



Drugs and Alcohol Today

Cannabis Nation. Control and Consumption in Britain 1928-2008

Axel Klein

Article information:

To cite this document:

Axel Klein , (2016),"Cannabis Nation. Control and Consumption in Britain 1928-2008", Drugs and Alcohol Today, Vol. 16 Iss 3 pp. 230 - 232

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/DAT-08-2013-0035>

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have emerged with far less clear a picture.

Hari's book describes the important contributions not just of inspired professionals, but also of user-activist groups such as VANDU. However, there is surprisingly no mention of the International Network of People who Use Drugs – now the leading group representing drug users globally, who are demanding representation on drug policy-making bodies, and a change to the dominant medico-legal discourse on drug use. Indeed, Hari should have questioned his own use of such discriminatory language as “addict” and “clean.” Some of Hari's key conclusions could also have been brought up to date by relating them to the new psychoactive substances market.

My main theoretical disagreement is with Hari's conclusion that the primary cause of “addiction” is lack of positive relationships: “the opposite of addiction is not sobriety – it's connection.”

Though this may be true of the most psycho-socially damaged drug users, research consistently shows that the etiology of drug use is complex, incorporating such diverse factors as genetics, personality, social context, hedonism, and self-transcendence.

These criticisms aside, Hari has delivered a very readable book about illicit drug use, presenting persuasive arguments to support a more humanitarian approach. Though social scientists may prefer more purely objective texts, general readers are likely to regard *Chasing the Scream* as one of the better books advocating for a reformed approach to drug use. I especially recommend it to people who would like a more thorough understanding of human intoxication based on an engaging blend of the personal and political, and the subjective and scientific.

Russell Newcombe

Director at 3D Research, Liverpool, UK.

Cannabis Nation. Control and Consumption in Britain 1928-2008

James H. Mills
Oxford University Press

2012

304pp.

Hardback,

£ 35.00

ISBN 978-0-19-928342-2

Review DOI

10.1108/DAT-08-2013-0035

Historians help us understand contemporary issues by explaining the story of origin, tracking the unfolding of events to demonstrate how a situation came about. Mills does not only reach into the past but takes us also to different continents in the process. Contemporary Britain is framed by its colonial experience, the encounter with other civilisations and their cultures of consumption. The empire rebounds as the accelerated flow of goods, people and habits transform motherland and outposts beyond recognition. Interestingly, the biography of the narrator echoes the story of cannabis. In a sense, the book is a continuation of a

previous research project, *Cannabis Britannica, Empire, Trade and Prohibition 1800-1928*, where he tracks the globalisation of cannabis. It was only in the nineteenth century that Indian migrants introduced their favourite intoxicant to the most far flung corners of the empire whence it became the world's most popular illicit drug. Though each book is a self-contained history, the first helps understand the fantastic paradox that forms the key topic of the second – cannabis prohibition in the UK.

The title mentions consumption and control as interrelated themes but the main concern of the narrative is with control. Even the fascinating glimpses we get into the patterns of cannabis use in the 1930-1950s are from the standpoint of control agencies, the records of police, courts and Home Office. This may well be due to the scarcity of alternative sources, but they also drive home one of the

central points of the book: that cannabis control was in place long before anyone in Britain save the odd foreign seafarer ever bothered to light up a joint. The way in which cannabis use evolved from the 1960s onwards bore the indelible stamp of repression, determined not by a rational process of risk assessment, but the ambitions of empire builders in the Home Office and particularly the police, and their zealous interpretation of international treaty agreements.

To be clear, cannabis was added to the list of controlled substance in response to an Egyptian request at the Second Geneva Opium Convention 1925. Britain, with its interests in India, was opposed to the classification, but, no longer the supreme arbiter of the world, acceded to the international agreement. In 1928 the treaty obligations were implemented under the India Hemp Regulation. With the state extending its functions to new areas of governance came the need for administrative processes that were duly performed by the Home Office Drugs Branch, which in the 1920s began priming police and customs officers on the dangers of cannabis. For the next 30 years at least, cannabis control, when measured against the scale of consumption, was generously funded. According to a report by New Scotland Yard there has been a total of 46 offences involving "Indian hemp" in 1946 rising to 56 in 1949 and 152 in 1960. Most of these were seamen and migrants and people associating with them. Two trends became that have characterised the way that cannabis has been (mis) managed had already become apparent, namely the role of a scare mongering press and the confusion of different issues. In the 1950s "racist anxieties were not uncommon and the habit of cannabis use amongst the migrants provided a useful pretext for the authorities to interfere with a groups they considered problematic largely because of the colour of their skins".

By the 1960s middle class white youths were attracted to cannabis, partly because the use of a prohibited intoxicant with provenance from diverse parts of the former empire challenged the existing order. Illicit drug use became cultural and

political protest and cannabis a symbol for the counter culture. Arrests rates jumped to 514 in 1962, and police forces, particularly in London, took a new interest. Officers "in their sharp suits and shades" became familiar characters in the West End and by the 1970s there were the first convictions for corruption. There were further reports of police harassment of young people with unconventional hairstyles, the planting of cannabis on suspects and the continuing attention paid to ethnic minority youth.

Inevitably perhaps, these efforts, boosted by an injection of new resources, failed to stem the tide. By the 1970s cannabis had become a familiar feature of local life in many British cities, just like reggae and ska, biryanis and kebabs. It was becoming clear that the attempt to keep Britain cannabis free had failed, and, moreover, police forces were for the most part not that concerned. While the drug squads were expanding and all forces used the issue to ask for additional resources and powers they "often seem to have been less inclined to take the issue too seriously". Cannabis control was mainly a means to be utilised in extending sectional interests than an end in itself.

In civil society there were from the 1960s onwards calls for the relaxation of cannabis prohibition. Governments launched a succession of inquiries into the matter, which did little to clear the confusion of how to accommodate this imported luxury and intoxicant in a regulated manner. The prevailing note was struck by the psychologist R.D. Laing, member of the Cannabis Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee on Drug Dependence, who said in 1967 that "the British compromise is sometimes the best way, not to get so worked up about it and to let public opinion come round to the point". He suggested further that if "the law was not enforced so energetically, then I think that would improve the situation".

It is interesting to consider that in effect little has changed since then. The process of "less energetic enforcement" has been formalised with cannabis cautions and the use of "compounding"

by HM Customs and Excise, while the discussions over the merits of decriminalisation and legalisation continue. Politicians remain unprepared to risk the wrath of a sensationalist media and the obstruction by law enforcement. Few continue to present a position supporting criminal sanctions for cannabis consumers or even petty suppliers, but the system remains in place. The one significant change since the 1960s, however, is the scale of the phenomenon. Once again it is good to recall the particular features of cannabis control, which was from the outset lodged within the remit of law enforcements. As a result, users never enjoyed the medical status granted to habitual opiate and cocaine users by the Rolleston committee.

It became quickly evident that most of the swiftly growing number of users were untroubled by it. Indeed, it was the rise in heroin and cocaine use during the 1980s that prompted increases in law enforcement resources with predictable consequences, as the “swollen ranks” of drug officers ran into the swollen ranks of cannabis users.

The focus on a particular substance means that the main developments around drugs with the spread of heroin and the responding emergence of harm reduction fall outside it. As the book revolves around the control theme the “normalisation debate”, and the mainstreaming of recreational drug use, are barely touched upon. In an excellent summary of the cannabis reclassification debacle under the Blair/Brown governments, Mills shows how dissenting ministers could moot cannabis decriminalisation to signal distance from government while the Tories would embrace a more tolerant stance in the process of modernising the party. Cannabis has long become a political football. Political discussions are about all sorts of issues but are rarely intended to redress the problematic classification itself. For policy reform advocates this is a frustrating read and especially the insight that the discussion has in essence been running in circles for half a century at least.

Axel Klein

Team Leader at the Cocaine Route Monitoring and Support Project, CHSS, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK.