

UPHNS HUB Video Call Minutes June 24, 2021

Attendance: 35

Presenters:

Ava Ginger, Heath d'Alessio, Sean Bristowe, Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy (CSSDP)

Welcome:

Ava facilitated land acknowledgement, meditation and reading by Angela Y. Davis

Presentation:

Why do we criminalize drug us?

- It's for profit, rich privileged white Americans, the prison industrial complex
- It's given a lot of jobs to cops, judges, prison guards
- How our current society depends on class divisions
- Prescribing a personalized moral failing versus intentional systemic oppression
- A colonial system. Another mechanism of control.
- Intersectionality, it's also a suppression of the global self and the fear of the immigrant
- The control aspect also applies to sex work, can't have control over your own body
- A reason to invade spaces/bodies etc.

Brief history of drug laws in Canada

1884 – Indian Act of 1844 — first form of prohibition – illegal to sell alcohol to Indigenous people, to consume it

- Another word that comes to mind – assimilation – if Indigenous persons wanted to continue to access alcohol, they had to let go of their Indian status
- Nova Scotia was the first to enforce prohibition among Indigenous folks, one of the main reasons the RCMP was formed was to stop the Indigenous population from drinking alcohol

1839 + 1856 Opium Wars fueled anti-Asian propaganda

1907 – BC Race Riots of 1907 – protesting workers right

- White men split off and terrorized Chinatown – any Asian store front – fueled by this idea that foreigners are lazy, sitting around smoking opium, taking jobs – all these things that are not based in truth or evidence – stoked a lot of media attention
- Prime Minister's right-wing man – Mackenzie King – led a one-man mission to investigate
- McKenzie said: it should be made impossible to manufacture this drug in any part of the dominium. Christian reformers - they are convinced that it is the Chinese people causing all of their woes – he came back to parliament, and then the Opium Act was enacted – the first prohibition that is happening country-wide
- More drugs were enacted in 1911. In 1923, cannabis was added to the list

1923 Chinese Exclusion Act

- Premised on the belief that Chinese people don't work, they're dirty, lazy, if they are working – they are taking jobs.
- White North America and the foreign other, and the foreign other is bad

1940 – Criminal “Addict”

- This term got popularized – meant that you are not just using drugs because you are using drugs, you are a criminal. Punitive measures were so harsh – the dangerous part about doing drugs was in becoming imprisoned, rather than doing the drug
- The harms of drug use actually lie in being incarcerated – a lot of the harm is associated with police involvement, creates conditions for a poisoned drug supply, criminalization is meant to harm drug users
- Carl Hart speaks to the racial aspect – the depiction of drug use in media is anybody but a white person
- If you bring in queer theory and the fact that queer and trans people also end up using, speaks to pathologizing - you are wrong, you are bad, criminalizing certain bodies

1960-1970 - Double standard of cannabis use

- The counterculture movement – now you see white middle class college students who want to smoke weed. They start to feel the effects of these immoral drug laws that had been impacting racialized and marginalized communities. That’s when there was a push back at least in Canada by white middle class. Maybe we should re-look at these. That was only because white people, the laws that these weren’t made for, were starting to be affected.
- Parallel between this and the current media discourse around drug poisoning and the overdose epidemic. The only time you see it in the media is when middle class white people are dying from the crisis. If we don’t make a change, history repeats itself.

1980-1990 AIDS epidemic

- This is when we see the beginning of the AIDS epidemic hitting, our first needle exchange program opens up in Vancouver, Ontario, and Montreal – these sites saved so many lives and helped prevent so many cases of HIV - this type of radical work disrupts the status quo and its revolutionary. Thank you to all those who were leading this work.
- Can’t do drugs in public, don’t have proper precautions, that’s when things start to get out of hand. Rise in death and infection caused activists to say we’re not doing this anymore.
- People mobilized, it was drug users, queer folks, they mobilized and supported each other. That was how harm reduction was born.
- DPC pretty early on the front of supervised injection, courageous nurses saw that people were using in alleys – opened up a closet in the Centre and put a space there for people to use, consulted with the ethics of the nursing college rather than the powers at be – it’s activism – we’re going to do what’s right and not worry about what people in suits who don’t understand what’s going on have to say about
- Want to acknowledge the first needle exchange that opened up contributed to HIV in DTES because it was a one-to-one exchange, not a needle distribution – it created an economic market for used syringes. Had to get a dirty needle to get a clean needle. This was a new thing at the time. PHS was created and changed how things were done. Thinking about the activism back then, they used art work (100 foot needle and took it down to City Hall, casket to the mayor’s office) – the drug using community in Vancouver and New York were so entrenched with the queer and gay community, that’s why there was so much cross over in HIV as well
- In Canada it is criminal to have HIV – if you have HIV and you have sex with someone and you don’t disclose that you have HIV - you can go to jail, even if you didn’t know you had HIV or you have a low viral load

Talking about how interconnected our queer and drug using community is, why do we think that is?

- For me, my drug use has been tied to gender exploration in terms of cannabis and other drugs – it also opened up a community I didn’t know I had access to – trans folks experience a lot of exclusion in

society, I didn't know I was trans until I was 28, there are a lot of reasons for that – drugs allow for a lot of healing – the toxic drug supply makes using drugs dangerous right now

- Cannabis and psychedelics offers us to slow down, reevaluate – I don't think the system wants us to have this space -- also leads to the queerness of yourself. I don't have to be this product of capitalism. My mind and eyes are open to alternative ways of living
- There is a lot of stigma in the health care system, don't always get the care you need or should get – it's very racist and discriminatory – drugs can become a form of self-medication
- Colonial violence – DSM is a tool of violence and oppression for people who are different – being trans and gay used to be a mental illness under the DSM
- We carry around a lot of shame and anxiety around our sexuality and our gender – its resistance and resiliency – sexuality and drug use is also tied up in our communities – it is a how we bond and explore our bodies, and our desires – if we feel a lot of shame for our desires, we can dissociate – not a full dependence on these drugs, but part of the way that we come together and explore ourselves

2000-2010 – Nothing monumental happened. The usual terrible things. Arrests on arrests. Death on death. Destruction on destruction at the hands of prohibition and racialized laws.

2017-2018 – Cannabis legalization (Bill C45)

- *What does legalization mean if people are still being criminalized? When it has been built on a history of systemic racism?*
- *Whose narrative is this upholding? And whose is being snuffed out?*
- Corporate gain - to get into the cannabis market – you have to have million-dollar property. Let's make money off of it, and let's make lots of money off of it. Unless you have privilege coming into this – you are not going to benefit.

Discussion:

Cannabis in Canada – *how we can use this to look at the future we dream of for other drugs?*

- 13th Amendment: 1865. *What if we made it illegal to be Black? Gay? To use drugs?*
- *Where do black people frequent? Where do they commune? How do they commune? What if we made all those things illegal so you have no way to live as you are?*

Case Study in Cannabis – 3 main pillars

- Criminalization – high surveillance in racialized communities, if drugs are illegal there needs to be a police state. Over sentencing, sentencing in general
- Legalization – what does this mean when people who are convicted before laws were passed continue to sit in jail. Legalization continues to rely on police, if we legalize something, we have to have the police there to enforce it. Policing as a means to surveil communities. Legalization sounds liberating, but what's really there?
- Industry – the people who sold cannabis prior to legalization are prohibited from entering into this industry. It's a closed door industry. Unless you have the backing to grow, sell, or profit – the penalties have sky rocketed for selling out the legal market. The people who have used this medicine, and continue to use this medicine are not able to profit

What is legalization without decriminalization? What does a more just future look like?

- Corporate control has made it more challenging for people to access drugs, the prices are higher.
- Jails hold 6th largest budget in Canada, they are 100 years old, falling apart at the seams, no access to health care, epic failure, there is no plan B -why aren't we looking at sustainable housing, treating

people as human beings – I don't want to see drugs legalized for a really long time, I think they need to be decriminalized first – better for communities to create their own safe supply, what is a safe supply, and who is it for? It needs to be equitable for everybody, and needs to be community led. If we go straight to legalization, it will be the same as cannabis

- Cannabis was my gateway to drug policy – you can't reform your way out of colonialism. We see this pattern repeat itself. Substances have long been used by communities, there is so much knowledge around the world – colonial systems come and prohibit them, moralize it until it becomes such a problem that have to legalize it. Not accessible, and reserved only for those who are profiting from it

What is the future of drugs all over the world, the way forward? What do we want to leave in the past? What do we want to bring into the future? What are we going to create for the future that is tolerant and loving for marginalized peoples?

Meeting Close:

- Thank you and showing up as your full selves!
- NEXT HUB CALL: Date TBD – EACH+EVERY, we will be bringing on some small business owners who are down with harm reduction and want to provide harm reduction support!

Links and Resources:

- You can find Droppin' In on Instagram [here](#)
- [Incarcerated and Infected: How the Virus Tore Through the US Prison System](#)
- [When Good Drugs Go Bad: Opium, Medicine, and the Origins of Canada's Drug Laws](#)
- Crackdown podcast: <https://crackdownpod.com>
- [20 people charged, \\$61M worth of drugs seized in largest bust in Toronto policy history](#)
- [A "Family" of Artists of the Downtown Eastside](#)
- [How Diverse is Canada's Legal Cannabis Industry? Examining Race and Gender of its Executives and Directors](#)
- Film: 13th - <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5895028/>
- [Jay Z "The War on Drugs is an Epic Fail"](#)
- [Race, cannabis and the Canadian war on drugs: An examination of cannabis arrest data by race in five cities](#)
- [2 Years After Legalizing Cannabis, Has Canada Kept Its Promises?](#)
- [How to Regulate Stimulants. Transform Drug Policy Foundation.](#)
- [Support. Don't Punish X CSSDP – Day of Action](#)
- CSSDP Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/CSSDP>