others offered praise. Hip-hop artists of the era, some of whom were direct participants in the crack business, often – though not always – celebrated the gangster entrepreneurs and street

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merchants of the crack trade. In hip-hop circles, these men often served as underground heroes in a racist society that left too many black men with too little dignity and too few opportunities for exuberant economic success. That some of the men who made money in the crack trade went on to invest – even if only to launder their ill-gotten gains – in a variety of black-owned businesses, including nightclubs, recording studios, music labels, hair and nail salons, clothing boutiques, video stores, gaming galleries, and other black-owned, black-employing, black-neighborhood enterprises, gilded the hip-hop lily. This entrepreneurial, capital-accumulating, creativity-celebrating, black-bolstering hip-hop culture is part of the story of crack, too.

Along with sellers, users, and celebrators, this history of crack focuses, too, on the people who fought to stop the sale and use of crack cocaine. Most politicians and public officials who observed the ravages of crack use and the violence bred by crack distribution reacted sharply to the devastation. Their first response was to demand that people caught up in the embrace of crack be punished, removed from their communities, and swept into America's burgeoning carceral state.

Such impulses led to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which mandated that anyone found guilty of distributing five grams of crack receive a five-year prison sentence – even as it took five *hundred* grams of powdered cocaine to earn those five years. The fact that most small-time crack cocaine dealers were African Americans and most large-scale dealers of powdered cocaine were white or Hispanic was baked into this particularly draconian and objectively racist law. Given how American politicians and the law-enforcement community have responded to the

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purveyors and distributors of opioids – who are overwhelmingly white – that racism appears even more obvious. Given, as well, the extraordinary license government officials have granted big pharmaceutical companies, “pain” doctors, medical clinic operators, and pharmacy owners to distribute their addictive and deadly wares to the public, it is obvious that the wealthy and the credentialed have escaped accountability in a way that poor, inner-city drug operators never have – and this despite the brutal fact that opioids have killed and damaged far more people than crack cocaine ever did. Racism and classism are integral to the story of crack cocaine.

But racism does not explain the motives of all those who fought the ravages of crack. Many African American leaders believed that only fierce measures could stop the street-corner violence and familial destruction crack had brought to their communities. Many of these leaders soon came to believe that the supposed cure – mass incarceration – was worse than the underlying problem. By the early 1990s some of these community leaders sought, and found, alternative solutions that did not simply drive more black men and women into the embrace of the carceral state, even as black clergy, local politicians, and community activists continued to recoil in anger and fear from the damage done to their neighbors, families, and friends by the epidemic of crack.

Crack’s hold on poor communities, especially in black inner-city neighborhoods, began to wane in the mid 1990s. Community leaders’ implementation of drug-diversion programs, support groups, and public health-oriented approaches to the crack epidemic played a role. So, too, did the imprisonment of so many people caught up in the selling and buying of

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crack. Nonetheless, many social scientists argue that the primary reason crack use declined was neither incarceration nor social-service programming of one kind or another. Crack use declined because people, most especially young people, looked at what ten years of intense crack abuse had done to their communities – to their loved ones – and chose not to use. They weren't "scared straight." They took up other illegal drugs, like "lean" or "purple drank," a codeine and promethazine prescription cough syrup mixed with soda. But crack users, they observed, paid too high a price for their rush. Crack did not, by any means, disappear. It is still easy to buy. Many still fall prey to abuse. But the intense use, arguably epidemic in poor African American communities, had burned itself out.

The history of the crack crisis is a dark tale. We prefer stories of national uplift and progress, of heroes who challenged long odds to make our country a better place. The story of crack in America offers no such uplift. It provides no such heroes – though there were men and women who struggled to bring hope and reform. The history of the crack era turns the American dream upside down.

Sometimes, we need to stare at the drear reaches of our national soul to understand who we are and who we wish to be. This brief, grim history of crack use, crack distribution, crack culture, and crack public policy aims to keep us from forgetting the many Americans left behind in our economically merciless times. It is one more chapter in the story of the racial injustice that has long structured life in the United States.

A history of crack also illustrates the central economic, political, social, and cultural role illegal drugs have long played

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in American life – illegal drug regimes directly affect the life course of the American people in ways that rarely enter conventional histories. The Intoxicated State has been and probably always will be with us. How we treat those who fall prey to drug addiction and how we reconcile ourselves to the commonplace desire to get high is one measure of who we are as a people. During the crack years, we came up short and hundreds of thousands of people suffered for our collective inability to treat each other with decency and mercy.