

Deconstructing the War on Drugs

In this literature review, I would like to apply a selection of our class readings to exploring prevailing themes of the war on drugs. Our readings have mainly focused on traditional warfare and violence. They have used psychological, economic, and public discursive analyses to account for the origins and persistence of political aggression. I would like to apply these themes to the methods of control and “warfare” that constitute the zero-tolerance drug enforcement policy spearheaded by the US Federal government. The war on drugs takes many prisoners. In this war, the injuries are related to the months or years of incarceration of those sent to prison for offences related to possessing or transferring drugs that the US Congress categorized as Schedule I and Schedule II. Injuries are also related to the stress individual’s feel when they live-out the penalties the criminal “justice” system gives them or when they experience the stress related to awareness of potential threats of the criminal justice system. Other indirect harms caused by the drug war are a lack of treatment for those with diseases of addiction, health harms caused by inaccessibility of illegal substances used for health promotion, and ongoing violence connected with the unregulated, black market dealing of illegal scheduled substances.

The war on drugs is fought through creating an atmosphere of fear. This is accomplished through a variety of propaganda campaigns that exaggerate, distort, and lie about the effects of “drugs” on behavior. Additionally, fear of getting caught by law enforcement officials is furthered with the harsh penalties meted out by the criminal

justice system. There is a strong moral element to the policing related to drugs. Drug users are demonized, and drug dealers are demonized to an even greater degree. With this drug war, it is vitally important to note the incredible double standards that are in place with some drugs over others. Alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine are well accepted and even symbols of status and power in society, despite the well-known and widespread physical harms of alcohol and nicotine. It is with this backdrop of massive incarceration and health harms, widespread fear, and blatant hypocrisy that I would like to begin my analysis of the origins, motivations, and shockingly ordinary place of the ‘war on drugs’ with respect to our lives. To examine this further, I will review the pieces by Gray and Bauman.

Chris Gray, 1997. “Introduction: From Sarajevo to Sarajevo, The USS *Oklahoma* to Oklahoma City,” and “Chapter One: Real Cyberwar,” in *Postmodern War: The New Politics of Conflict*. New York: Guilford, 1-35.

In this piece, Gray gives his description of the postmodern war. The symbolic figure to represent this new style of militarization is the cyborg— a cybernetic human soldier whose fighting prowess has been augmented by technology. With this image, Gray singularly defines postmodern warfare by its all-important reliance on information and information technology (IT). “As a weapon, as a myth, as a metaphor, as a force multiplier, as an edge, as a trope, as a factor, as an asset, information (and its handmaidens—computers to process it, multimedia to spread it, systems to represent it) has become the central sign of postmodernity” (22). Sophisticated technologies have dramatically changed the landscape of warfare, both for massive state militaries and for indigenous resistance movements. Zapatista rebels in Mexico effectively utilize the internet to build international solidarity for their cause. The contemporary experience of

war, which Gray characterizes as diffuse and multi-fronted (including virtual fronts), is inextricably bound with the advanced technologies used to wage war. Gray also brings in the importance of “High-Tech, Low-Intensity Deadly Conflict” as an integral part of postmodern warfare. Ongoing Third-World covert operations, anti-terrorism, and war on drugs operations fall under this category. In these conflicts, in addition to role that advanced weapons, communications, and surveillance technologies play in maintaining low-intensity conflict, PSYOPS (psychological operations) are recognized as crucial determinants of victory.

Gray’s recognition of the increasing militarization of the war on drugs as part of ongoing, low-intensity deadly conflict is key to understanding the postmodern features and persistence of the war on drugs. Gray’s assertion that the escalation of military involvement in the war on drugs was “almost certainly a reflection of Pentagon fears of a peace dividend” points to the view that the military-industrial complex is constantly on the lookout for a new enemy, especially when a major one falls away (30). What I infer from this is that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 along with the impending collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 meant that the Cold War was coming to an end. Without the enemy of Communism to fight, the Pentagon feared that the defense budget would certainly be cut. To stave off this cut, another ruthless enemy had to be sought out and destroyed. Drugs were the perfect target. Although President Nixon had first declared the war on drugs in 1971, the true militarization of the conflict did not begin until the summer of 1990. This is when then Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney directly approved the deployment of two hundred soldiers of the 7th Infantry Light Division to search the public lands of Northern California for marijuana plants. Known as Operation

Greensweep, the operation reportedly seized 1,100 marijuana plants and more than 8 tons of cultivation gear. Several citizen groups filed a lawsuit shortly after the raid claiming the authorities conducted warrantless searches, used excessive force, damaged the environment and illegally detained suspects¹. Later that summer, National Guard in all 50 states were active in the drug war. Soldiers in fatigue searched patrons at a Grateful Dead concert for drugs. The blunt power of the US military was finally being used *against US citizens* in the war on drugs. In addition to giving us this timeline, Gray shows how the militarization of the war on drugs came from the need to find a new enemy at the dawn of the post-Cold War era. He also argues that the intact military institutional infrastructure and advanced surveillance technologies that have been invested in (to the tune of billions of dollars) generate inertia for the “continued expansion of the drug wars” (31).

Zygmunt Bauman, “The Uniqueness and Normality of the Holocaust” In Catherine Besteman, ed. *Violence: A Reader*. New York: NYU Press, 67-96.

In Bauman’s work, we see how the Holocaust would not have been possible without the technically efficient and amoral modern bureaucratic state. Inspired by a grand vision for creating a well-groomed garden, the political authorities are able to call the bureaucracy into action to help “weed out” the Jews from the garden of Aryan purity. Bauman uses the metaphor of “a garden culture” to describe modern life. Weeding is a chore that is taken on by people who treat society as a garden. This metaphor is easily applicable to any kind of systematic eradication of a group of people in society: “If garden design defines its weeds, there are weeds wherever there is a garden. And weeds are to be exterminated” (74). This weeding process is not understood as destructive, but

¹ <http://cannabislink.ca/usa/>

rather as a creative task that the modern bureaucratic structure is well-tailored to undertake. But the gruesomeness of the task does not detract. Bauman describes how the bureaucratic infrastructure sufficiently distances each individual bureaucratic worker from the first-hand experience of the final calculated act of mass human killing. One's day-to-day experience in the modern bureaucracy is far from this reality, and this allows the bureaucracy to accomplish its mission without moral outcry by the workers. Bauman also identifies the "tendency of all bureaucracies to lose sight of the original goal and to concentrate on the means instead" which, for the German bureaucracy, meant that it could focus perfecting the technical means of killing rather than focusing on moral or ethical questions about whether or not creating a better country meant that genocide was necessary. Modern safeguards such as the scientific and religious establishments were silent at the national level and ultimately did not call for an end to the policy of the Final Solution. The scientific community, Bauman argues, was swayed by the "helpful hand" of the government in terms of providing growing funds for research. This external factor, when combined with a tradition of scientific amorality and value-freedom, led to a self-silencing on the part of the scientific community about speaking publicly about the moral or ethical implications of state policies. Thus, we see that modern society's disintegration did not lead to the Holocaust; rather, key modern institutions made the Holocaust possible and actively worked to orchestrate it.

The modern drug war is predicated on an idealized vision of a garden free of the weed of schedule I and II drug use. The perfect vision is represented in the phrase "a drug-free America." This phrase was incorporated into federal law in 1988 when US Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act which stated: "It is the declared policy of the

United States Government to create a drug-free America by 1995.”² The official policy is that anyone who uses a controlled substance is an abuser; responsible use is oxymoronic. The weeds that must be removed from the garden-society are those persons (seen as a criminal menace) who are directly connected with allowing schedule I and II drug use to continue. The state-military-prison-industrial bureaucracy executes this plan with exceeding efficiency. Although there have been a handful of individuals who have been given the death penalty for drug charges, there is no such final solution of genocide as there was in Germany. However, this does not mean that high-ranking officials in the bureaucratic structure that executes drug war policy do not think that some kind of final solution is inappropriate. Former Los Angeles police chief Darryl Gates once said that casual drug users “ought to be taken out and shot” for committing “treason” in the war on drugs³. Imprisonment, by far, is the most common extreme punishment given. In 2002, over 1.5 million people were arrested for drug-related offenses, with approximately 700,000 arrested for marijuana-related charges. Over 10,000/year are incarcerated for drug-related charges (since 1995). The bureaucracy acts without question. In the documentary *Grass* (a history of marijuana prohibition in the US), there is a scene that depicts New York City police officers encircling a city park where people are reveling in a peaceful hemp-fest-type festival. Several of the officers were questioned on camera about why they thought they were there or whether this was a worthwhile use of their time. The officers remarked that they did believe their time could be better spent elsewhere, that the people in the park posed no threat, and that they were not the ones who made such decisions. Several individuals were arrested on charges of drug

² <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/society/crime/crimegun6.pdf>

³ Ronald J. Ostrow, “Casual Drug Users Should Be Shot, Gates Says,” *Los Angeles Times* (September 6, 1990). Quoted in: Jacob Sullum *Saying Yes*. Tarcher/Putnam books. New York, 2003.

possession at the event. This is an example of the work-ethic driving workers in a bureaucracy to execute a weeding-out vision, despite the enormous costs of such operations and despite the fact that their personal moral feelings run contrary to the weeding-out policy. Bauman's description of a bureaucracy shows how this is possible. It is interesting also to see the complicity of the medical-scientific establishment in the carrying out of the grand vision policy. Despite numerous published studies that support medical use of certain schedule I substances, despite numerous blue-ribbon panels commissioned to study the effects of drug use finding greater harm in prohibition of drug use rather than use itself, etc., there is no large, concerted lobbying effort on behalf of the scientific community to end this policy. The fear of losing funding or of losing credibility certainly must dissuade such actions, just as Bauman described. There are many groups that benefit from drug prohibition—like tobacco companies and prison companies. Tobacco firms, liquor firms, and pharmaceutical companies are all well-known contributors to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America⁴. Many of the scientists employed by these groups are not going to risk speaking out for fear of job loss. Thus, the prisons grow. The US has 5% of the world's population yet houses 25% of the world's prisoners. This is a gulag.

As it is said: the first casualty of war is “the truth.” The same is quite true about the war on drugs. In using the same sophisticated technology as modern warfare, in employing propaganda, in employing systematic structural violence, the war on drugs bears much resemblance to most post-modern warfare. The centralized control of major news and media outlets allows the reality of those who suffer in the war on drugs to be all-but hidden. Thus the victims suffer out of view. By removing the awareness of

⁴ <http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/library/pdfal.htm>

suffering from the view of the many, the war is allowed to continue unabated.