

From the War on Drugs to Black Lives Matter: exposing the discourse on drugs in the history of US racism

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The war on drugs has played a significant part in the creation of the prison-industrial complex that has condemned the lives of millions of Black Americans. In this article for Black History Month Laura Clark explores the history of the discourse around drugs in the creation and maintenance of racism in the US.

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Introduction – US racism and the war on drugs

As we mark Black History Month, the violence that has shaped the history of Black communities lives on unabated. During the first ten months of 2016 the police in America have killed at least 206 Black people.¹ The outcry surrounding these acts of violent injustice has been swift and extensive, with people rising up all over America in protest against on-going police violence in their communities. Although these deaths only began to receive extensive media coverage following the murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, the attacks on Black bodies and the un-mattering of Black lives goes back to the founding of the United States.

It is this long history of violence and oppression that movements like Black Lives Matter are invoking, as they refuse to let these murders be written off as 'mistakes' or a result of a few racist police officers. It is a systemic issue at the heart of the police force and, by extension, American society in general.

The reasons behind these police killings of Black people are the same as they were in 2006 when one in 14 African-American men were in prison compared with one in over a hundred white men.² The intersection between police violence, mass incarceration and perceptions surrounding drug use, is extremely lethal and volatile for Black people in the US.

Since the 'War on Drugs' in the 1980s, under the Reagan administration, Black and Latino people have been incarcerated at rates completely disproportionate to both their drug use and population size. Under his aggressive program, mandatory minimums were introduced which resulted in a 'one size fits all'

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database#>

² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, 2012), 100.

approach when it came to various degrees of possession and dealing charges.³ During this time, the legal distinction between powdered cocaine and crack cocaine was also introduced, whereby sentences for crack cocaine possession were a hundred times harsher than that for powdered cocaine, associated with wealthy white users.⁴

These laws have had an immensely destructive effect on some of the most impoverished neighbourhoods in the US, with America's prison population increasing nine hundred percent from 1971 to the present day.⁵ White, affluent areas, like college campuses, with an equal if not greater drug consumption rate than inner city areas, are rarely the site of aggressive anti-drug policy. In contrast, poorer areas with communities of colour have suffered an historic lack of investment and infrastructure that has been exacerbated under Neoliberalism. People living in these areas have been forced into the informal economy of the drug trade, are the site of constant police encroachment and violence.

To understand the role that the dominant discourse on drugs has played in the recent past, we need to go back to earlier stages of US history, when cocaine, marijuana and opium were invoked as racialized threats to social order in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The discourse on drugs and the history of racism

In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012) Michelle Alexander explores the origins of the Prison Industrial Complex, in the continuation of a system of racial order and oppression that goes back to slavery and segregation. The fact that more Black men are in the correctional justice system today than were enslaved in 1850, supports Alexander's charge that the targets of mass incarceration are not simply coincidental.⁶ Furthermore it points to the continued disenfranchisement of Black men, who once incarcerated, are in some states no longer able to vote and can lose other constitutional rights. According to Alexander the drug aspect to this oppression is merely the latest incarnation of systematic racism, a convenient way of imprisoning non-white men and women deemed dispensable by the state.⁷

The rhetoric surrounding drug use, however, has long been used to demonise and ostracise minority groups who for some reason or another, represented a threat to the status quo. If we were to measure the severity and scope of drug related discrimination against minority groups throughout history in terms of

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000004642370/jay-z-the-war-on-drugs-is-an-epic-fail.html?action=click>ype=vhs&version=vhs-heading&module=vhs®ion=title-area>

⁴ <https://www.aclu.org/feature/fair-sentencing-act>

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000004642370/jay-z-the-war-on-drugs-is-an-epic-fail.html?action=click>ype=vhs&version=vhs-heading&module=vhs®ion=title-area>

⁶ Alexander, *New Jim Crow*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

the numbers incarcerated, then the effects would indeed seem negligible. Yet if we think in terms of representations in popular culture and the knock on effects these have had in generating widespread racism and stereotypes, the effects become much more pronounced. For instance, just as the image of the lazy, unemployed and violent Black male drug user is widely disseminated in mainstream American culture today, cementing the link in people's minds between criminality and blackness, and arguably resulting in the hundreds of illegal killings of unarmed Black men and women, the same process of demonization can be found throughout American history.⁸

The uniquely violent history of the oppression of Black people in the US runs parallel to another history of state and civil repression of minority groups configured as 'other' and 'alien'. Notably this can be seen through representations in popular culture and has been enacted through aggressive anti-drug policies. African-Americans have found themselves in a double bind in terms of these overlapping and intersecting histories, and this is part of the reason why the figure of the Black male drug user is so insidious and lethal today. As we shall see, this is based on representations that have been reinvented and re-appropriated various times over the last century.

The historical conflation of violence, blackness and drug use has its roots in the Jim Crow south of the 1920s and was further entrenched by the 'crack epidemic' during the 1970s which saw the vilification of minorities in poor neighbourhoods. The shooting of Terrence Crutcher in September of this year, highlighted some of the ways that law enforcement criminalises and pathologises Black men. The officer who claimed 'that looks like a bad dude too, probably on something' was clearly invoking racist assumptions about drug use and criminality amongst Black men.⁹ The assumption that Crutcher was a 'bad dude' and was 'on something' stems from this history of criminalisation and vilification. These portrayals in the media, film, newspapers etc. are hard to deconstruct because they contribute to a pervasive understanding about who and what is 'other'. These are clearly still active today when we look at how Black people are treated with suspicion and lethal force by police when doing everyday things like sitting in their girlfriend's car.¹⁰

By the turn of the twentieth century, the South had perfected its social order of racial oppression, known as Jim Crow, which imposed segregation, housing and occupational restrictions on African-Americans, as well as legitimising

⁸ Kelly Welch, 'Black Criminal Stereotypes and Racial Profiling', *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 23 (2007).

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/21/terence-crutcher-wasnt-bad-dude-just-black-man-in-america>

¹⁰ <http://www.motherjones.com/media/2016/07/these-celebrities-powerfully-described-23-ways-you-could-be-killed-while-black>

widespread violence against them. The system was based on the idea that Black people were inferior and had to be separated from the white community, as a means of protection and in order to prevent any miscegenation. However, as the first few decades went by, a sea of change began to sweep over America, especially during and after the First World War. It was a time of intense social upheaval in which the Women's Movement threatened Southern ideals of patriarchy while African-Americans were demanding their right to the principle of democracy - in whose name the war had been notionally fought.¹¹ This fear of 'uppity blacks', defying imposed social boundaries and threatening the economic and social foundation of Southern society, led to an increase in violence against Black people, as a means of re-asserting racial superiority, as can be seen in the Red Summer of 1919, whereby 83 men were lynched, many of them returning servicemen.¹²

Racial tensions in the South also saw the demonization of African-American cocaine use through tropes of fear of rampant Black sexuality, criminality and insanity, as well as a paternalistic call for the problem to be addressed in order to 'save' the Black race. All these themes had a long history in Southern race relations and represented long espoused stereotypes about the Black male body, as well as his threat to white society.

Cocaine and the oppression of Black America

In the context of this backlash, cocaine represented an even greater threat to the social order because of its alleged strength enhancing and sexual perverting tendencies. The perceived mental inferiority of African-Americans meant any mind altering substance would have an extremely damaging and violent effect on them, unleashing their supposed inner beast.¹³ Although initially very popular among the medical community and middle class users, the diversification of the addict pool resulted in the demonization of cocaine users and supported the claim that drugs are only effectively fought against when the primary user is perceived to be from a minority group.¹⁴

After becoming popular with African-American dockworkers in New Orleans, cocaine use spread all over the South and was even actively encouraged by some employers, who extolled its ability to allow for longer working hours and facilitation of harder work.¹⁵ Following on from this, it spread to the inner-city, wherein its easy availability to African-Americans via Coca-Cola public fountains

¹¹ J. William Harris, *The New South: New Histories (Rewriting Histories)*, (2008), 94.

¹² Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought To Be: The Black Freedom Struggle From Emancipation to Obama*, (Harvard, 2010), 157.

¹³ Michael M. Cohen, 'Jim Crow's Drug War: Race, Coca Cola and the Southern Origins of Drug Prohibition', *Southern Cultures*, 12 (2006), 71.

¹⁴ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 207.

¹⁵ Cohen, 'Jim Crow's Drug War', 70.

became one of the main rallying causes in affecting cocaine's removal from the drink's recipe.¹⁶

The notion that cocaine increased physical prowess was enhanced by the claim that it increased immunity to shock, thus starting the rumour that African-American men high on cocaine were impossible to kill. The most famous of these was the story of Chief of Police D.K. Lyerty of Asheville, North Carolina, who shot a 'cocaine crazed negro' three times with a standard issue 32 calibre weapon before he died.¹⁷ Consequently, the hysteria surrounding this and other similar incidents, led to the adoption of a 38 calibre weapon across the Southern police force, as a means of dealing with this new threat.¹⁸

The idea that cocaine rendered users indestructible was extremely dangerous in a society that was based on the routine and ritualistic enforcement of physical violence on Black men and women as a means of maintaining the social order. Moreover, cocaine was also said to improve marksmanship, a claim that was encapsulated in the rumour that an African-American cocaine user killed five people at long distance range in Asheville, with only one bullet each.¹⁹

In a *New York Times* article, entitled 'Cocaine User Shoots 7', the shooter is described as 'fighting until he fell literally riddled with bullets'. The article went on to highlight his marksmanship after killing seven people, his strength as he fought until the end, and his immunity to pain as he died after being shot multiple times.²⁰

This mythical fear of Black male strength, virility and power, echoes the description that was given by Officer Darren Wilson, who fatally shot Michael Brown in 2014. The Officer described the victim as a 'demon' and 'Hulk Hogan' despite being the same height as the 18 year old (although of a lesser build).²¹

Cocaine use was also used to rationalise aberrant behaviour, as can be seen in the way that incidents of racially motivated violence, or race riots, were documented in newspapers. Most of the attacks featured in newspapers recorded African-American violence perpetrated against white people. Arguably, this suggests that these outbursts were the result of the tension of living under such an oppressive system of control that served to emasculate and debilitate African-Americans at every opportunity. Essentially, drugs provided an explanation for why violence

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁷ 'Negro Cocaine 'Fiends' Are A New Southern Menace', *The New York Times*, 8 Feb. 1914.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ 'Cocaine User Shoots 7', *The New York Times*, 6 Dec 1902. See also 'A Murderous Negro.' *Alexandria Gazette*, (D.C.), 20 April 1909.

²¹ <http://time.com/3605346/darren-wilson-michael-brown-demon/>

had increased, and provided a framework within which legitimate acts of resistance in terms of 'race riots' were reduced to drug induced mania.²²

The discourse surrounding cocaine provided rationalisation for the motivations of Black men, deemed to be mentally and physically inferior, who had sought to challenge the racial order through violence, and why they were sometimes successful in doing so.²³ It negated legitimate causes of violence owing to institutionalised racism, by reducing it to a cocaine frenzy, as can be seen in the claim of Mayor Woodward of Atlanta that 'crimes that provoke race riots are caused by cocaine and liquor.'²⁴

Cocaine provided a means of explaining away disturbances in the South, as well as legitimising white supremacy and brutality against African-Americans, which was justified by pseudo-scientifically backed up idea of an unstoppable monster.²⁵ This can be seen in 1914 in the case of two African-American men who had instigated a 'race riot' after having shot ten people, and which served as the pretext for pushing through narcotics legislation.²⁶ When the term 'race riot' was used it was linked with cocaine so as to suggest that the attack was drug addled, rather than indicative of widespread dissatisfaction or unrest among African-Americans.²⁷

Parallels could be drawn today in terms of the way in which genuine disaffection with racism and violence against Black people, resulting in large scale protests, die-ins etc., are portrayed as nothing more than riots. For instance, much of the coverage surrounding Black Lives Matter protests, especially by the right wing media will claim that many of the attendees are violent opportunists. What this narrative fails to show is that these outbursts of pain and anger, which can manifest as violence, involve the whole community and are inherently political and historical.

Anti-Opium Legislation and the control of Chinese labour

The intersection between drug policy and racism and the history that it stems from is not exclusive to the experience of African-Americans. The US has a long and violent history of 'othering' through racist drug policies. Many of the same tropes pertaining to fear of the 'other' in terms of virility, violence and a threat to society have their roots in the vilification of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco in the 1880s. In the same way that Southern white fears about maintaining a racialised form of law and order manifested itself in an anti-cocaine frenzy, for

²² Cohen, 'Jim Crow's Drug War', 73.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ 'Cocaine and Vile Liquor.' *Rock Island Argus*, (Ill.), 27 Sep 1906, 4.

²⁵ Cohen, 'Jim Crow's Drug War', 73.

²⁶ Joseph Spillane, *Cocaine: From Medical Marvel to Modern Menace in the US, 1884-1920*, (2002), 121.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

San Franciscan whites, the importance of disciplining and controlling an immigrant work force was at the forefront of the criminalisation of a culture and people through anti-opium legislation.

From the 1850s onwards, thousands of Chinese immigrants arrived in America, largely in California, ready to work in the gold mines, on railway construction and on the building of vital infrastructure needed to create new towns and cities.²⁸ Although welcomed with open arms by business interests who sought a reserve of cheap labour, local workers, who attributed their reduced bargaining power, lower wages and poorer working conditions to the arrival of the Chinese, began to project and organise anti-Chinese hostility.²⁹ This led to a range of grass roots Sino-phobia movements like the boycotting of Chinese made goods³⁰, as well as state-sponsored policies designed to regulate behaviour, including a myriad of housing and employment restrictions, all of which served to denigrate and exclude the Chinese.³¹

Essentially, the Chinese community fell victim to tensions which questioned their right to live and work in America, and faced local politicians' manipulation of racial politics designed to cut through class divisions and maximise votes.³² Once the Pacific Coast vote became crucial to the outcome of national elections, Congress stepped in. Despite objections from local business interests, the government introduced the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 as a permanent solution to the Chinese problem.³³

It was amidst this atmosphere of racial tension in terms of anti-immigration sentiment and labour market failure that the opium issue became part of an ideological response, designed to provide a legal basis and moral justification for arbitrary police raids, searches and eventually deportation.³⁴

Beyond fears of heightened sexual promiscuity and interracial mixing, some doctors claimed that opium use made men impotent. Although posing a different kind of threat to the one we saw with cocaine, the claims operated as a threat to the security of a nation built on the industriousness of its workforce and a continuous birth rate.³⁵ Opium therefore perturbed gendered relationships in that men lost their sex drive and ambition and women were denied their role as transmitters of social values and morals to the next generation.³⁶

²⁸ Rose Hum Lee, *The Chinese in the United States of America* (Hong Kong, 1960), 256.

²⁹ John Helmer, *Drugs and Minority Oppression* (1975), 20.

³⁰ Doris Marie Provine, *Unequal under the law: Race in the War on Drugs* (Chicago, 2007), 69.

³¹ Diana L. Ahmad, *The Opium Debate and Chinese Exclusion Laws in the Nineteenth Century American West* (Nevada, 2007) 51-4.

³² Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: the Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* (New York, 2007), 144.

³³ Provine, *Unequal under the law*, 70.

³⁴ Helmer, *Drugs and Minority Oppression*, 32.

³⁵ Ahmad, 'Opium Smoking', 60.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Normative familial relations were overturned further by the fact that the opium den was the antithesis of a domesticity that was central to American notions of the nuclear family and the male breadwinner.³⁷ It represented a breakdown of class, gender and racial boundaries, whereby things like reputation and status were rendered futile, further threatening social harmony. The fact that the most Chinese men were without a family, due to restrictive immigration policy and occupational necessity, transgressed social norms and meant that Chinatown and the opium den especially became seen as a place of perverse sexuality, which 'orientalised' the consumer.³⁸ Furthermore the feminisation of the drug, supported by the fact the Chinese male was the object of suspicion in terms of his feminine dress, hair style and the fact that he worked in traditionally female industries, represented a threat to American notions of masculinity based on virility and ambition.

Compared with alcohol, which reinforced American male self-perceptions of bravado, confidence and talkativeness, opium was seen as engendering feminine characteristics like reflection, silence and introspection.³⁹ The emasculation of Chinese men therefore was intimately linked to the depiction of the drug itself as effeminate in a way that posed a threat to the aggressive, industrious and productive masculinity of the American male.

At the same time, however, Chinese men were seen as sexual threats to the purity of white women, in a way directly contravening their apparent lifelessness and impotence, exposing the inherent contradictions in such racialised discourse. Arguably, however, the emasculation of the Chinese male served to alleviate American male fears about their own feelings of insecurity and debilitation in the face of an affront on their role as breadwinners amidst intense Chinese competition for labour.

Anti-Marijuana legislation and Mexican immigrant labour

The Chinese case holds great similarity on many fronts with the anti-Marijuana campaigns targeting Mexican agricultural and factory workers from the 1930s to the 1950s. Mexican immigrants arrived at the start of the twentieth century in search for work, settling largely in the South West, in the agricultural fields of California and the factories of Los Angeles. The Mexican born population therefore saw a dramatic increase at the start of the century, whereby it more

³⁷ Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 77.

³⁸ Curtis Marez, *Drug Wars: The Political Economy of Narcotics* (2004), 87 and 72.

³⁹ Ahmad, 'Opium Smoking', 55.

than doubled from around 40,000 in 1870 to 100,000 in 1900, as part of a recurring trend of immigrant workers being used to alleviate labour shortages.⁴⁰

Despite being granted full US citizenship in the aftermath of the US-Mexican War, Mexicans were still treated as second class citizens and faced economic exploitation as well as fervent racism.⁴¹ In ways similar to the Chinese example, they were associated with the 'backward' nation they came from, and their customs, culture and way of life were seen as a threat to American values, as well as their perceived role in the stagnation of wages and the increase in unemployment.⁴²

The habit of smoking marijuana, which was common within Mexican communities since their arrival, only began to receive widespread public and media attention during the 1930s with onset of the Depression.⁴³ Unemployment peaked at 12.5 million in 1931, bringing with it a whole range of social and political upheavals in which the Mexican presence served as a contributing factor.⁴⁴ That same year, the largest number of 'aliens' were deported in American history, a large proportion of them Mexican, demonstrating the link between competition over labour and exclusionary policies.⁴⁵

The discourse around marijuana formed part of this shift against the Mexican population. It was used to denounce them as immoral, violent and sexually aggressive, all of which served to rationalise state brutality and hostility when deporting, often illegally, Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American citizens. Arguably, because of their citizenship, even greater efforts were undertaken in order to dehumanise them and make them seem 'un-American'. The anti-marijuana campaign was therefore part of a larger exclusionary movement that gained traction once the worth of Mexican immigrants as a pool of surplus labour was exhausted, with xenophobic and nativist movements calling for what little jobs were left to be given to 'American' citizens, meaning in this case, 'whites'.

The discourse around marijuana legitimised and justified the exclusion of Mexicans, while it criminalised and demonised them. It also allowed for the pacification and subordination of Mexican workers, by scaring them into submission.⁴⁶ Anti-communist and anti-marijuana rhetoric worked hand in hand to imprison and discipline 'unruly workers', so as to create a malleable and docile

⁴⁰ Silvia Pedraza and Ruben Rumbaut, *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race and Ethnicity in America*, (Belmont, 1996), 89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴² H. Wayne Morgan, *Drugs in America*, 139.

⁴³ John Helmer and Thomas Vietorisz, 'Drug Use, the Labour Market and Class Conflict', *Special Studies 2* (1974), 27.

⁴⁴ Camille Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation and California Farm Labour 1900-39*, (1996), 78.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Marez, *Drug Wars*, 151.

workforce capable of furthering the development agriculture and the tourist industry of the South West.

As in the other cases of the racialised representations of drug use, there was a fear that smoking marijuana would engender a transgression of social and racial hierarchies. According to a *Butte Montana Standard* article from 1927, when a 'beet field peon' uses marijuana, 'he thinks he has just been elected the President of Mexico, so he starts to execute all his political enemies.'⁴⁷ In ridiculing Mexicans' visions of themselves as the President of Mexico, and not the President of America, despite many of them being American citizens, the article represents a rejection of difference and 'non-whiteness', prevalent during this time, that denied Mexicans any claim to American culture and society. It also further associates Mexicans with violence stemming from political unrest in their country of origin and offers a stark contrast between their actual position as an exploited labour force and the false sense of entitlement and power that they could experience.

Mexicans and Mexican-Americans had always been seen as temporary residents. This enabled the US government to conduct a widespread policy of deportation as a solution to the labour problem. The unlawful expulsion and use of police brutality against these people was justified and upheld by marijuana related stereotypes about their criminality and depravity along with the damaging effects they were having on America's youth.

The main way in which the discourse on marijuana helped to demonise Mexicans lay in associations with violence and insanity, much as the discourse on cocaine had done in the South. Essentially, violent crimes committed by Mexicans were attributed to insanity caused by marijuana smoking, dubbed the 'loco' or 'killer weed.'⁴⁸ This benefited both the Federal Bureau of Narcotics who sought to galvanise popular opinion against marijuana as a means of pushing through national legislation, and various civil, business and governmental interests who sought to expel or subdue Mexican workers. Furthermore, it was a commonly held notion that the majority of violent crimes being committed were caused by marijuana and, by extension, Mexicans.

The link between Mexicans and criminality was therefore further reinforced, and could be seen as an extension of their association with illegality and 'other-ness' due to their perceived illegal entry from a foreign land.⁴⁹ The correlation of marijuana and Mexico was heightened by the fact that during the hearings for the 1937 Marijuana Tax Act, the Spanish term 'marihuana' rather than the Latin term

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁸ 'Police Slay Crazy Man', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 Feb. 1936.

⁴⁹ Leo G. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens and the Nation*, (Stanford, 2008), 25.

'cannabis' was used repeatedly, thus subtly reinforcing the foreign nature of the drug and linking it back to Mexican workers in need of discipline.⁵⁰

It is interesting to note that whilst the medical community was usually charged with using their position of respectability to give credence to racist stereotypes about minority drug use, in this case it was law enforcement that took the centre stage. This is reflective of a shift in attitudes towards drug use in general, beginning with the passage of the 1914 Harrison Act, which precipitated the criminalisation of drug addicts, as opposed to them being seen as in need of medical attention.⁵¹

This is why the sources for this era are largely newspaper articles, criminal journals and statements from the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, headed by Harry J. Anslinger, who took a personal interest in the case of marijuana. After funding was cut Anslinger turned to a cheaper and more direct way of drumming up support for national legislation by relying on scaremongering, propaganda and the dramatization of crimes supposedly committed by marijuana addicts. He went about collecting a 'gore file', which was a collection of heinous acts to prove the danger of marijuana and Mexicans.⁵²

One such of these 'files' was reported on in an *LA Times* article from 1936, whereby a 'marihuana-crazed Mexican' is described as smashing windows and attacking police officers, until, echoing the discourse about African-American superhuman strength, he was shot nine times 'until the last shot dropped him' and he 'struggled to attack the officers.'⁵³ This pervading sense of Mexican criminality was further encouraged by law enforcement agencies who made spurious claims like the fact that '80% of the murders committed by Mexicans are done whilst the killers are drugged by marijuana.'⁵⁴

The intersectionality of race and drugs

The intersectionality of race and drugs, as expressed in the present day prison-industrial-complex in the US, is not an anomaly, but something that has its roots in the historical depictions of racial minorities through the discourse of drugs and the persecution of African-Americans since slavery. Perceived drug use was used as a subtext through which charges of un-American-ness were expressed, allowing for restrictive legislation and police brutality, as seen in the South.

At times of economic or social upheaval, perceptions of who was part of normative society and who was outside it and thus a threat to it, hardened,

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵¹ Inciardi, *The War on Drugs*, 14.

⁵² Musto, *Drugs in American History*, 433.

⁵³ 'Police Slay Crazed Man', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 Feb. 1936.

⁵⁴ 'Youth Gone Loco', *The Christian Century*, 29 June 1938.

resulting in increased nativism and racism, as seen with Chinese and Mexican immigrants. Discourse surrounding drugs acted as one aspect of a number of central tropes, all dealing with the perceived 'other-ness' of non-whites, relating to their moral, sexual and physical character.

The assertion of difference essentially allowed for a consolidation and restructuring of what it meant to be an American, at times when these values were being challenged by subversive economic, social and political forces. Furthermore, whilst there has been a clear economic motivation behind controlling various immigrant workforces it is important for Marxists to distance their arguments from the kind of economic readings of drug policy that were especially prevalent in the 1970s.

These writers had a tendency one-sidedly to emphasise the economics relating to the oppression of minority groups and not to recognise the importance of the racialisation of drug use that further entrenched already racist depictions of 'others' born from an oppressive and white supremacist history. The subtle intersection between economic motivations and the constant tension within American society relating to its immigrant population, as well racialised 'others' within and pre-dating the nation, versus its extremely racist white supremacist tendencies, came together to create a racialised response to the issue of drug use.

Comparisons with Britain

Focusing on the discourse surrounding drugs, and the way in which historically, drug policies have been used as a cover for various vested economic and political interests, is important in the UK as it has been in the US. On both sides of the Atlantic Black and minority ethnic young people are being racially profiled and imprisoned for drug offences committed at a much higher rate by their white counterparts.

In the UK anti-drugs legislation is a major driving force behind pushes for greater stop and search powers and aggressive policing practices, all of which disproportionately have impacted on people of colour. For instance, Black Britons are eight times as likely to be arrested and ten times more likely to be sent to prison than their white counterparts when it comes to drug offences.⁵⁵ Similar to the US, police in the UK target areas of relative socio-economic deprivation to ensure they meet their targets in terms of cracking down on drug use and drug dealing.

The 2014 Young Review, which looked into improving the treatment of young Black and Muslim men in the criminal justice system, noted that Britain

⁵⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/joepublic/2008/oct/08/drugsandalcohol.equality>

imprisons Black people even more disproportionately than the US.⁵⁶ Nearly half of all people convicted for Class A drug supply in London are black, according to previously unpublished data seen by VICE, despite this group representing only ten percent of the population.⁵⁷ This is a city with a huge wealth disparity and a well-documented media, financial and political elite who enjoy a 'luxury' lifestyle that includes extensive cocaine use. With claims even circulating that cocaine use amongst bankers in the City may have contributed to the global financial crash, in the sense that reckless drug use created an atmosphere of irresponsibility and encouraged risk taking, the disparity between drug sentencing is extreme.⁵⁸

A radical and ethical response to police violence against communities of colour in the UK has to deal with the institutional racism at the heart of the police and society in general. This includes recognising Britain's racist colonial history as well as resistance to it, combatting racism within the media, tackling inequality and radically restructuring our societies to challenge various forms of oppression which affect people of colour, i.e. sexism.

Some general remarks on decriminalisation

Alongside this structural change, the cause for supporting the decriminalisation of drugs, and especially marijuana, lies in the fact that this is a humane response to the ineffectiveness and discriminatory impacts of prohibition.

Decriminalization would mean that criminal penalties for possession or dealing drugs would be removed, and a system would be in place whereby the issue of drugs would be dealt with as a health problem not a criminal one. The legalization model, as seen in the US however has seen the co-option of illicit trades into the mainstream economy and their subsequent 'opening up' to market interests and venture capitalists.⁵⁹ The proliferation of business interests in America taking advantage of a booming marijuana trade is indicative of a dangerous move towards regulation through privatisation, which marginalises communities reliant on income from selling marijuana on the streets and doesn't make any provisions to offer alternative employment.⁶⁰ An alternative model would focus on the reinvestment of funds into social projects, similar to the way

⁵⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/drugs-uk-johann-hari-interview_uk_5710a266e4b0636a3f6c75ab

⁵⁷ http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/foi-uk-drug-conviction-ethnicity-282?utm_content=buffer857fa&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

⁵⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/shortcuts/2013/apr/15/cocaine-bankers-global-financial-crisis>

⁵⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000004642370/jay-z-the-war-on-drugs-is-an-epic-fail.html?action=click>ype=vhs&version=vhs-heading&module=vhs®ion=title-area>

⁶⁰ http://www.salon.com/2015/04/29/the_racist_end_to_the_war_on_drugs_white_america%E2%80%99s_just_trying_to_figure_out_how_to_take_our_money/

Aurora, Colorado are pledging to redirect \$1.5 million made from marijuana tax to helping homeless people in the area.⁶¹

Due to the damaging effect the War on Drugs has had on vulnerable people, and communities of colour especially, any move towards regulation or decriminalization must have within its structures to compensate and include these communities so they too can reap the benefits. Such are the minimum demands a revolutionary can make of a reformist government, whilst recognising that a decriminalisation strategy would run up against the logic of the market, that are bread and butter of wider debates about the economics of socialism and capitalism.

Concluding remarks

For revolutionaries, the history of racism in the US and the UK cannot be divorced from the way in which immigrant labour has been integrated into the system. The role played by the discourse on drugs, and its concomitant prohibition, has linked together the control of labour-power along with its racialisation and subordination. It is against this systematic violence that the call for justice lives on in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Appendix – A brief note on gender

The research that went into this piece focused on the construction of a particular notion of male 'otherness'. Throughout my case studies, the male drug using 'other' was seen as a threat to society and white womanhood specifically, which is to be protected and kept 'pure'. This way of defining of womanhood and the emphasis on it remaining white, helped to maintain racist and patriarchal values. In contrast, the non-white female 'other', has been rendered invisible, especially in the kinds of historical sources being explored. She is either not allowed to be there (in the Chinese case through immigration laws), is present but rendered invisible (attempted erasure of Black women), or only visible when sexualised (exoticisation of Mexicanas). Although beyond the scope of this piece, women of colour have their own experiences when it comes to the war on drugs and the legacy of misrepresentations of otherness and illegality. As outlined by bell hooks, Black women have often been caught in the intersection between racism and sexism and, as such, are largely written out of the histories pertaining to both feminist and Black liberation movements. This is why women-led movements like Black Lives Matter are so important in terms of shifting attention towards Black women and their contribution to the overlapping struggle against racism and sexism.

⁶¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/colorado-city-to-use-15-million-from-pot-tax-to-help-homeless_us_57337d8ce4b0365741117859