

# The Moral Economy of Heroin in ‘Austerity Britain’

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**Abstract** This article presents the findings of an ethnographic exploration of heroin use in a disadvantaged area of the United Kingdom. Drawing on developments in continental philosophy as well as debates around the nature of social exclusion in the late-modern west, the core claim made here is that the cultural systems of exchange and mutual support which have come to underpin heroin use in this locale—that, taken together, form a ‘moral economy of heroin’—need to be understood as an exercise in reconstituting a meaningful social realm by, and specifically for, this highly marginalised group. The implications of this claim are discussed as they pertain to the fields of drug policy, addiction treatment, and critical criminological understandings of disenfranchised groups.

## Introduction

Late in 2012 I met ‘Ryan’ for the first time on the outskirts of a small town in England’s North-West. This town, like many others located in former manufacturing heartlands of the UK, is now severely blighted by the numerous social problems that accompany continuously high levels of unemployment. The main street contains more ‘chain’ pubs, betting shops and pay-day loan outlets than it does anything else, a sign outside one of which informs us that if we have a ‘bank card and a job’ we could walk away with up to £1000 cash in minutes. Noticing it caught my eye, Ryan educated me—“there’s not many people round here with both of them things” he quipped. We settle in an empty café and he gives me an overview of his life: he has used heroin habitually for almost 15 years, frequently engages in acquisitive crime, and has served three prison sentences. Yet, he was thoroughly pleasant company and insisted on pouring my tea before his own as it was “good

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manners". This was the start of my fieldwork with heroin users like Ryan, but not long into it I hit upon a recurrent theme. He explained:

We all do stuff we shouldn't you know, crime and that. But only when we *have* to. For the most part there's no need though, we get by together you know, we all help each other out. If I'm paid [has money], I'll sort them out [his peers], but if I'm broke they'll sort me. It means there's a lot of goings-on [arguments] about money and that, but it also means we all get by you know?

Field notes

These processes of 'getting by' are the core concern of this article.

It is argued here that heroin users 'getting by' through collective support and mutual exchange constitutes much more than it initially appears above. These exchanges are presented below as constitutive components of a 'moral economy of heroin', which is itself part of a concerted set of efforts towards the reconstitution of a meaningful social sphere by, and specifically for, this marginalised group. A similar moral economy was observed in homeless heroin users in the U.S. (Bourgois 1998; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009), and British studies from the 1980s revealed systems of reciprocal exchange to be prominent features of the upsurge in heroin use at this time (Parker et al. 1988; Pearson 1987). However, while there have been some exemplary ethnographies of problematic drug use in recent years (Briggs 2012; Parkin 2013), moral economies have not featured to the extent they could.

Analysis of heroin's moral economic order is shown below to have a number of significant advantages. Firstly, it helps account for changes in the prevalence of this type of drug use. Whilst recent years have witnessed an 'age of austerity' in the UK, characterised by double and triple-dip recessions, they have also seen recorded levels of heroin use decline. As Seddon (2006) notes, while the relationship between social exclusion and levels of problematic drug use is complex, recognition of the link between the two has been a key feature of British drug policy making since the 1980s. The official position has normally been that increasing levels of social exclusion/marginalisation results in increasing levels of problematic drug use. However, the current estimate of 256,163 opiate users in England is over 5000 less than it was this time last year (Hay et al. 2014: 3), and this downward trend has been constant since well before the 2008 financial crash which kick-started the rise of austerity economics.

This presents a number of interesting questions for the heroin-social exclusion nexus, yet the situation is more complex still. Whilst available data shows an *overall* decline in use, this does *not* hold across all age-groups. The number of users in the 35–64 bracket has *increased*, and this trend is also constant from previous years (Hay et al. 2014: 5). The specific problems presented by ageing populations of drug users are now widely recognised (see Crome et al. 2014) and are certainly not confined to the UK. In fact, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2008) have estimated that continent-wide this subsection of problem drug users will have doubled in size between 2001 and 2020. Importantly, it is demonstrated below that changes in prevalence rates such as these are inextricably linked to heroin's moral economy.

In short, this article presents the moral economy of heroin as a distinctive socio-cultural reaction to the imposed and ever-encroaching politico-economic restructuring of social life in marginalised Western communities. It opens with a short conceptual overview of 'moral economy', followed by an equally brief exposition of some of the ways in which criminologists have understood social exclusion and the actions/reactions that stem from it. Following this, the works of continental philosophers such as Stiegler (2011, 2013, 2014)

and Badiou (2009a, b)—as they have been adopted by contemporary criminological theorists (e.g. Hall 2012a; Hall and Winlow 2015; Winlow and Hall 2013)—are introduced to this field as presenting a promising alternative means by which criminology might understand issues related to exclusion and marginalisation. It is argued here that theorising heroin use through the lens of moral economy/continental philosophy provides a useful means by which wider criminological debates about social exclusion and resistance can be engaged with (cf. Hall and Winlow 2015; Hayward et al. 2015). The remainder of the article is then concerned with illuminating these debates through the use of ethnographic data; here the operation of heroin's moral economy is demonstrated in terms of its instrumental and emotive functions. Finally, the claim that heroin's moral economy constitutes a distinct reconstitution of social life has multiple implications for drug treatment provision, drug policy debates, and wider criminological understandings of disenfranchised groups; these are discussed to close.

## Criminology, Moral Economy and Social Exclusion

The concept of 'moral economy' has been deployed towards a number of different criminological ends of late. Useful examples include Fassin (2005), Karstedt and Farrall (2006) and Loader et al. (2014). The term can be traced back to the works of the Marxist historian Thompson (1971, 1991) who, among other things, was interested in the genesis of political unrest during transitions into moneyed and market-orientated societies. He argued that an offense against 'collective morality' was the most likely undercurrent of riotous events, claiming that:

It is of course true that riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor.

(Thompson 1971: 78–79)

Thus, for Thompson, moral economy involved *both* normative values about 'proper' conduct in market exchanges, and instrumental concerns surrounding need and the true exchange value of commodities.

Moral economy is conceptually hinged upon this normative-instrumental nexus, and in this respect it has proven most useful to the study of illicit drugs (which are, basically, tradable market commodities). In terms of heroin specifically—whilst numerous scholars have noted systems of sharing and exchange (see Fields and Walters 1985 and Preble and Casey 1969)—the American anthropologist Philippe Bourgois has done most to highlight the heuristic utility of moral economy. His works (1998 and Bourgois and Schonberg 2009) outline the systems of exchange used by homeless heroin users in San Francisco in terms of their instrumental functions to these users:

Sharing incurs economic and moral debts for future exchanges of heroin. It is best understood as investment in the complex gift-giving economy that addicts construct among their mutually dependent colleagues in order to minimize the chance of finding themselves dopesick and isolated.

(Bourgois 1998: 2331)

Importantly though, they also recognised that sharing is “not simply a pragmatic, economic, or logistical necessity; it is the basis for sociality and establishes the boundaries of networks that provide companionship and also facilitate material survival” (Bourgois and Schonberg (2009: 83).

As such, understanding problematic heroin use becomes contingent upon recognising the complexity of the moral economic systems underpinning it. In social groups where exchanges of heroin have strong instrumental and/or material significance, they go on to attain increased significance in respect of moral and emotive life as well. Others have recorded similar findings; O’Keefe Dyer’s (2003) Durkheimian analysis of the ‘social fact’ of heroin use is predicated upon the sense of ‘community and solidarity’ (2003: 102) afforded to the heroin user enmeshed in the daily *social* rituals of use. And Alexander’s (2008) highly influential ‘poverty of the spirit’ model of addiction is built upon the complex relationship between some wider social settings that exclude and more localised, *drug using*, social contexts that can provide a form of relief against this through addiction. Importantly, the core claim running through these works is that in worlds of disadvantaged heroin users, very little appears to exist in the way of a meaningful social life outside the socio-economic practices surrounding the use of this drug—that is, its *moral economy*.

Crucially then, the emergence and importance of heroin’s moral economy must be contextualised through larger debates about late-modern social exclusion. Here Young’s (1999, 2007) recanting of the transition from inclusive, welfare-orientated societies to the more exclusive societies of contemporary times is most useful. He identified the complexities of the included/excluded nexus through his ‘bulimic society’ thesis. That is, a world where “massive cultural inclusion is accompanied by systematic structural exclusion” (Young 2007: 32). Dependent heroin users of the type described below are subject to such exclusionary dynamics and it is important that their marginalisation is not understood through the binary conceptualisations Young was at pains to discredit. Despite their very real ‘subcultural’ status, they cannot be disconnected from the wider social, cultural, and political systems of neoliberal capitalism.

One way in which the nuances of this situation have been accounted for can be found through the works of cultural criminologists (e.g. Hayward et al. 2015). Their core argument is that the contemporary dynamics of social exclusion provide opportunities to *resist*. For cultural criminologists “the act of transgression itself contains distinct emotions, attractions and compensations” (Hayward et al. 2015: 73), and these need to be understood as playing an aetiological role in the deviant behaviours of the ‘transgressive subject’ (Hayward and Young 2004). As such, the relationship between a subcultural group and its wider setting is understood through the complexities of *resistance*. Thus, it is possible to understand the moral economy of heroin as a resistant project—as a system that provides participants with a means to (a) protect themselves from the harsh impacts of their exclusive wider social settings; and (b), achieve a degree of identity otherwise denied them by said social setting through their transgressions against it.

Importantly however, others have offered different explanations grounded in the works of contemporary European philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou and Bernard Stiegler (see Hall 2012a; Hall and Winlow 2015; Treadwell et al. 2012; Winlow and Hall 2013). This has been most fruitful regarding social exclusion, and Badiou’s (2009a) description of contemporary Western nations as ‘atonal’ provides a sound example of why. In essence, Badiou contends that atonal worlds are social settings that have come to lack meaning. These are, for Žižek (2009: 29), worlds “which lack the intervention of a Master-

Signifier to impose meaningful order onto the confused multiplicity of reality”. Winlow and Hall (2013: 130) have usefully built upon this to forward their concept of ‘asocial atonality’. They describe this condition as a manifestation of a larger crisis of sociality that accompanies late-modern consumer capitalism; what neoliberal nations are experiencing now, they imply, is more akin to the complete *disintegration* of social life itself than it is any sort of ‘exclusion’ from it. Their argument is that the default neoliberal subjectivity is now one of individualistic self-interest, one that flees social responsibility/obligations wherever possible. The ‘solicitation of the trap’ (Hall 2012b) is that this default, asocial subjectivity is directly tied to the imperatives of capital. As such, deviant subcultural formations should not be understood as resisting the processes of their exclusion, but as actively embracing it.

Bernard Stiegler’s *Disbelief and Discredit* trilogy (2011, 2013, 2014) displays a similar line of thought. Stiegler insists that ‘trust’ and ‘belief’ in social systems are essential to individuals and societies alike. He contends that individuals only become complete and contented persons (an ‘I’) in so far as they are part of a meaningful social (a ‘We’) and vice versa (a meaningful ‘We’ can only exist if it is composed of meaningful ‘Is’). He terms this “individuation” (Stiegler 2009: 40). This matters because neoliberal consumer capitalism *disindividuates*; it prevents the social/individual identification matrix from unfolding. This works across the social scale, but crucially for those at the lower ends a lack of ability to identify as part of a meaningful We results in a loss of trust in that We (Stiegler 2011, 2014). Stemming from this is a loss of expectation that social life will improve, the results of which are either: (1) “manifestly explosive” (Stiegler 2013: 121); or (2), a tendency to “regress towards reactive behaviour and the survival instinct” (Stiegler 2013: 4 original emphasis). Interestingly, he goes on to postulate that it is here, under the “reign of the drives” that the “proliferation of addictions” is highly likely (Stiegler 2013: 4).

While Stiegler’s model adds support to the claims of Hall and colleagues, his position is more effectively used as indicative of the debate here. That is, why understanding heroin’s moral economy is centred upon the complexities of responses to wider systems of exclusion. It can be understood as a resistance-based project of transgressive identity assertion, or as a reaction to the on-going adoption of asocial neoliberal subjectivities, or *potentially as both at the same time*. As the remainder of this work will demonstrate, the moral economy of heroin is a means by which the disintegration of social life can be *resisted*—that is, it is a means by which individuation can become possible again. Yet, it also plays a fundamental role in maintaining and reproducing the larger patterns of exclusion it is a *response* to—that is, as users become more enmeshed within this ‘reactive behaviour’, they actively participate in the processes of their wider marginalisation.

## The Moral Economy of Heroin in Austerity Britain

In what follows the moral economy of heroin is described with recourse to its normative and instrumental functions. Before this however, a word on methods is required.

### Methods

The fieldwork this article is based upon was conducted on a housing estate in North-West England (that I call ‘the Range’) across 2012–2013. Seventeen participants were involved in this research, six of which were female, the rest male. Eight were in the 35+ age-

bracket, another seven were in the 25–34 range, and two were below 24. All were unemployed and dependent upon social security payments to survive, and all were criminally active with all but one having spent time in prison. All were long-term heroin users, with all but one using other drugs as well (crack cocaine, cannabis and various prescription medications mainly). Heroin ‘careers’ ranged from just under 3 years at one end, to almost thirty at the other. Access was gained and negotiated informally through personal contacts of the researcher, and carefully maintained throughout the project through good will; nobody was paid for their participation. The main methods of data collection were participant observation and conversation-based interviews. However, in-depth ‘life-history’ interviews were also conducted with three of the five core participants towards the end of the fieldwork (‘core’ in that I spent extended amounts of time with them as opposed to many of the others whom I met less frequently).<sup>1</sup>

In the field I was always open about my reasons for being present. I carried a pen and notebook, using them as and when it was appropriate. Upon returning from each visit a detailed set of field notes was compiled. This was an ethnographic approach that prioritised ‘being with’ and ‘being present’ in moments of meaning-making as and when they occurred, over and above one that relied on their later recollection in interviews. Although this approach has its limitations, observation-based methods such as these have been argued to increase the validity of research with populations of addicted drug users due to the frequent (and often significant) divergences between what this population *say* they do, and what they *actually* do in practice (Bourgois 1998). My university’s ethics committee granted this project approval after review in 2012. The interested reader is directed towards Wakeman (2014a) which provides a full account of the methodological complexities of this research.

## The Moral Economy of Heroin: The Instrumental

In its most immediate form, the moral economy of heroin is made up of numerous small exchanges that facilitate users sharing heroin with each other so they do not experience withdrawal. This could be one user offering another a small amount of heroin in return for getting the same back later, or the day after (but rarely longer than 24 h), or it could be in return for some other sort of service. For example, ‘Ryan’ was frequently called on to purchase heroin for other users who did not know particular dealers. Moyle and Coomber (2015: 543) describe this technique of income generation as the “nominated buyer” method. He would also allow people to inject in his flat, with both these ‘services’ generating reciprocal payments:

Ryan’s flat is never quiet for long, but today it’s particularly hectic. I’ve been here just over an hour and two people have visited already. There was a targeted police raid this morning and the two main dealers on the estate have been arrested. This means for now a lot of the users are struggling to get heroin. The smaller user-dealers on the Range only serve [sell to] a select few people so as not to gain the attention of the police. Ryan is one of these people so he’s in demand today. It suits him just fine; every time he ‘runs over the road’ for someone he can expect a ‘flick’ [a small amount of powder], a couple of lines [runs of heroin smoked on foil], or a couple of millimetres of dissolved heroin solution prepared for injecting. Just as the kettle

<sup>1</sup> The other two were unavailable for interviews after leaving the estate suddenly—one to sell heroin in another town, the other following his arrest and remand for a violent street robbery.

reaches the boil visitor number three arrives. It's another man whose name I'm not told, and as such I don't ask; he doesn't look altogether friendly and quickly gets right to business:

"Run over there and see him for me Ry, he wont serve me no more"

A folded up ten pound note is passed between them and without a word, Ryan's on his way. The silence in here now is painful, I neither speak nor get spoken to. I just sit quietly smoking my cigarette. Thankfully Ryan is quick and a small wrap of heroin is passed over upon his return. The man isn't staying, but he does carefully unwrap his bag and empty a tiny amount of it on to Ryan's foil.

"Nice one lad" he utters as he wraps it back up and is off out the door.

Almost right away, the exact same thing happens again. Although I do get a name this time, 'Kelvin'. The same scenario unfolds except this time Kelvin's staying to inject. He asks to go upstairs but Ryan wont let him, "in the kitchen" he tells him bluntly. I've seen this before, it's for two reasons: one so they can't steal anything he may have upstairs, and two so he can see them and respond if they 'go over' [overdose]. The whole thing is over quick; he injects in his groin [femoral vein] so it's pretty much a case of in and out. He stands, eyes closed, hunched over and motionless like a scarecrow for about five minutes to enjoy his hit, he then nods Ryan towards the filter left in the cooker [the small spoon-like device used to prepare heroin for injection]:

"There you go Ry" he utters, and Ryan quickly places the cooker down under the corner of his sofa. That filter will provide a little injection when re-cooked; just enough to ward off withdrawal in the morning for an hour or two.

"Stick around for a bit if you want Kely", Ryan asks?

A mumbled excuse about "needing to be somewhere" comes as a reply – Kelvin is on his way as quickly as he arrived.

Field notes.

Days like this day were not uncommon for Ryan. He is one of the oldest and longest-established heroin users on the Range and is able to 'see' all the dealers. This is a form of social capital (Bourdieu 1987) that he holds on this estate.<sup>2</sup> What was most striking about its use in the above though was the lack of verbal communication between parties. Both knew what was being requested and what would be returned, nothing in the way of clarification was required. This is indicative of the baseline instrumentality of the moral economy of heroin as well as the degree to which it is ingrained within, and adhered to by, these users.

As Coomber and Moyle (2014) have argued, small exchanges like this are the constitutive components of modern drug markets. However, if two people have an established relationship then transactions often grow in size and stature. The formation of 'partnerships' is most beneficial, and whether one wants to or not, the sharing of heroin is crucial to maintaining a habit. However, it is crucial to surviving one's social circumstances too, as Helen (a 48 year-old, long-term heroin user) explains:

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<sup>2</sup> This has been noted before in drugs research—Sandberg (2008) terms it 'street capital'.



Sharing's really important, 'cus it's like people who do this drug like us, we all know, we all know that we're not always going to be able to make it [get money] you know? It's like the other week I ring up the [social security office] and tell them look, I'm really ill, I'm not going to be able to make the appointment I've got this afternoon, can we change it? Well she's like 'oh we'll send you a letter out, and then you fill it in...' [all said in a mock snooty 'phone voice'] and all that, but that's no good to me is it? I missed the meeting that day and they stopped my money right away, I had nothing that week. I had to break the law to eat! That time I'm round [Ryan's house] a lot, and he was so good to me, he helped me out all he could everyday you know?

SW: So he helped you keep your habit?

Yeah, but not everyone's like that you know? But most of them like us are [implying her, Ryan and the older users]. It's not even like you want to be you know? Nobody does really I guess, you'd obviously rather have it all yourself wouldn't you? But you've got to do it, you've got to share, 'cus it's like that person, you know them, they're one of us, you know that they're in this position too, and that tomorrow you might need them to do it for you. The thing is, all that stuff going on makes it hard [her health problems and difficulties surrounding her children] and the bottom line is just – whether you want to share it or not – you know that you've *got to* to get through a whole day.

Helen: Interview.

Thus, the importance of the moral economy of heroin is firmly rooted in its instrumental functions. Heroin habits are expensive to maintain, typically costing somewhere between £10 and £50 a day. This is a significant amount of money for someone dependent upon welfare and even when combined with gains from criminality, sharing is the only viable means of securing a regular flow of heroin.

Crucially though, by participating in heroin's moral economy material needs beyond heroin are also met:

It's not just [heroin] you know? Like the other week when he got that dog, he got given 'half and half' to have her [Ryan was recently given half a wrap of heroin and half a ten-pound rock of crack cocaine to look after a dog], but he didn't have any food for her or anything like that did he? I did, I've always had dogs, so when he came up to mine for something to eat I gave him some food for the dog too. Then the next week when his money went in he come up mine with the [heroin] he'd got with it, but he brought me half a bag of dog food back as well.

Helen: Interview

It is important to note here that Ryan was given this dog food during a visit to Helen's house in search of food *for himself*. This is a regular occurrence, he often told me of how she would 'look after' him by cooking him meals—there is significant crossover here with the 'mutual societies' of drug users described by Dorn et al. (1992). Furthermore, I often witnessed members of this group giving and receiving small money loans, usually for purchasing gas and/or electricity for pre-pay meters. Importantly, while these might not appear to be directly connected to heroin they are *inextricably* bound up within the moral economy that surrounds it. It is simply the case that the majority of these users have nobody to turn to should they require a loan of £5 to keep their heating on in the middle of



January, or some food if they have not eaten that day. However, they *can* approach a select number of users for help—and have a strong chance of getting it—due to their common involvement with heroin. Helen and Ryan know that lending to each other is essential; it compels the reciprocal services they depend on. Their shared imperative to avoid withdrawal is actually the security which permits other transactions to take place within this economy.

There is another analogy to be drawn here between the forms of capital Bourdieu (1986) identified and the processes of their conversion (from 'social' and 'cultural' to 'economic'). Ryan's abilities to access the user-dealers and know where stolen goods can be sold quickly are both manifestations of his social and cultural capital. He is able to trade on this to ensure his survival; he can convert his social capital into economic as and when he needs to. If, however, heroin is removed from the equation—if he were to stop using it for example—these skills are effectively rendered useless as forms of capital as they have virtually no conversion potential elsewhere. It is *only* in the moral economy of heroin that users like Ryan and Helen can trade on their particular skill-sets for the material and instrumental goods and/or services they require to survive.

Here the significance of Stiegler's ideas around individuation reappears; participation in heroin's moral economy provides users with the ability to belong to a 'We' (witness the frequent references to 'us' above). In this respect it provides opportunities for individuation to occur; for people to belong to a social realm in the face of their exclusion from their wider social setting. However, the nuances of this phenomenon are also rendered visible here; it must be understood as both an evolving *reaction* (c.f. Hall and Winlow 2015) to this level of exclusion, as well as *resistance* against it (c.f. Hayward et al. 2015). This socio-economic system has arisen among these users to attain the significance it holds as a result of wider processes of exclusion tied to the advancement of neoliberalism, but not out of any sort of 'revolutionary intent' on their part. This is a kind of reactive-resistance that *negates* the impacts of marginalisation, but does not challenge (or recognise) their sources, strengthening and reproducing them in the process. However, this is only half of the story—the moral economy of heroin also has emotive features that must be accounted for.

### The Moral Economy of Heroin: The Emotive

During my time on the range I frequently observed moral economic payments being made and received in ways which appeared to be motivated by emotional rather than material needs. For example, it was not uncommon to see users being overly friendly and attentive towards one another, especially in the well-rehearsed rituals that surrounded injection. Long-term users often have difficulty finding a vein to inject into, so if a user is good at this they are ideally placed to receive 'favours' in return for providing this service.<sup>3</sup> Injection rituals do not stop with the administration of heroin; they are usually followed with emotionally-based 'care-giving' practices like cleaning the injection site with a sterile wipe. What was occurring in these instances was a kind of bond-assertion as 'partners' inside the moral economy. That is, in reaffirming one's self as a good person to have around, as both useful *and* caring, one could solidify their links with others. The cultural dynamics of these practices make them too complex to be reduced down to pure

<sup>3</sup> As some are more than others. Not long into the fieldwork I met an individual who told me he was a 'state-registered nurse'. Due to his chronic addiction I initially doubted this. However having witnessed his proficiency with a hypodermic syringe, I am now sure I was wrong to do so.

instrumentality; they actually indicate how the instrumental core of heroin's moral economy renders its exchanges of increased *emotive* significance.

Ryan's relationship with a younger user named Tony is illustrative of this emotive bond. Tony is in his early thirties and well known (i.e. *feared*) on the Range. He is a former dealer of significant status and has a reputation for violence (one that has been hard-earned and that he is not averse to reaffirming should the need arise). His approach to heroin use is somewhat different to Helen, Ryan and the older users, he is aggressive in his pursuit of heroin and less inclined to just get by through relying on others. Should he need something, he goes out and takes it. Still, his relationship with Ryan is structured around what each can contribute instrumentally to the other's wellbeing, but *operated* through the normative/emotive discourses of 'friendship'. To exemplify this, on our way back from selling a stolen games console for Tony one day, Ryan and I bumped into two men in a park. One of these men believed Ryan had burgled his Grandmother's home and upon seeing us started to make loud and aggressive threats to stab Ryan whilst his companion physically restrained him.

When we arrive home Tony demands the tenner for the PlayStation right away. Ryan tells him about what just happened but he has better things on his mind for the moment – he makes a call and just a few minutes later a bag of heroin is dropped off outside. It's smoked in the normal way, Tony has five or six lines and then Ryan is given two, this process is repeated until both of them have fended off their withdrawal symptoms. At this point Tony picks up on the story of the threat:

"So what happened with him then? What'd he say to you?" he enquires.

"It's about that burglary at [name omitted]'s place, you know? That's his Nanna" Ryan explains.

Tony bursts out laughing at this – it seems to me that whilst he has some respect the man who threatened Ryan, he doesn't hold him in high regard. He shakes his head and promises to take action on Ryan's behalf. He asks for a phone and as usual, Ryan directs him towards mine:

"Just hold on lad, I'll talk to 'em" he tells us, sniggering as he types in the number.

He wonders off into the kitchen and a long conversation ensues with someone I later find out to be the older brother of the man who just threatened Ryan. The details of this are impossible for me to know as I could only hear Tony, but the long and short of it is clear – nobody will threaten or commit any violence towards Ryan. When he returned to the room, he was most confident his demands would be met:

"You see these dickheads Ste, if I tell 'em what's what, they *know* I've told them, see what I mean? They'll not be coming after him now, not now I've told them I'm here with him [meaning in the flat]. People like that, they understand things don't they Ry? [Ryan nods in agreement], while I'm here, nothing'll happen to anyone who's with me."

He turns to Ryan and laughs:

"See, I told you, you'll get no bother with me here lad".

He then picks up his tube and continues to smoke what's left of the heroin. From here on in though it's his, no more is shared.

Field notes.

The above can be understood with recourse to the emotive facets of the moral economy of heroin. While Tony is at Ryan's flat through instrumental need—he requires somewhere to stay and someone to go out and sell things for him so he can stay out the way of the police whom he was currently 'on the run' from—his contribution in return for these services is *emotive* before it is *material*. Yet, it is still irrecoverably bound up within heroin's moral economy. Tony gets his needs met through Ryan who in return benefits from his significantly superior status on the estate. That is, Tony can offer feelings of safety and security to Ryan. Users of lower socio-economic status are more likely than their well-off counterparts to experience many of the harms associated with drugs (Stevens 2011). One of the most significant of such harms where heroin is concerned is interpersonal violence. While it is important not to paint too bleak a picture—violence is common within this drug market yes, but it is not *reducible* to it as a range of other structural and/or cultural factors are also at play (see Coomber 2015; Wakeman 2014b)—every user I met had stories of violent victimisation to tell. Regarding his abilities in this context, Tony has a valuable commodity to exchange.

While Ryan's pride prevents him from saying so, it was clear that he liked having Tony around for the protective benefits of his presence. Moreover, Tony was able to maintain his self-persona as 'a criminal force to be reckoned with' by asserting his masculine prowess over Ryan. He did this by mocking Ryan, his home, and his lack of female companionship. Although all of this was framed as friendly humour, it had stronger resonance for Tony; it was crucial to the maintenance of his ego ideal. Despite the fact he sleeps in his clothes on someone else's couch, he can still *be* someone of significance. In this respect, while both men benefit instrumentally from their relationship, its emotive significance is much stronger. And critically again, the moral economy of heroin underpins this all. Without heroin, this relationship and all its benefits simply ceases to exist.

Finally, it is important to show the consequences of a violation of the moral economic order. Again this *appears* instrumental in nature—you failed to comply with a request of mine so I shall not grant one of yours—yet has more normative/emotive underpinnings. In the following extract 'Barry' (a heroin user in his late 1930s) is punished for a violation of the sharing imperative:

Barry isn't well at all right now; he's really feeling the effects of withdrawal. It's gone midday and he's had nothing since yesterday. Helen is sitting across the room halfway through her smoke and it's too much for Barry to ignore now – I was wondering why he'd not asked for any, but I find out when he does. He sheepishly asks Helen if he could have just two lines:

"No way Barry, no way at all mate, when I was sat here the other night ill, you wouldn't give me one line of yours, *not one* – it's not on mate! You can't come here now after you sat watching me sick giving me nothing, then expect anything of me, sorry but that's it".

There's a real awkward silence in here now; everyone knows that she's right to take this stand, but also that Barry's now got to sit there withdrawing, *watching someone smoke heroin*. This is the darker side of the moral economy – failure to make a payment when one is expected (and when someone is withdrawing, it *is* expected) means that you'll be excluded in future. Barry makes an effort towards protest:

"I did give you some though didn't I? The other day, in here, I gave you a few lines of that thing I got of him round the corner, didn't I?"

However Helen's not having this.

"No, no way Barry, don't start with all that, you know the day I mean. The other night, *after* the day you're on about, you gave me nothing and you know it. Don't try and lie about it now 'cus you know it's true. I told you then didn't I? I told you don't ever ask me for anything again."

Barry has little choice but to accept the ruling. He turns to Ryan looking for some support, he's looking for the slight possibility that a word from him might just change her mind. To be fair, it might, but despite Ryan's friendship with Barry nothing comes except a nonchalant shrug of the shoulders. Ryan knows only too well the importance of these rules – he has to live by them. As cold as ice, Helen finishes up the last of her gear, screws up the foil she was running it on and drops it in the ashtray right under Barry's nose.

Field notes.

This is not spite—the consequences of violating the moral-economic order must be enforced to ensure its proper functioning. In this sense—and as noted by Taylor (1993) and Pearson (1987)—heroin use underpins normative systems of order through its social practices. But it is more than this, also visible above is a distinctive effort towards the structuring and maintaining of overarching social relations—indeed, *social life itself*—along a strict set of principles tied to heroin's moral economy.

Here the complexities of heroin's moral economy can again be understood through the conceptual apparatus of Continental philosophy. Badiou's (2009a) atonal worlds are characterised by the fragmentation of traditional social lives. He claimed that in neoliberal democracies, not only has a sense of purpose and belonging disappeared for many through the large-scale reorganisation of systems of production, but so too has the sense of *order* that previously stemmed from such purpose and belonging. Usefully, this reading reveals the core duality at play here. The moral economy provides meaning and order where there are none, and in this sense it is a resistant project which protects participants against their excluded status. However, it also constitutes a symptom-like response to the internalisation of atonal/asocial subjectivities. Witness the overarching dogma inherent in the previous example—*trade with us or be cast aside*. Thus, as users retreat further into the moral economy in an exercise of apparent 'anti-atonality', there is a strong argument to be made that they are further permitting, facilitating and maintaining the larger ideologies of exclusion that work against them.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In considering the above together, the first resonant feature is the way it can help explain contemporary patterns of heroin use; specifically, the growing number of users in the 35+ age group. Those who do not desist from heroin use early in their drug-taking careers become embedded within this moral economy. This is not to say that it attracts people into heroin use, but it *is* to imply that it is a significant factor in keeping them using once they have started. The younger users I met on the Range had greater social ties than the older ones, and as such did not rely upon the moral economy of heroin to the same extent that the likes Ryan, Helen or Barry did in terms of meeting of their complex social needs. For this

latter group these systems of exchange—the instrumental *and* the emotive—have come to form the base of sociality itself. In this respect, the prevalence data can be made sense of.

The above also has considerable relevance to debates about drug treatment provision. This is the case because efforts towards reintegration and notions of 'social inclusion' frequently inform rehabilitative approaches to drug addiction. However, considering the above, questions can be asked around what it is exactly that people are expected to reintegrate into, if heroin's moral economy provides a more instrumentally and emotionally rewarding social environment than a heroin-free alternative does. Moreover, the same questions can (and should) be asked around the implications the above has for the recovery agenda that has characterised British drug policy and treatment commissioning in recent years (see Duke 2013; Watson 2013). As community-based self-help groups are frequently at the core of recovery treatment initiatives, the considerable pull of heroin's moral economy with its multiple social functions for users requires significant consideration. Succinctly put, it is unlikely that the social benefits available through twice-weekly, hour-long recovery groups could realistically hope to match it.

Furthermore, in terms of drug treatment provision, even promising developments such as heroin-assisted treatment are problematized by the above. That is, in the event of an increased roll out of heroin prescription services—which is not at all unrealistic in the UK at present—the moral economy of heroin would be rendered obsolete. The considerable successes of heroin prescription programmes in treating patient groups similar to the users encountered in this research notwithstanding (see Strang et al. 2012), the fact that they confine heroin use to a clinical setting (the prescribing clinic) is important here. These facilities forbid sharing of any kind and as all consumption is undertaken and monitored in individual booths, there is no opportunity for any sort of social interaction. As such, the findings presented above raise important issues around the potential desirability and long-term efficacy of heroin-assisted treatment programmes (see Wakeman 2015).

The arguments made here also have relevance for wider debates about drug policy revision. Within such debates, problematically, it is sometimes the case that the most marginalised and disadvantaged drug users are rendered less visible than some of their peers. Numerous reformers claim a world in which drugs are legally regulated rather than prohibited would be a world in which less harm would be done to people globally through the production and distribution of drugs like heroin. To be clear, this is almost undoubtedly true. However, the effects such a change would have on the Range's heroin users are something of a moot point. It is plausible to suggest that calls for the legal regulation (or even decriminalisation) of drugs like heroin demonstrate a distinct lack of awareness around the possible implications such a policy manoeuvre might have for the most disadvantaged users. While such a shift would certainly benefit middle- and upper-class users (allowing them to indulge their chemical proclivities without risking their comfortable jobs) the effects this would have on users like Ryan would be very different. He depends upon the moral economy of heroin for so much and, ultimately, this socio-economic system currently depends upon its *illicit* status.

It is in this respect that attention has to return in closing to the wider issue of social exclusion. Whilst the debate surrounding the most convincing theoretical explanation of subcultural formations (as either forms of resistance *against* social exclusion, or as indoctrinated *responses to* the internalisation of asocial subjectivities) will not be ended here, it is hoped that the above has made a contribution on this front. The fact remains that there is strong evidence of both positions to be found here. Either way, the problems of the users on the Range remain very real. Stiegler's (2013) claim that those who lose a sense of trust in their social order also lose expectation in it improving is pertinent in this respect.

The users I met through this research demonstrated little if any expectation that their social circumstances would improve. In the face of this the actions heroin's moral economic order is composed of attained hugely increased significance for them. As such, it must be understood as playing a crucial role in these peoples' lives—it must be understood as the result of a concerted set of efforts towards the reconstitution of a meaningful social sphere by, and specifically for, this highly marginalised group. It provides a sense of order, a sense of belonging, and means by which some of the harsh realities of life in austerity Britain can be negated. In this respect, it is about so much more than just 'getting by'.

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