



WILLIAM GARRIOTT

The Narcopolitical Imaginary

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In Meadville, West Virginia, the town where I lived while conducting the research that would become *Policing Methamphetamine* (2011), there was a house that everyone called “the drug house.”¹ It was a one-story house with white wooden siding and a small porch on the front. The two residents were a man who appeared to be in his late thirties and a woman who was probably in her sixties. I assumed they were mother and son, but it was hard to tell. They had only just moved to town, part of a recent influx of what local residents called “Baltimore people:” a small, emergent population of poor whites that had migrated (or were assumed to have migrated) to the area from Baltimore, Maryland.²

The “Baltimore people” were widely seen as a blight on the community—part of a broader process of social and moral decline. One of the clearest signs of this, I was told, was the lack of interest they seemed to show in the upkeep of their homes. Peeling paint, uncut grass, and overgrown trees and bushes were the norm. Such neglect of the home was offensive in itself, but was also seen as a telltale sign of deeper deviance at work. For instance, Baltimore people were consistently suspected of being involved with drugs, both selling and using. This was a somewhat ironic perception given that many who had in fact moved to the area from Baltimore did so to escape the ravages of drugs in that city.

Nevertheless, these perceptions persisted. Take the couple who lived in the “drug house.” Their house had earned this moniker, not because of any firsthand knowledge that local residents had (at least none that they shared with me), but, rather, based on how the couple that lived in the home were perceived. The fact that they were “Baltimore people” was inherently suspicious. Then there was the fact that the windows were always closed and the blinds pulled down. For many, this implied that something secretive, devious was taking place inside—something that required constant hiding. There was also the fact that neither the man nor the woman seemed to be employed. This suggested an instrumental motivation to sell drugs for money, but also a character flaw that made drug dealing and drug use more plausible since there was a high cultural value placed on hard work (particularly manual labor) in the area. Many also noted that cars pulled up at the house at all hours of the day and night. Those who arrived would often only stay

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inside the house for a short while before returning to the car and driving on. “Sure sign of drug dealing,” one man told me.

Then there was their appearance. The man, in particular, was an uncanny fit for the images of the white, meth-ravaged body popularized by anti-meth campaigns such as the Multnomah County Sheriff’s Office “Faces of Meth”™ program and the Montana Meth Project—images that were then circulating through the local community.³ He was thin—and appeared to grow thinner over the course of the time that I lived there. His dark blond hair was usually unkempt, as was his facial hair, which somehow seemed to always be on its way to becoming a beard without ever actually arriving. He smoked constantly. I would see him on the front porch, smoking, often accompanied by the woman with whom he lived. She was likewise a heavy smoker, despite the fact that she needed an oxygen tank in order to breathe. The two had a small dog, a Chihuahua, which sat on the woman’s lap and barked at passersby on the street. The two were always friendly, and made a point of saying hello every time they saw me—a basic pleasantry they extended to others in the town as well.

Such acts of neighborliness were not enough to shake local perceptions that the two were involved with drugs, however. At times, I, too, felt myself succumbing to these perceptions. One morning I saw the man walking slowly down the sidewalk as if in a stupor. He was smoking and looked like he had been awake for days. An hour later I saw him again, arms laden with coffee and sandwiches from the local McDonald’s. His gait was slow and labored, and he seemed to struggle significantly under the weight of his load. His gaze was so lacking in focus I was surprised when he made it successfully to the front porch of his house. As he slowly walked up the steps and into his shuttered home, I pondered the scene. “Maybe everyone is right,” I thought to myself. “Maybe it really *is* a drug house.”

These two individuals were living a life defined by drugs. This was not because the two were, in fact, using and selling drugs (something which no one in the town had actually confirmed). Rather, drugs provided the primary referent as local residents worked to make sense of the presence of these two individuals in the community. Indeed, drugs—or “narcotics” as they are often called—are now central to the production of contemporary human sociality itself. Beyond their actual neurochemical effects, narcotics function today as a semiotic technology shaping the intersubjective space in which thinking-about-the-other takes place. In my own case, tacit assumptions about the drug economy and the effects of drug use shaped how I and other residents of the area perceived these individuals and their home. It allowed us to make meaning out of a set of observations that, in and of themselves, had no real significance. More nefariously, it provided us with a language through which to talk about socioeconomic, geographic, health, and other forms of difference. In this way, narcotics serve likewise as a political technology—the forms, functions and effects of which I have attempted to capture with the term “narcopolitics.”

In a recent interview, I had this to say about the concept of “narcopolitics:”

I use the term narcopolitics to refer to a mode of political practice that works to rationalize governance in terms of the problems associated with illicit drugs, a.k.a. “narcotics.” It is an adaptation of Michel Foucault’s concept of “biopolitics”—an attempt to theorize the same dynamics of governance he examines from the perspective of “life” but from the perspective of narcotics. (Cole 2011)

I went on to talk about the vital role that the narcotics issue has played and continues to play across various sites of sociality and governance in the contemporary United States, including the workplace, schools, and the home—all sites I discuss in detail in *Policing Methamphetamine*. But what I neglected to stress sufficiently there and in my development of the concept more generally in the book, is that, in practice, narcopolitics is a deeply precarious means of engaging in the work of governance. This is due in the first place to the fact that criminalization continues to be the centerpiece of US drug policy. As such, the narcotics issue carries both the promise and the perils associated with the project of “governing through crime” (Simon 2007).

Anthropologist JoAnn Martin succinctly outlines the inherent contradictions of this project:

If the art of governance entails striking the perfect balance between the intervention of the state and self-governance, crime threatens this delicate equilibrium. Crime suggests a failure of those technologies of power aimed at producing docile bodies; and yet, if governmentality is to prevail, the crime and criminal must be subject to technologies of power consistent with the reasoned management of society. There must be techniques for producing “truth” regarding criminals so that they can be reconstituted as manageable cases, taking their place among other deviant, albeit manageable subjects, such as the insane, the perverse, women, and children... Criminality is compatible with governmentality only when the criminal is shown to be a manageable subject, an object of interest and investigation, rather than a terrifying figure. (Martin 2003, 174)

Public support for the criminalization of narcotics depends on the ability of the state to successfully depict certain substances—and, by extension, the users of those substances—as morally, physically and legally dangerous. To this

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end, techniques for producing the “truth” of the drug offender *cum* criminal have certainly proliferated, with everyone from public health workers to police contributing to popular understandings of drug users as subjects with a high risk for engaging in criminality and other forms of deviance. Technologies of power aimed at bringing drug crimes and drug criminals under control have proliferated as well. Indeed, the connection between drugs and crime has become so strong in popular discourse that the two are virtually interchangeable. This has had particularly significant implications for the functioning of contemporary criminal justice institutions in the US which now center largely around drug offenses and offenders, with a concomitant development of new techniques and technologies—legal, medical, bureaucratic, and so on—for carrying out this work.

The paradox of this approach, however, is that while the efflorescence of these techniques and technologies has opened up countless pathways for the work of governance to take place, it carries the constant possibility of undermining the very governmental efforts being pursued. This is because, as Martin notes, for the project of “governing through crime” to work, criminals must be shown to be “manageable” subjects—individuals whose deviance can be successfully corrected and normalized. But this is difficult to achieve in a context where citizens are being encouraged to use their imaginations in construing the criminal threat. While such imaginings are easily set in motion, their outcomes are unpredictable, and the arts of governance are opened up to the powers of fantasy, projection, and other psychodynamic processes.

Take, for instance, the couple living in the “drug house.” The two individuals were hardly terrifying, but their lives provided a screen onto which local residents could project myriad fantasies about drugs and their effects. These dynamics were difficult to contain once they got going. Moreover, they were not limited to “Baltimore people” and other marginalized populations. There was also significant speculation about local officials, including police, the mayor, the prosecuting attorney, and several defense attorneys.

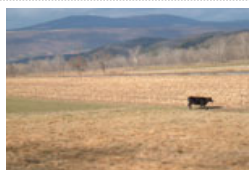


PHOTO: WILLIAM GARRIOTT

In conversations with residents, I was told that the prosecuting attorney had been seen doing lines of cocaine off of the hood of a car; that certain defense attorneys were in league with local drug dealers; and about a secret rendezvous between the mayor and an unknown figure who arrived by helicopter in the middle of the night. Police were said to have escorted the mayor to and from the meeting; and it was widely assumed to have been about drugs. I, too, was subject to these narco-mediated imaginings. One of the police officers I interviewed—a state trooper who had worked for several years undercover as part of a federal drug task force—

required that I bring two forms of identification to the interview, including my university ID card. This was, so he told me, to protect against the possibility that I might actually be a drug dealer posing as a researcher in order to conduct counter-surveillance on the police. He went on to tell me that I “wouldn’t believe” the lengths to which some would go in order to get some “inside information” about the drug operations taking place in the area (cf. Garriott 2011, 56ff).

This imaginary dimension of narcopolitical practices—the narcopolitical imaginary—fuels and is fueled by governmental techniques that take narcotics and users of narcotics as their object and shapes how such practices and their attendant technologies are put into play. It is a crucial component of narcopolitical practice insofar as it enables the imagining-of-the-other in narcopolitical terms. That is, inasmuch as narcopolitics requires a figuration of the other vis-à-vis the question of narcotics, a certain imaginary is necessary to mediate or accomplish that work. From a governance perspective, this imaginary must construe that person as dangerous and thus worthy of criminalization and other forms of state intervention. At the same time, the imagination is hard to contain once it is set in motion, and the criminal other can just as easily come to be seen as an object of terror whose powers exceed the state’s capacities for intervention. In the latter case, the project of governing through crime may be undermined, as reasoned self-governance gives way to paranoia and fear.

This is not to say that state power cannot be reasserted in the face of such imaginings. Indeed, as anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have demonstrated, the figure of “the criminal” today often works politically as, “the ground on which a metaphysics of order, of the nation as a moral community guaranteed by the state, may be entertained, argued for, even demanded” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006, 279). Nevertheless, witnessing the response to methamphetamine in this small rural community, I was led to focus on a unique aspect of this process. I came to understand that, though the making and maintaining of the social order—in the form of social solidarity, the legitimation of state power, and/or the vociferous encroachment of the “art of governance” into everyday life—may depend on the creation of these criminal figures, it is ultimately unsettled by them. To put it simply, such “figures of criminality” disturb the very social order they enable (Rafael 1999).

What precisely a “settled” social order would look like is a larger question. However, the point is that the social order made possible through the work of narcopolitics appears to be a deeply precarious one. It is pervaded by suspicion, uncertainty, frustration, disappointment, and above all ambivalence. In my fieldwork on methamphetamine, I did not

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witness the consolidation of any repressive power (state or otherwise), at least not in any unqualified way. What I did witness was a deepening disquiet about the state of things, and pessimism about the tools available to remedy them. Thus, there was ultimately something uncanny and unsettling about this criminal figure that emerged in the wake of methamphetamine: even as it called forth the full power of the contemporary narcopolitical state in the US, it introduced a sense of disquiet that the extant strategies of governance could not overcome.

William Garriott is a cultural anthropologist. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from Princeton University and a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School. His primary interests are in the anthropology of law and medicine, with related interests in science and technology studies and religion. He is currently completing two projects. The first is an ethnographic study of the methamphetamine epidemic in the rural United States. The second is an edited volume on addiction, tentatively entitled, *Anthropologies of Addiction: Science, Therapy and Regulation* (co-edited with Eugene Raikhel). Dr. Garriott teaches courses on law, crime, drugs, policing, surveillance, and security.

Notes

¹ All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

² It should be stressed here that being classified a “Baltimore person” had little to do with whether or not one had actually come from Baltimore.

³ For the “Faces of Meth”™ program see <http://www.facesofmeth.us/main.htm>. For the Montana Meth Project see <http://www.montanameth.org/>.

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