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

*Review by Andrés Perezalonso<sup>1</sup>*

Recent years have seen a proliferation of analyses that move away from the traditional schools of International Relations towards post-structuralist and social constructivist approaches which make of discourse a central theme. The influence of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, among others, is pervasive in a variety of works of current scholars who seek to apply the notions of deconstruction, genealogy or biopolitics to the international arena. In doing so, more than one has highlighted the direct relationship that exists between security and identity.

There are different variations around the notion of the Other, often conceived as a potential threat, as the element that constitutes and determines the Self.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a work that has become a standard for studies gravitating around security, discourse and identity is David Campbell's genealogical analysis of American identity and United States foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> In a first approach, Kyle Grayson's book on Canadian identity can be understood along the same lines of thought. There are, however, a few important differences which turn out to be refreshing, given the nature of the subject of study. While we are accustomed to think of alienation and belligerence as important aspects of American political discourse, most people (Canadians and non-Canadians alike) will not usually consider Canada as a country primarily concerned with threats from the exterior or deviance from the interior. We do not stop to think of the ways in which this country constructs its identity through practices of security, nor do we stop to think what threats might be perceived by the Canadian imagination, if any. That Grayson has stopped to consider issues that are often overlooked or taken for granted is already promising for the stimulation of future research in comparable areas of study.

Grayson's guiding question is "how have competing ideas of security and Canadian identity managed to code particular practices as un-Canadian, thereby making it possible to pursue various forms of prohibition towards illicit drugs?"<sup>4</sup> In doing so he challenges dominant conceptualizations of what Canada or being Canadian is, while resisting the temptation of revealing the 'hidden truth' about Canadian identity, since, as he argues, such reality is constructed by the meaning we give it and always linked to power relations.

Instead of trying to provide an answer to the question of 'what is true' about illicit drugs and their effects, the focus shifts to who is able to tell the truth, about

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<sup>2</sup> For an example see Richard Johnson, 'Defending ways of life, The (Anti-)Terrorist Rhetorics of Bush and Blair', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19-4 (2002)

<sup>3</sup> See David Campbell, *Writing Security, United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998)

<sup>4</sup> Kyle Grayson, *Chasing Dragons: Security, Identity, and Illicit Drugs in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008): 5

what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power in processes that have been touted as marking a slow liberal transformation in Canadian drug policy.<sup>5</sup>

This approach allows Grayson to stress discontinuity and seemingly contradictory elements of Canadian identity/security. Indeed, perhaps the major strength of the book is that it traces the imagination of Canada through a wide spectrum of dissimilar manifestations. Illicit drugs and their consumers have historically received responses from Canadian authorities and society that range from multiculturalism and tolerance to racism; just as they do from law enforcement to medicalization. This way, Canada ceases to be simply a progressive and tolerant country enlightened by rational principles; through its practices related to drugs it reveals itself as a complex set of contradictory representations subject to contingency.

Grayson makes a comprehensive, intelligent and intelligible study of Canadian identity and illicit drugs. His analysis covers equally the role in the performative of identity of the country's geopolitical relationship with the U.S.; the different historical constructions of minorities (Asian, Somali, African-Canadian) as the alleged carriers of the 'drug epidemic'; the positions of the medical, legal and law enforcement communities, swinging back and forth in their portrayal of drugs as a disease to be treated or a crime to be punished; and specific issues embedded within the larger discourse, such as the medicalization of marijuana or the rise and fall of rave culture.

There is little left to be desired of *Chasing Dragons*. If any matters remain unanswered they are related to the possibility that alternative methodological or theoretical approaches could have provided additional or more interesting results. There are a few passages that suggest so. For example, on the issue of race and illicit drugs, Grayson concludes:

In the Canadian context, the securitization of specific drugs has been made possible through biopolitical discourses of race. In adopting a Foucauldian approach that highlights the contingent character of the discursive relations that made it possible for opium and khat to be represented and accepted as threatening to the Canadian Self, I have made it clear that *these threat constructions had very little to do with the chemical properties of these substances*. Opium and khat were constructed as threats because of the political challenges they presented to Canadian identity and culture within their contexts of securitization.<sup>6</sup> [Italics added.]

True enough, the Canadian discourse on drugs is proven to be contingent and has been marked by a biopolitical understanding of race – points which may be highlighted thanks to Foucault. But the obvious gap between the constructions of threat and the chemical qualities of drugs begs for the introduction of the analytical notion of *disproportionality* as proposed by Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda.<sup>7</sup> Although these authors were not alien nor opposed to social constructivism they chose to retain a sense of objectivity in their appreciation of hard facts – like the chemical qualities of a drug – in order to assess how disproportional a construction of a threat was.

The possibility of using Goode and Ben-Yehuda's work in the construction of drugs in Canada as dangerous is apparent in a number of examples in Grayson's book. However, early on in the text Grayson dismisses Goode and Ben-Yehuda's *Moral Panics* for the reason that these panics are only one of many possible manifestations

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<sup>5</sup> Kyle Grayson, *Chasing Dragons*: 18

<sup>6</sup> Kyle Grayson, *Chasing Dragons*: 123

<sup>7</sup> Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994): 36

and that such analysis using such explanatory concepts “presuppose the existence of some previously articulated morality that all members of society draw from and interpret in a uniform manner – a precarious assumption even in the most homogenous of social environments”.<sup>8</sup> It is a fair point, but there is no reason why we could not find a way to adjust Goode and Ben-Yehuda to a complex discourse marked by contradictions and discontinuities; nor is there a logical reason why a Foucauldian perspective would deny the element of disproportionality *when present*.

Ultimately the problem seems to be related to what we do with ‘facts’ in the context of discourse analysis. This is how Grayson deals with them:

*In exploring [the question of the conditions of possibility for the acceptance of the interpretation of threat], this study draws from researched data and follows standard rules of evidence. At times, arguments based on empirical data will be provided that counter what are considered by authorities to be conventional ‘facts’; at other times, alternative interpretations of conventional ‘facts’ are offered. Some may want to argue that, given the discussion about the productive role of discourse made above, the presentation of evidence in this manner is at best dubious (i.e., it does not clearly define its ontological basis), or at worst, intellectually unsustainable and contradictory. Such charges, though, project onto this project the traditional aim of (social) science as the search for truth; they neglect to recognize that no such truth claims are being made here.*

Thus, Grayson makes use of evidence and ‘facts’, but not as standards of truth or objectivity. They are simply used to destabilize constructions and to make a point of the contingency of the discursive formations. This appears to be the essential difference with an approach that would accept disproportionality and therefore evidence as a measure of objectivity or lack of it.

Perhaps 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 that does not pretend to possess ‘true’ explanations of reality, i.e. that of elemental facts and data.

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<sup>8</sup> Kayle Grayson, *Chasing Dragons*: 31