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

Review by Martin Coward

In 2007 The Independent declared Guinea Bissau ‘Africa’s first narco-state’ and an important staging post in the movement of illicit drugs from Latin America to Europe. Concurrently, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) World Drug Report referred to the patterns of organized crime responsible for the smuggling of drugs from Latin America and South Asia to the US and Europe as an ‘invisible empire’. Central to both accounts is an image of the flow of drugs, and the violence (of criminals and warlords) taken to be attendant to it, as a pressing source of instability and insecurity in the global era. Interestingly both reports do not simply identify the threats to the health of northern populations that illicit drugs and the criminal networks responsible for distributing them represent. Both accounts also note the way in which northern demand for illicit drugs, via the underdevelopment and violence the drugs trade perpetuates, comprises a threat to the populations of the south.

Notwithstanding such nuances, however, both accounts could be seen as elements of a wider discourse that represents the sources of global danger as emanating from the global south towards the global north (Dalby 2006). Such a discourse reinscribes long-standing civilisational discourses in a contemporary account of the manner in which the developed, largely pacific, northern self is threatened by its underdeveloped, violent and illicit southern other. Such an other is taken to demand a securitised response in order to contain its unruly threatening behaviour.

Chasing Dragons represents an excellent response to such securitising discourses. Kyle Grayson demonstrates the manner in which notions of civilisation, gender, sexuality, race and moral superiority are inscribed into Canadian national identity via discourses on illicit drugs. As such, Chasing Dragons is a timely lens through which scholars might critically read the securitised responses to threat perceived to posed by illicit drugs.

Taking the metaphor of the dragon as both transcendent object of wisdom (and, hence, metaphor for finding certainty in an uncertain world) as well as threatening monster, Grayson shows the manner in which discourses surrounding illicit drugs have performed Canadian national identity both in terms of its search for security as well as in relation to its threatening others. As such Grayson draws upon the framework of analysis developed by David Campbell in his Writing Security (1998) to show the manner in which the representation of otherness is central to a discursive performance of the security of the self. Grayson augments Campbell’s framework with reference to Foucault’s understanding of parrhesia (the technique of

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claiming authority for one’s discursive position and thus gaining the ability to make credible discursive performances) and *biopolitics*. This framework allows Grayson – drawing on Gearoid O’Tuathail (1996) – to present the discourses surrounding illicit drugs as a ‘geo-graphing’, or inscription via cultural practices, of relations of identity.

This theoretical framework is then deployed to examine a genealogy of the empirical discourses surrounding illicit drugs in Canada in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This genealogy begins with an account of the manner in which Canada’s contribution to negotiations concerning global drug control regimes was constitutive of a sense of the moral superiority, and liberal sophistication, of Canadian identity. Grayson interestingly notes that this has led to a position in which Canada identifies itself with America’s civilisational position and yet finds itself, due to its liberal stance, taken to be perversely different to the US (which has a more punitive attitude towards illicit drugs). Grayson shows how such a positioning can be understood, via queer theory, as a mix of difference and sameness that the US finds threatening in its ambiguity.

The genealogy then examines the racialisation of Canadian identity through discourses about the manner in which the threat of illicit drugs arises from immigrant communities. Stemming from the notion that Canadians were a superior ‘northern race’, illicit drug consumption has been taken (from Chinese opium smoking to Somali Khat chewing) to be a foreign activity indicative of the indolence and moral inferiority of ‘southern races’. The majority of the book though is taken up with three chapters that might be seen together as a genealogy of the medicalisation of the body of the drug user. From early conceptions of the drug user as a criminal addict to contemporary anxieties about the threat to the health of young people posed by ecstasy, discourses surrounding illicit drugs in Canada have been constitutive of a notion of health that has performed an ideal of Canadian society. Such a performance could be said to be biopolitical in the sense intended by Foucault – a discourse that attempts to define and regulate the vital functions of the population.

In its theoretical sophistication and empirical richness *Chasing Dragons* is, to my mind, an important contribution to the critical security literature. As such it raises for me a number of questions that I would like to pose by way of concluding this review.

In the first place it strikes me that two important points are left unexplained (indeed, are mentioned only in passing). On the one hand, it is stated that the US has a punitive attitude towards illicit drugs. And yet, curiously for an account that stresses the cultural and interpretive basis of identity, there is no explanation for how such a situation arose. On the other hand, a vast rise in the number of arrests for drugs offences towards the latter part of the twentieth century is noted in several places and yet no explanation is given for this rise. What were the performative circumstances in which such an increase in arrests became possible?

Secondly, I note also a curious kernel of objectivity under an account that poses the cultural, performative notion of identity as its central category. This manifests itself in the bald assertion that tobacco can be (‘arguably’) seen as a larger health threat than illicit drugs. Of course on a common sense level this appears incontrovertible. And yet the purpose of the analysis is to unsettle such common sense. So the question is how do we subject such an assertion to the same analysis as the discourse surrounding illicit drugs?
Thirdly, I detect a certain formalism in notions of identity and difference deployed by critical security theorists. Such accounts are predicted on the idea that all performances of selves are worked out in relation to others. Two problems seem to arise here. On the one hand, what happens to the international? Is it merely the theoretical residue of the various self-other relations that exist in global politics? Or is it a site in which more than the relation of self and other takes place and which has its own specificities that makes it a distinct space (as I think classical realist accounts of the international might posit it to be)? If the international is nothing but a theoretical residue (i.e., that which can be deduced from an aggregation of all the self and other relations that exist globally) what about international relations as a discipline? Is it simply a sort of global sociology of self-other performances? Secondly, there is the problem (that you note in the conclusion) of the inability of Canada to become something other than America’s other. But this will be more than an empirical problem. It will be a structural problem. Conceptually, Canada cannot be something other than its neighbour’s other. But is this not limiting theoretically?

Fourthly, I was interested to see that there is no discussion of the economics of illicit drugs. Of course, I recognise that the primary aim of the book is to examine the performance of identity that Canadian discourses on illicit drugs accomplish. Moreover, I also understand that your conceptual framework would lead us to understand economic circulation and exchange as a cultural artefact. That said, the consumption of illicit drugs requires their production and exchange. Moreover, these circuits of production and exchange will be related to wider social circuits of production and exchange. This is noted in passing when the marginalisation of Somali immigrants is recognised. But how is this marginalisation related to their positioning within the discourse on illicit drugs? For example, is the drugs discourse not just a matter of the performance of national identity but also class identity? The problem I perceive is that critical theories of international politics have been criticised for failing to account for mechanisms of production and exchange (Laffey 2000). Of course such criticisms falsely figure the economic as extra-discursive and thus objective (de Goede 2003). Indeed, in response to such criticisms critical theorists have noted the way in which ‘economic’ categories are amenable to discursive analysis (de Goede 2006). However, these discursive analyses are few and far between with critical theorists choosing to concentrate on cultural representation as the forum in which identity is performed. In this regard I would have thought that the discourse on illicit drugs provided an ideal opportunity to undertake an analysis of the discursive constitution of economic circuits and subjects. Discourses on drugs are dominated by ideas concerning the economic basis of flows and dependencies. These could, presumably, have been deconstructed in your framework and so I am a little surprised by their absence.

Finally, I am of course in sympathy with your conclusion, but also a little unclear about where it leaves us. Of course, as Foucault said, making facile gestures difficult is the first task of theory. But can’t we take more from this analysis? What would comprise an ethical stance towards those understood as dependent on the substances we refer to as illicit drugs? What would comprise an ethical response to the flow of such substances from, for example, Latin America to North America? In other words, I am not sure I agree with the notion that contesting the common sense is the most we can ask of scholarship. I would have thought that if scholarship is a practical engagement with the world (as you suggest in your concluding reference to Foucault’s understanding of theory and politics as coterminous) then implicit in such
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scholarship is an ethical engagement with the world that has to go further than simply contesting the common sense. And it strikes me that in the face of some of the global challenges of posed by illicit drugs such as those I outlined at the start of this review, we will need to go further lest we allow common sense (no matter how challenged) to maintain its hegemonic position in responses to the challenges that we perceive illicit drugs to pose.

References

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