



Publication details, information for authors and referees and full contents available at: <http://global-discourse.com/>

ISSN: 2043-7897

Suggested citation:

Grayson, K. (2010) 'Author's Reply to Reviews of "Chasing Dragons: Chasing Dragons: Security, Identity and Illicit Drugs in Canada" by Kyle Grayson', *Global Discourse* [Online], 1: 1, available from: <<http://global-discourse.com/contents>>.

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## Chasing Dragons: Security, Identity and Illicit Drugs in Canada by Kyle Grayson

*Author's Reply by Kyle Grayson<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

I wish to start by thanking the reviewers for the very considered comments and the close readings that these are based on. At a time when the volume of scholarship is increasingly exponentially to where the results of academic publishing often feel like the sound of one hand clapping, it is a rare occasion to be able to engage in a discussion with two colleagues on issues of mutual interest.

At the same time, it is an unnerving experience, particularly to see others identify and reveal the potential tensions, sub-texts, omissions, and unresolved issues entangled within one's own research. But having colleagues who are willing and able to provide this kind of support is central to the academic fulfilment of the Foucauldian maxim about making facile gestures difficult—including our own. While I cannot possibly hope to do justice to the important issues raised by the reviewers or necessarily resolve them to anyone's satisfaction, I will attempt to provide at least a preliminary response to points raised individually and in combination where appropriate.<sup>2</sup> But first, it is necessary, as Martin Coward has noted, to contextualize *Chasing Dragons*.

### What was I trying to do?

Keeping all the usual caveats of the hermeneutic circle in mind, *Chasing Dragons* initially set out to find an answer to the question: 'what is the relationship constituted by the politics of illicit drugs, security policy, and identity in Canada?' In exploring Canadian geonarcotics, the construction and coding of the body of the illicit drug user, the nexus formed by practices of liberalism and illicit drugs, and the regulation of sub-cultures and minorities through the prism of illicit drugs policy, I realized that another question was lingering beneath the surface: 'how has it become possible for Canadians to position themselves as distinct from Americans?'. This second question to my mind is the more politically relevant in a context where the United States is a looming presence in any discussion of identity, policy, or political possibility. Thus, what I hoped to illustrate was the historical contingency of the drug threat, the identity of the people said to be in danger, and the relations of power underpinning the entire dynamic, in order to challenge the common assertion that there is a crystal clear delineation between the foreign policy characters of Canada and the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Kyle Grayson, Politics, 40-42 Great North Road, Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, United Kingdom. Email: k.a.grayson@ncl.ac.uk.

<sup>2</sup> With respect to Martin Coward's question about the performative circumstances under which US incarceration rates increased in the United States, please see Grayson (2003), or for a longer version Grayson (1999). These were based on the major research paper required for my Masters degree—and it shows!

## Truth, Power, and Objectivity

In using insights, frameworks, and--dare I say it--'methods' developed by 'post-structuralist' theorists, the thorny issue of 'truth', that is what can we claim to know with certainty, comes to the forefront in the book and in the minds of the reviewers. The position I take in *Chasing Dragons* is unabashedly Foucauldian: what counts as knowledge (of truth) is a reflection of power-relations, while knowledge and truth regularize relations of power by conveying a status to those in the fields of their production. The end result is that truth is not just contingent but also highly subjective. And those truths that become inculcated into the realm of knowledge known as common-sense are in fact political products that have the tendency to benefit those in positions of authority. Thus, one of the most highly political acts is that of establishing which discourses, institutions, techniques, and processes, will be accorded value in finding truth. Both reviewers raise key questions about this approach and how it plays out in *Chasing Dragons*.

For Martin Coward, the issue is consistency. With respect to my deployment of the common-sense assertion that tobacco can arguably be seen as a greater threat to public health than illicit drugs, he notes that the argument slides from wishing to problematize the foundations of truth production to taking them--and their products--at face value. Thus, the deeper issue is how might one subject such an assertion to the same analysis as the discourses surrounding illicit drugs?

My response is two-fold and much more focused on the first point than the second. The assertion is made in the text to demonstrate the inconsistency within the illicit drugs discourse itself: that is, if the protection of public health is a primary concern, why are those substances that the requisite regime of truth and its accepted procedures of knowledge production have identified as more harmful not been subject to the same forms of brutal disciplinary and biopolitical control? And the implicit answer that runs throughout *Chasing Dragons* is that tobacco use has not historically been subject to the same politics of security and identity.

In terms of how to best subject the claim of tobacco's harm to critical scrutiny, my suspicion would be to engage in a genealogical analysis of how smoking has been problematized--from a cancer, heart disease, and stroke causing agent in the self and more recently in others, to the psychological effects of addiction--since the proliferation of professional medicine in the nineteenth century. The objective would be to see how these problematizations have shifted with changes in the way in which the practices of medicine are understood.

For Andres Perezalonso, the issue is more fundamental: in accepting that truth is socially constructed and contingent, do we concede too much in the approach used in *Chasing Dragons*, thereby leaving us unable to expose deliberate deceptions as lies? As he so eloquently puts it:

*the time has come for our understanding of discourse analysis to attempt a synthesis between a purely constructivist approach and one which accepts a certain standard of objectivity while not pretending to possess grand 'true' explanations of reality; i.e. one that limits and supports its claims of objectivity on elemental facts and data while recognizing the production and construction of discursive objects.*

I have two serious concerns about the pursuit of such a project. The first is that there is not a realm of the real and a realm of the discursive that merely represents the real; discourse constitutes reality. Therefore, the study of politics and the use of discourse analysis to study politics--or any other field for that matter-- is about examining the contests that occur over meaning and representation that make reality intelligible. That 'event a' is taking place or that 'person b' exists tend to be shared across positions: at the heart of politics are the battles that are fought over what 'event a' *means* or how 'person b' is *represented*. These battles are discursive; victory is achieved when the dominant discursive formation is no longer able to accept the meanings and representations forwarded by your 'opponent' as understandable. It is misplaced to try to use philosophical realism in order to say that we can ground any claim in a 'reality' that supposedly exists independently of our thoughts about it and then move on to argue that this reality can be objectively verified and necessarily used to adjudicate between competing claims in a way that is neutral. To do so, is to try to give solid form to the wind. And as Nietzsche reminded us, much like a frozen stream in the winter, even those forms that appear to be solid, may be in a state of flux beneath the surface.

But what then of deception, lying, or even *bullshit*? Particularly with respect to the discourses of illicit drugs where 'bad science'--that is, medical research that has purposely sought to come to conclusions that heighten the risks associated with illicit drugs--has been identified by many analysts as a pivotal contributor, how can the approach taken in *Chasing Dragons* respond? The answer, in part, is to illustrate that 'deception' tries to have it both ways. On the one hand it wishes to latch onto the relations of power and advantages that arise in discourse when a claim has been produced through the recognized procedures, processes, and practices underpinning the contemporary regime of truth. On the other hand, it wishes to do so without actually having gone through them. Thus, one can be critical in saying that a lie does not hold up to the knowledge production procedures of the contemporary regime of truth while still recognizing that the regime of truth itself is contingent. Calling out a claim on this basis does not require an appeal to a logos.

### **Formalism, Identity, and Critical Security Theory**

The next set of issues identified by Martin Coward are as equally important and vexing as the status of truth: what is the international, what is international relations, and how then do our understandings of these establish limits in both theory and practice?

In part, critical scholarship in the academic discipline of International Relations has arisen in response to the inherent contradiction identified by R.B.J. Walker (1993) in *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, Western political theory and its constitutive understandings of sovereignty—always bound to the territorial state—paradoxically make the international a space devoid of politics. Instead, it becomes a type of mechanistic model like those forwarded by structural theories of realism where agency gets completely subsumed under the constraints of the structure (i.e., anarchy). These 'orrey[s] of errors', as Richard K. Ashley (1986) has quipped, leave politics as something that may only take place within the confines of the territorial state where a sovereign maintains rule of law and order. Yet, to maintain this law and order internally demands that the sovereign be prepared to keep the disorder that supposedly characterizes the space of the international outside;

violence becomes a means for preserving order either by expanding the realm of the inside or repelling the forces of the outside, with both strategies leading to various forms of violence. Thus, to paraphrase Homer Simpson observations about alcohol, the sovereign becomes the cause of--and answer to--all of life's political problems.

Yet, Coward suggests that critical approaches themselves—or at least my appropriation of them in *Chasing Dragons*—may in fact fall into exactly the same trap. This is certainly something troubling to consider and my initial response will be deeply insufficient to the task. On the one hand, I would crudely argue that the international as a space is constituted by everyday relations of power aggregated to the largest volume currently commonly recognized in political discourse as defining a discrete social and economic space where meaningful activity occurs. On the other, these seemingly abstract and supposedly mechanistic relations of power help to constitute the everyday (Davies and Niemann 2002). In other words, the international is not a residue of a range of other processes enacted and determined at another 'level' nor can it simply be reduced to self-other identity constructions played out elsewhere. The levels of analysis—e.g., the international, regional, national, local, and individual—that are supposed to segregate both research and power relations themselves into water tight boxes for observation miss that these are all mutually constitutive and relatively indistinguishable in the absence of mental gymnastics or slick sleights of hand. When a piece of street art by an award winning artist—who could be described as male, and/or British and/or as Muslim—is commissioned in Birmingham with a message displaying solidarity with Gaza and is subsequently ordered painted over by the Birmingham police as a matter of public security, what level of analysis can best explain the power-dynamics at play? No one level is sufficient. This was the position that I wished to articulate in *Chasing Dragons*.

Still, this leaves the structural and conceptual problem of self/other identified by Coward. In part, it requires one to begin to break free of the binary thinking and 'tradition' of western philosophy that has shaped how we approach these things even in critique. A place to begin looking might be in psychoanalytic theories of abjection like those advanced by Julia Kristeva where the subject-object dichotomy of self and other collapses through feelings of disgust and unity. If I were crafting *Chasing Dragons* again, the work of Kristeva, particularly given the way in which it has been compellingly deployed by people like Francois Debrix (2008) to explore identity dynamics in the 'war on terror', would certainly be engaged.

### **Moral Panics: Confusing Processes with Causes**

Theories of abjection are not the only place where the reviewers suggest that I may have left out literature that could have furthered my arguments. Perezalonso notes that using literature on moral panics could have potentially produced fruitful results. The issue with the 'moral panics' concept is that it has a tendency to be used a black box to explain why certain outcomes occur when these cannot not be easily deduced through an analysis of rational interests or 'rational' cognitive processing being used to produce 'rational' policy outcomes—often defined through utilitarian outcomes. This of course relies on highly contested notions of rationality while positioning things like emotion and the affect as abnormal—rather than central—to politics. For this reason, the moral panics concept is inherently conservative, being deployed to fight a battle about the way politics ought to be conducted along utilitarian lines without problematizing those lines themselves.

Furthermore, moral panics do not have the explanatory power that is given to them by advocates. Moral panics are, at best, a reflection of deeper processes and more diffuse relations of power, that provide limited insight to either 'why did X happen' or the more critically the important question of 'how did X become possible'. My preference was to look at the processes and power-relations themselves rather than using a term to aggregate them.

At the same time, Perezalonso's comment offers a very important direction for future research with respect to the way in which the concept of moral panic is used as the central problematization to frame the politics of resistance to things like illicit drugs policy. For example, how does the concept of moral panic as a problematization shape the ways in which opposition forces attempt to initiate changes to policy? What kinds of counter-arguments does it make possible and/or preclude?

#### Economic Representations of Illicit Drugs

In terms of future research, Coward also notes the recent impact of discursive analyses of economic categories that would appear to be beneficial for the case of illicit drugs. As he rightly notes, the preference in critical security studies to focus on cultural representations is itself limiting—and I would argue is in part a product of disciplinary politics from within critical scholarship itself. By way of a partial justification for the absence of this kind of analysis in *Chasing Dragons* one primary consideration can be raised: scope. To have given fair hearing to an analysis of the ways in which value sums are deployed<sup>3</sup> or how the illicit drug industry itself—with relations that could charitably be considered as hyper-capitalist—is often represented as being outside of the formal structures of normal market relations would have necessitated an expansion in this project that would have been untenable. However, as part of research consortium headed by Julian Reid that will be exploring the contemporary biopolitics of global development governance, my contribution on the global illicit drugs regime will necessarily have to engage in this kind of analysis, particularly with the way in which patterns of drug production, distribution, and consumption are linked to theories and representations of underdevelopment.

#### The Role of Critical Scholarship

The final point raised explicitly by Coward and implicitly through the comments of Perezalonso is the role of critical scholarship. Both I think would agree that academic research is always shaped by the environment in which it is produced. My future research on the global illicit drugs regime will be shaped by the elements listed by Coward in addition to a global security environment in which the resolve of the most vociferous wager of the 'war on drugs', the United States appears to be wavering with the announcement that the Obama administration will be abandoning the term and looking to increase the percentage of its anti-drugs budget dedicated to harm reduction and treatment programmes.

Likewise, *Chasing Dragons* was researched and written in a political environment in which aspects of Canadian drug law were declared unconstitutional,

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<sup>3</sup> For example, police as a matter of policy always report the value of drug seizures in terms of the monetary value of the smallest weighting of the substance typically sold multiplied by the total weight seized as opposed to the actual wholesale value (which would be far less).

laws regarding marijuana possession went unenforced in most jurisdictions for nearly a year, the federal government flirted with the decriminalization of marijuana, and all of these were represented in nationalist discourses as evidence of both the extension of personal freedom in Canada based on a long history of tolerance and its superiority in relation to the United States. In illustrating the largely forgotten role played by Canada in establishing the punitive global illicit drugs regime, the centrality of race to the Canadian illicit drugs discourse, and the relations of power underpinning models of national and municipal illicit drug governance where police and medical professionals have clashed over the management of the body of the illicit drug user for the past ninety years, *Chasing Dragons* does attempt to make a practical contribution. That contribution was to reframe the parameters of the Canadian drugs discourse and the ways in which illicit drugs have been problematized so that the appropriateness of comparisons to the United States, the domination of policing concerns, the denial of the roles played by gendered and racial representations, and the idea that harm reduction is devoid of power relations are no longer taken for granted.

Dawn Moore (2007) has shown with respect to drug treatment courts and rehabilitation programmes in Canada, that until deeper-seated relations of power based around gender, race, and class dynamics are confronted, contesting illicit drugs policy and alternative options will be limited to the repackaging of means for the same (biopolitical) ends. Thus, I do explicitly take the position to not provide detailed prescriptive policy options because this would either involve a listing of generalized policy orientations (e.g., recognize that illicit drug policy has disproportionate effects based on classifications of race, gender, and class) that could potentially serve as fodder for policy savants who delight in the minutiae of policy making, leaving all of the analysis proceeding these prescriptions extremely vulnerable to dismissal, or be an exercise in banality as policies potentially being advocated (e.g., legalization with production and distribution controlled by the public sector) are non-starters within the existing discursive formation.

At the same time, I would not want to be so quick to replicate the distinction made by mainstreamers who wish to label critical work as impractical because it does not offer policy advice in the in an easily digestible form devoid of any kind of problematizing--i.e., the form they have come to expect. Transforming modes of thinking and ways of problematizing are just as practical as being able to provide a number for budget line or guidance over the size of a policing deployment. If critical scholars make this concession to the mainstreamers and to the savants, it will be all over for critical scholarship. Already academics *writ large* are being increasingly pressurized to engage in paint-by-numbers social science research whose end results serve to confirm the presuppositions held by contemporary government and business. At this time, there is a need to be vocal about the practical utility of our work. Not only will no one else do so for us, but the failure to confront this charge head on will eliminate what little remaining space there is for academic research to play its role in the transformation of the world for the better, whatever that better may turn out to be.

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