

BOOK REVIEW

The Drug Effect

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Title: *The Drug Effect: Health, Crime and Society*

Editors: Suzanne Fraser and David Moore

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The ethical commentator, in response to the abject failure of the global war on drugs, the harms it generates and the apparent lunacy of its continuing application, may be forgiven for an appeal to scientism. Indeed, a common refrain among drug war critics is the need for social policy decision-making that sidesteps moralising and ideology, and instead focuses on 'the facts'. In *The Drug Effect: Health, Crime and Society*, Suzanne Fraser and David Moore have collected a range of voices that question the objectivity of the scientific approach, and, more fundamentally, the 'epistemological naiveté' of positivism – that is, the view that it is possible to produce objective, value-free knowledge about the world. Instead, they argue for constructionism, and the view that everything we think we know about 'drugs' is determined by discourse, values, history and politics. This isn't necessarily to say that there is nothing whatsoever material about matter (although the authors are interestingly inconsistent on this) and that a fatal heroin overdose is 'merely a discursive construction', but it is at the very least a warning that the supposed 'facts' may be no less subject to discourse and social norm than are the transparently moral judgements they wish to circumvent.

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The result is a fascinating collection of perspectives, in three parts. The first, corresponding with the 'society' of the subtitle, is *Drug Use as Social and Cultural Practice*. These chapters centre on exchange relations in a heroin marketplace, the significance of drug practices in urban gay identity, the complex representations of illegal drugs in popular culture, and the challenges and benefits of multidisciplinary in drug research. Inasmuch as these diverse texts have a common thread, it is the view of illicit drugs as having multidimensional social meanings, with their practice vitally embedded in those broader social contexts.

So it is that the anthropologist (Robyn Dwyer) finds that her exchange of cigarettes with research participants mirrors in complexity and significance their exchanges of heroin with others. This is not the depersonalised marketplace where *homo economicus* maximises utility through the self-interested exchange of cash and goods, but rather an intricate social practice where factors like ethnicity, trust, respect and the strength and nuance of personal relationships radically impact on behaviour. There is no objective 'fact' or 'rule' about drugs or drug markets to be found here; there is only the unfolding of layers of meaning and subjectivity.

It would be easy, to those unfamiliar with medical anthropology or the theory and literature around

medicalisation, to assume that the second section, on 'health', would, unlike 'society', provide a more concrete perspective on drugs. The focus in the section entitled *Drugs, Health and the Medicalisation of Addiction* is on such biologically tangible subjects as hepatitis C epidemics, the use of pharmaceuticals in enhancing employment performance, drug maintenance programmes and the place of pharmacotherapy within broader social policy and welfare principles. In each of these short chapters, however, each roughly ten pages in length, the reader is brought to fully grasp the subtle irony of the book's title, which seemed so academic when introduced – that whatever the predictable, physical effects of drugs may be (and even these are built on problematic assumptions), the idea of drugs has an at least equally powerful effect on the way that they come to manifest, on a micro no less than on a macro level.

The final section, on 'crime', or *Drugs, Crime and the Law*, is largely rather less thought provoking, although no doubt as important. As is probably inevitable with a legal focus, its case studies, largely British and Australian, tend to be more difficult to generalise to other legal contexts. Still, its chapter on the danger of medicalisation to the cause of cannabis decriminalisation (by Craig Reinerman) is enlightening, and the final chapter, condensed from Desmond Manderson's *Possessed: Drug Policy, Witchcraft and Belief*, should be required reading for anyone with an interest in drug policy. This text draws astonishing parallels between a zero tolerance approach to drugs and the witchcraft frenzy of the sixteenth century, reflecting their common foundation in a shaky faith in, and thus a desperate defence of, a certain system as the all-powerful enforcer of social norms, obedience and simple morality. The permissive world that anti-drug champions and witch hunters fear is, through the drug user and the witch, made concrete and firmly 'other', thus propping up the increasingly rickety but still dominant construct of the normal and good, be it the church or the law.

For all of this, the book has three major drawbacks. The first, and least fundamental, is that, in

drawing only from scholars in the US, the UK, Canada and especially Australia, its range of insight is difficult to extrapolate to the developing world. One of the most interesting case studies, for example, is on the way that the discourse of sleep disorder and its pharmaceutical self-management have been developed to serve the needs of the employer, at the emotional, financial and physical expense of the employee. With the different workplace dynamics in developing countries and their far lower market penetration of sleeping pills, it is unclear how this analysis can be made relevant to the other 85% of the world's people. But the flippant dismissal of 'first world problems', so beloved of hip internet denizens, is, of course, neither fair nor productive. In fact, the social constructionist approach is, although itself obviously subject to social deconstruction, unusually transmittable. The insight that social dynamics shape every possible observation of the world is just as easily applied to any social context or observation. Still, the relative lack of variety in direct subject matter robs the book of a certain richness, and the reader of a real understanding of the flexibility of this analytical lens.

Its second drawback is very nearly the reverse. The brevity of the chapters makes the book engaging and readable, but will likely also leave the non-specialist with the sense that there was a great deal more to be learnt, but that the author could only afford to allude to it. Some of the theoretical language of post-objectivism, constructionism or postmodernism can be tough to untangle without a patient guide. And, as attractive as density of meaning can be, it can also be overwhelming. Although the scholar might get bored, the reader with a less than comprehensive familiarity with Foucault, Freud, Latour, Derrida, Fanon, Saïd etc. may find their lightly dropped names either enticing or alienating. Either way, allowing the authors more space for theoretical exposition, even at the expense of one or two other chapters, might have facilitated the book's usefulness to non-specialists and non-scholars.

The book's final and most fundamental weakness, however, is not so much its own as that of its entire analytical mode. Having had all the

certainty appropriately slipped out from under our feet, we find that not only has the way forward been totally obscured, but that we're also going to have to think seriously about the meaning of direction and what it means to walk. We find ourselves in the place of Latour's mad scientists, 'who have let the virus of critique out of the confines of their laboratories and cannot do anything now to limit its deleterious effects; it mutates now, gnawing everything up, even the vessels in which it is contained'.¹ With everything stripped of its very thingness, the thought of decisive action seems absurd. Admittedly, the editors claim only to have aimed to emphasise the value of a critical approach to drugs, and at this they entirely succeed. But, while such an emphasis can hardly be imagined to lead to worse policy decisions, it is unclear how it will lead to any at all. Given that society continues to experience massive drug-related harm, and that a number of the authors are also involved in drug policy making or activism, one can only hope that they devote the next book to explaining what we can and should actually do about it.

NOTES

1. Bruno Latour in Suzanne Fraser and David Moore, *The Drug Effect: Health, Crime and Society*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 95.