Chapter 3 - Marijuana and the Politics of Reality

Introduction

One of the mysteries of recent social research is the seemingly contradictory conclusions about marijuana use. Perhaps no sector of social behavior is more disputed. Empirical questions concerning aspects of marijuana use arouse a hornet's nest of controversy. Even the fundamental question of the effects of the drug on the human mind and body is hotly disputed; two descriptions, both purporting to be equally "objective," often bear no relation to one another. Is marijuana a drug of psychic dependence? Or is it meaningless to speak of dependency in regard to marijuana? Does marijuana cause organic damage to the brain? Are its effects criminogenic? How does it influence the overall output of activity—in popular terms, does it produce lethargy and sloth? Does it precipitate "psychotic episodes"? What, specifically, is its impact on artistic creativity? What is the drug's influence on mechanical skills, such as the ability to drive an automobile? Does the use of marijuana lead to heroin addiction?

These questions can be answered within the scope of empirical sociological, psychological, and pharmacological scientific technique. Each query can be operationalized. Indices can be constructed and tests can be devised. Occasionally they are. Yet the zones of widespread agreement are narrow indeed. Surely this should puzzle the sociologist.

The Social Construction of Reality

All civilizations set rules concerning what is real and what is not, what is true and what is false. All societies select out of the data before them a world, one world, the world taken for granted, and declare that the real world. Each one of these artificially constructed worlds is to some degree idiosyncratic. No individual views reality directly, "in the raw," so to speak, but our perceptions are narrowly channeled through concepts and interpretations. What is commonly thought of as reality, that which exists, or simply is, is a set of concepts, assumptions, justifications, defenses, all generally collectively agreed-upon, which guide and channel each individual's perceptions in a specific direction. The specific rules governing the perception of the universe which man inhabits are more or less arbitrary, a matter of convention. Every society establishes a kind of epistemological methodology.

Meaning, then, does not automatically come about. Rather, it is read into every situation, event, entity, object, phenomenon. What one individual understands by a given phenomenon may be absolutely heterogenous to what another individual understands. In a sense, then, the reality itself is different. The only reality available to each individual consciousness is a subjective reality. Yet this insight poses a dilemma: we must see in a skewed manner or not at all. For, as Berger and Luckmann point out, "To include epistemological questions concerning the validity of
sociological knowledge is like trying to push a bus in which one is riding." [1] Sociologists, too, are implicated in this same process. But unless we wish to remain huddled in the blind cave of solipsism, the problem should not paralyze us. We leave the problem of the validity of sociological knowledge to the metaphysical philosophers. If we wish to grasp the articulation between ideology and what Westerners call science, we must look to fundamental cultural beliefs that stimulate or inhibit the growth of scientific-empirical ideas. One form of this selection process, the course of defining the nature of the universe, involves the rules of validating reality. A procedure is established for accepting inferential evidence; some forms of evidence will be ruled out as irrelevant, while others will serve to negotiate and determine what is real. For instance, some religious systems have great faith in the validity of the message of the senses.

Other civilizations give greater weight to mystical insight, to the reality beyond empirical reality.

The sociologist's task starts with this vast cultural canvas. While the "major mode" of the epistemological selection and validation process involves the decision to accept or rule out the data of our senses, within this tradition, minor modes of variation will be noticed. Clearly, even societies with powerful scientific and empirical traditions will contain subcultures which have less faith in the logic of the senses than others have. Moreover, all cultures have absorbed one or another mode of reasoning differentially, so that some institutions will typify the dominant mode more characteristically than others. Certainly, few in even the most empirical of civilizations will apply the same rules of evidence in the theater of their family as in their workaday world.

The more complex the society, the greater the number of competing versions concerning reality. The positivists were in error in assuming that greater knowledge would bring epistemological convergence. The arenas of controversy are more far-flung than they ever have been. Now, instead of societies differing as to how they view the real world, subsegments of the same society differ as well. This poses a serious problem for those members of society who have an emotional investment in stability and the legitimacy of their own special version of reality. The problem becomes, then, a matter of moral hegemony, of legitimating one distinctive view of the world and of discrediting competing views. These rules of validating reality, and society's faith in them, may serve as strategies in ideological struggles. Contending parties will wish to establish veracity by means of the dominant cultural mode.

All societies invest this selection process with an air of mystification. Using Peter Berger's phrase: "Let the institutional order be so interpreted as to hide, as much as possible, its constructed character.... [The] humanly constructed nomoi are given a cosmic status...." [4] This process must not, above all, be seen as whimsical and arbitrary; it must be grounded in the nature of reality itself. The one selected view of the world must be seen as the only possible view of the world; it must be identified with the real world. All other versions of reality must be seen as whimsical and arbitrary and, above all, in error. At one time, this twin mystification process was religious in character: views in competition with the dominant one were heretical and displeasing to the gods—hence, Galileo's crime. Now, of course, the style is to cloak what Berger terms "fictitious necessities" with an aura of scientific validity. Nothing has greater discrediting power today than the demonstration that a given assertion has been "scientifically disproven." Our contemporary pawnbrokers of reality are scientists.
Value and Fact in Negotiating the Marijuana Reality

Probably no area of social life reflects this selective process more than drug use. Society has constructed the social concept "drug" in such a way that it excludes elements which are substantially identical to those it includes. What is seen as the essential reality of a given drug and its use is a highly contingent event. What society selects as crucial to perceive about drugs, and what it ignores, tells us a great deal about its cultural fabric.

The scientist makes a distinction between those questions that can be answered empirically and those wholly in the realm of sentiment. The question of whether marijuana causes crime is answerable, but the question of whether marijuana is evil or not is intrinsically unanswerable, within an empirical and scientific framework. It depends completely on one's perspective. However clear-cut this distinction is in the scientist's mind, as a tool for understanding the disputants' positions in this controversy, it is specious and misleading for a variety of reasons.

The strands of value and fact intersect with one another so luxuriantly that in numerous reasoning sequences they are inseparable. What one society or group or individual takes for granted as self-evidently harmful, others view as obviously beneficial, even necessary. In crucial ways, the issue of harm or danger to society as a result of the drug pivots on moot points, totally unanswerable questions, questions that science is unable to answer without the resolution of certain basic issues. And for many crucially debated marijuana questions, this modest requirement cannot be met. In other words, before we raise the question of whether marijuana has a desirable or a noxious effect, we must first establish the desirability or the noxiousness to whom.

We must concern ourselves with the differential evaluations of the same objective consequences. Many of the drug's effects—agreed-upon by friend and foe alike—will be regarded as reprehensible by some individuals, desirable or neutral by others. Often antimarijuana forces will argue against the use of the drug, employing reasons which its supporters will also employ—in favor of its use. We have not a disagreement in what the effects are, but whether they are good or bad. This is probably the most transparently ideological of all of the platforms of debate about marijuana. Three illustrations of this orbit of disputation suffice.

Were marijuana use more prevalent than it is today, there would come the billowing of a distinct aesthetic. The state of marijuana intoxication seems to be associated with, and even to touch off, a unique and peculiar vision of the world. That the marijuana-induced vision is distinctive seems to be beyond dispute; it is rewarding or fatuous is a matter for endless disputation. Inexplicably, the drug seems to engender a mental state which is coming into vogue in today's art forms. An extraordinarily high proportion of today's young and avant-garde artists—filmmakers, poets, painters, musicians, novelists, photographers, mixed-media specialists—use the drug and are influenced by the marijuana high. Some of the results seem to be the increasing irrelevance of realism; the loss of interest in plot in films and novels; a glorification of the irrational and the seemingly nonsensical; an increased faith in the logic of the viscera, rather than in the intellect; a heightened sense for the absurd; an abandonment of
traditional and "linear" reasoning sequences, and the substitution of "mosaic" and fragmentary lines of attack; bursts of insight rather than chains of thought; connectives relying on internal relevance, rather than a commonly understood and widely accepted succession of events and thoughts; love of the paradoxical, the perverse, the contradictory, the incongruous; an implosive inward thrust, rather than an explosive outward thrust; instantaneous totality rather than specialization; the dynamic rather than the static; the unique rather than the general and universal. The parallel between the mental processes associated with the marijuana high and the "tribal" mind typified by McLuhan is too close to escape mention.

Those with conventional, traditional, and classic tastes in art will view these results in a dim light. A recent antimarijuana tract, for instance, comments on the highly unconventional and antitraditionalist novelist William Burroughs' approval of marijuana's influence on his creative powers: "The irony is that Burroughs meant his remark as an endorsement." The sociologist of knowledge seeks to understand and explain the bases from which man's intellectual efforts spring. He will notice the prominent place in this debate the manner in which matters of taste, such as artistic aesthetics, are intimately and inseparably bound with views of the empirical reality of the drug. He who is opposed to the use of marijuana, and who believes that it is (empirically) harmful, is very likely to dislike contemporary art forms, and vice versa. The two are not, of course, necessarily causally related, but rather emerge out of the same matrix.

Marijuana's reputed impact on sexual behavior is all to the good to some who are comfortable with an unconventional view of sex. To the sexually traditional, the fact that marijuana could disrupt man's (and woman's) sexuality is an out-of-hand condemnation of the drug. While marijuana's opponents would label any imputed increase in sexual activity as a result of drug "promiscuity" and would roundly condemn it, the drug's apostles would cheer society's resurgent interest in the organic, the earthy, the sensual. For instance, a 1967 court ruling in the Court of Massachusetts, held that sexual promiscuity was one of the undesirable consequences of marijuana use; Justice Tauro rejected the defendants' appeal. Strangely, Time magazine claimed that Tauro's ruling would be judged fair by even the staunchest of marijuana supporters.

Marijuana as a mind-altering drug has discrediting power to the one who thinks of the everyday workings of the mind as normal and desirable. But to the explorer of unusual and exotic mental realms, its mind-altering functions are in its favor. The ideologues of the psychedelic movement—and marijuana is considered by most commentators as the weakest of the psychedelic or hallucinogenic drugs—claim that every member of society is lied to, frustrated, cheated, duped and cajoled, and so grows up totally deceived. Barnacles of attitudes, values, beliefs, layer themselves upon the mind, making it impossible to see things as they truly are. This ideology maintains that far from offering an escape from reality, the psychedelic drugs thrust man more intensely into reality. By suspending society's illusions, the voyager is able to see reality in the raw, with greater verisimilitude. Aldous Huxley exclaimed, under the influence of mescaline, "This is how one ought to see, how things really are." The antipsychedelic stance will, of course, deny the validity of this process. What is real is the world as the undrugged person perceives it. Any alteration of the normal state of consciousness is destructive and-inherently distorting. Drug use, it is claimed, is "a way to shut out the real world or enter a world of unreality"; the psychedelic drug user attempts to "take a trip away from the real world and to a society of his own making." But what is astonishing about the
controversy is that both sides presume to know precisely what reality is. Whatever version we choose to guide our senses, we should not fail to see the ideological character of the controversy. Both orientations are to a large degree arbitrary, conventional. Epistemological questions cannot be resolved by fiat or empirical test. Even the natural sciences rest on faith, an unprovable assumption that the senses convey valid information. Yet each side insists that it alone has a monopoly on knowing what is true and what false, what is real and what illusory. Both sides attempt to mask the capricious nature of their decision with an air of legitimacy and absolute validity. Taking a relativistic stance toward both perspectives, we are forced to regard both as statements of a distinctly political nature. An essential component of dominant medical and psychological thinking about illicit drug use is that it is undesirable, that the user should be treated in such a manner that he discontinues use. The user is felt, rightly or wrongly, to threaten some of the more strongly held cultural values of American society:

In my opinion, psychopharmacologic agents may be divided into two major categories depending on the manner in which they either help or hinder the individual in his adaptation to society.

Drugs may be used in one of two ways to help relieve... tensions: by sufficiently diminishing emotional tension to permit the individual to function or by allowing the individual to totally escape from reality. Sedatives, tranquilizers, and antidepressants... often permit an individual to function more effectively. Psychedelic drugs... allow the individual to escape from reality so that he need not function at all. The first group of drugs is often useful to society; the second group would only destroy it. [11]

Given the basic premises on which statements such as these are based, it is difficult to understand just what the notion of detachment and objectivity toward the drug user might mean.

Another locus of unresolvable controversy, where value and fact interlock inseparably, is the question of a hierarchy of values. An impartial stance is claimed by combatants in a multitude of pseudoscientific questions. Here, even the value issues may be resolved. Everyone agrees that marijuana may precipitate psychotic episodes, and that, further, psychotic episodes are a bad thing. The issue then becomes not, does it occur, or, is it good or bad, but does marijuana's claimed benefits outweigh its possible dangers? Should we restrict society's right of access to drugs so that we may minimize the potential harm to itself? How do one set of values stack up against another? One might, by donning a white coat, pretend to scientific objectivity in answering this question, but it might be wise to remember that even the emperor didn't succeed in the ruse.
A second powerful reason why strictly empirical arguments seem to have exerted relatively little hold in the marijuana controversy, aside from the intricate intertwining of value and fact, seems to be basic panhuman psychic process that leads to the need for the confirmation of our strongly held biases; moreover, empirical reality, being staggeringly complex, permits and even demands factual selection. We characteristically seek support for our views: contrary opinions and facts are generally avoided. This opens the way for the maintenance of points of view which are contradicted by empirical evidence. And there is invariably a variety of facts to choose from. It is a comparatively simple matter to find what one is looking for in any moderately complex issue. Each individual facing an emotionally charged issue selects the facts which agree with his own opinions, supermarket-like. Individuals do not judge marijuana to be harmful or beneficial as a result of objective evidence, rationally weighed and judiciously considered. The process, rather, works in the opposite direction: the drug is considered harmful—as a result of customs that articulate or clash with the use and the effect of the drug, as a result of the kinds of people who use it, the nature of the "reading" process society applies to these individuals, and as a result of campaigns conducted by moral entrepreneurs, as well as innumerable other processes—and then positive and negative traits are attributed to the drug. The explanation for perceiving the drug in a specific manner follows the attitudes about it. A man is not opposed to the use or the legalization of marijuana because (he thinks) it leads to the use of more dangerous drugs, because it causes crime, because it produces insanity and brain damage, because it makes a person unsafe behind the wheel, because it creates an unwillingness to work. He believes these things because he thinks the drug is evil. The negative consequences of the use of marijuana are superadded to support a basically value position. But everyone, Pareto says, seeks to cloak his prejudices in the garb of reason, especially in an empirical age, so that evidence to support them is dragged in post hoc to provide rational and concrete proof. Clearly, not many interested participants in a given controversy are aware of the rules of the scientific method. They may feel that they are empirically proving a point by submitting concrete evidence, yet the mode of reasoning merely confirms their ideological biases. "Proof" by enumeration exemplifies this principle. The criminogenic effects of marijuana are demonstrated by listing individuals who smoke marijuana who also, either under the influence or not, committed a crime. Munch and Anslinger and Tompkins exemplify this line of reasoning. (We will elaborate on this point in the chapter on marijuana's supposed effects on crime.) Conceptions of true and false are extravagantly refracted through social and cultural lenses to such an extent that the entire notion of empirical truth becomes irrelevant. True and false become, in fact, what dominant groups define as true and false; its very collectivity establishes legitimacy. A pro- or antimarijuana stance reflects a basic underlying attitudinal syndrome, ideological in character, that is consonant with its drug component. Prior to being exposed to attitudes or "facts" about marijuana, the individual has come to accept or reject fundamental points of view which already lead him to apprehend the reality of marijuana in a definite manner. These ideological slants are not merely correlates of related and parallel attitudes. They are also perceptual screens through which a person views empirically grounded facts. In other words, marijuana provides an occasion for ideological expression. Perceptions of the very empirical reality of the drug are largely determined by prior ideological
considerations. Almost everyone facing the issue already has an answer concerning its various aspects, because of his attitudes about related and prior issues. He finds facts to suit his predilections—whether supportive or hypercritical—and commandeers them to suit his biases. The essential meaning of the marijuana issue is the meaning which each individual brings to it. The marijuana “reality” going on before us is a vast turmoil of events which, like all realities, demands factual selection. Yet the selection of facts is never random. It is always systematic; it always obeys a specific logic. Any message can be read into the impact of the drug; anything you wish to see is there. We support our predilections by only seeing in the dung that which supports them. If the critic wants to see in the drug and its use violence, sadism, rape and murder, they are there, buried in the reality of marijuana. If the drug supporter wishes to see peace and serenity, they are not difficult to find either.

This is not to say, of course, that no research has ever been conducted which approaches scientific objectivity. (Scientific objectivity is, as we pointed out above, one form of bias, but since on most issues all participants in the dispute pay their respects to it, this axiom is apolitical in its import.) It is to say, however, that not all participants in the marijuana controversy have been trained as scientists, nor do they reason as scientists. Interpretations of the marijuana studies are more important to us here than the studies' findings themselves. Out of a multitude of findings a diversity of mutually exclusive conclusions can be reached. The multitude of results from the many marijuana reports forms a sea of ambiguity into which nearly any message may be read. The researcher's findings do not make themselves clear to the reader. Any opinion may be verified by the scientific literature on marijuana. Mayor LaGuardia's Report rivals the Bible in the diversity of the many conclusions that have been drawn from it.

Marijuana's proponents take heart in its conclusions, and nearly all of the entire report has been reprinted in a decidedly promarijuana anthology. Yet at the same time antimarijuana forces find in the study solid evidence for the damaging effects of the drug.

Our point, then, is that drawing conclusions from even the most careful and parsimonious scientific study is itself a highly selective process. The welter of findings are subject to a systematic sifting process. Often the researcher finds it necessary to disassociate himself from the conclusions which others have drawn from his own work. For instance, a sensationalistic popular article on LSD was denounced as a distortion and an atrocity by the very scientists whose research it cited.

More attention ought to be paid, therefore, to the "reading" process of drawing conclusions from scientific work, rather than the findings themselves. In fact, specifically what might be meant by "the findings themselves" is unclear, since they can be made to say many different and contradictory things. If a tactician were surveying the marijuana controversy, he would be struck by the ideological advantage of the antipot lobby in at least one respect: the single negative case is considerably more powerful than the single positive case—or, indeed, many positive cases. Harmfulness is far easier to prove than harmlessness. In order to demonstrate that marijuana is not damaging at all, it would be necessary to produce evidence that all cases of marijuana use did not result in damage—all individuals at all times—an obvious impossibility. Whereas to show that it is
damaging in any degree, only a few scattered cases need be produced. (Even assuming that the "damage" can be traced to the marijuana, a question which is, itself, problematic.) Consequently, there is no conceivable evidence which can be presented to someone with a strong antimarijuana position which he will accept as a demonstration of the drug's comparative harmlessness.

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Strategies of Discreditation

Labeling has political implications. By devising a linguistic category with specific connotations, one is designing armaments for a battle; by having it accepted and used, one has scored a major victory. For instance, the term "psychedelic" has a clear prodrug bias: it says that the mind works best when under the influence of this type of drug. (Moreover, one of the psychedelic drug proselytizers, in search of a term which would describe the impact of these drugs, rejected "psychodelic" as having negative overtones of psychosis.) The term "hallucinogen" is equally biased since an hallucination is, in our civilization at least, unreal, illusory, and therefore undesirable; the same holds for the term "psychotomimetic," capable of producing a madness-like state. The semantics and linguistics of the drug issue form an essential component of the ideological skirmishes. As an example of how labeling influences one's posture toward a phenomenon, note that the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs has jurisdiction over "addicting" drugs, which supposedly includes marijuana, while the Food and Drug Administration handles "habit-forming" drugs. Because of this jurisdictional division, the Bureau is forced into the absurd position of having to classify marijuana as an addicting drug, and to support this contention, it supplies drug categorizations that follow jurisdictional lines, as if they had some sort of correspondence in the real world. However, the Bureau seems not to take its own classifications seriously, since whenever the issue is discussed by its members, it is emphasized that marijuana is not addicting in the classical sense, but it produces a "psychological dependence."

"Drug abuse" is such a linguistic device. It is often used by physicians and by those in medically related fields. Encountering the use of the term, one has the impression that something quite measurable is being referred to, something very much like a disease, an undesirable condition which is in need of remedy. The term, thus, simultaneously serves two functions: it claims clinical objectivity and it discredits the action that it categorizes. In fact, there is no such objectivity in the term; its use is baldly political. Drug abuse is the use of a drug that influential persons with legitimacy condemn. Their objections are on moral, not medical, grounds, although their argument will be cast in medical language. Nonmedical drug use is, in the medical view, by definition abuse.

A linguistic category both crystallizes and influences responses to, and postures toward, a phenomenon. The term "abuse" illustrates this axiom. It announces that nonmedical drug-taking is undesirable, that the benefits which the drug-using subculture proclaims for drug use are
outweighed by the hard rock of medical damage. Yet, since the weighing of values is a moral, not a medical process, we are full-face against an ideological resolution of the issue, yet one couched in a scientific and empirical exoskeleton. Furthermore, the linguistic category demands verification. By labeling a phenomenon "abuse," one is willy-nilly under pressure to prove that the label is valid. The term so structures our perceptions of the phenomenon that it is possible to see only abusive aspects in drug use. Therefore, data must be collected to discredit the beneficial claims of drug use.

Another strategy of disconfirming the marijuanaists' claims to legitimacy is the notion, closely interconnected with drug use as abuse, that marijuana use is the manifestation of medical pathology. This thrust bears two prongs: (1) the etiology of marijuana use as an expression of, or an "acting out" of, a personality disturbance; and (2) the effects of the drug as a precipitator of temporary but potent psychotic episodes. By assigning marijuana use to the twilight world of psychic pathology, its moral and willful character has been neutralized. The labeled behavior has been removed from the arena of free will; its compulsive character effectively denies that it can be a viable alternative, freely chosen. A recent discussion argues that assigning the status of medical pathology is an effective device for neutralizing the legitimacy of a political opponent's ideology.

An act reduced to both symptom and cause of pathology has had its claims to moral rectitude neutralized and discredited. As a manifestation of illness, it calls for treatment, not serious debate. In a sense, then, physicians and psychiatrists have partially replaced policemen as preservers of the social order, since attempts at internal controls have replaced external sanctions. Both presume to know for the subject how he "ought" to act. Yet the new sanctions, based on an ideology which the deviant partially believes in—scientific treatment of a medical illness—becomes a new and more powerful form of authoritarianism.

Generally, some sort of explanation, particularly one involving compulsion and pathology, is needed wherever it is not rationally understandable to the observer, that is, when it doesn't make sense. An anomalous and bizarre form of behavior demands an explanation. We can understand repeated dosages of poetry, because we all approve of poetry, so that no special examination is necessitated. It is only where the behavior violates our value biases that we feel it necessary to construct an interpretation. There is the built-in assumption that the individual should be able to do without recreational drugs, that their use is unnecessary, and a life without them is the normal state of affairs. Violation of our expectations requires an explanation. No explanation for abstinence from drugs is necessary, since our biases tell us that that is the way one ought to live.

Looking at all of the actions of which society disapproves—deviant behavior—we notice that they share fundamental similarities. However, these similarities inhere not so much in the acts themselves as in the way society responds to them. One of the more interesting responses is the tendency to impute psychological abnormality to their authors. The issue of whether such judgments are "correct" or not is less relevant to us as is the nexus between the kinds of acts that attract such judgments, and the nature of the society in which they are made. It is said that Freud once had a patient who believed that the center of the earth was filled with jam. Freud was not concerned with the truth or falsity of that statement but with the kind of man who made it. Similarly, the sociologist of knowledge concerns himself with the kinds of explanations a society fabricates about behavior in its midst, and what those explanations reveal about that society. It should be regarded as extremely significant that deviant behavior seems to have
attracted explanations which activate a principle of psychological abnormality. The sociologist legitimately raises the question as to what it is about American society which begets a personality abnormality explanation for marijuana smokers, as well as heroin addicts, homosexuals, unwed mothers, criminals, juvenile delinquents, and prostitutes, in addition to a host of other deviant groups and activities. [21] The fact that each of these social categories—and the activities associated with them—are severely condemned by American society makes the nature of the process of constructing pathology interpretations of deviance at least as interesting as the etiology of the deviant behavior itself. In all of these cases, adopting a medical approach to the deviant and his behavior effectively neutralizes his moral legitimacy, as well as the viability of his behavior. In this sense, the constructors of such theories serve to mirror the basic values of American society.

It is incredible that so many participants of this debate feel that the issues can be decided rationally—and in favor of their own side, naturally, which is, of course, how they decide what is rational. In reality, the marijuana debate is simply not an issue that permits rationality Some questions are inherently unanswerable, while others, although ideally subject to empirical demonstration, are so heavily mired in sentiment that no amount of tugging is going to get them out. Only the naive think that "proof" proceeds in the manner of the scientific ideal. "Proof" involves gathering information, however dubious, which suits one's own biases, and suppressing that which threatens them. Actually, "facts" are instruments designed for the support of one's biases. These facts may actually be true, but truth is complex and elusive, and even seemingly contradictory facts may be "true." Anyone who thinks of marijuana use as evil wishes to attribute "evil" causes to it, as well as "evil" consequences (especially). No one likes violence, crime, heroin addiction, or "psychological dependence," so marijuana is charged with generating them. Actually, these are all code words. The allegation that marijuana causes violence is code for "marijuana use is evil." Today's allegations have, of course, been retranslated into contemporary scientific metaphors, because religious imagery does not speak with much practical authority today, but their meaning is identical. Consider the following quotes (the emphasis is mine):

... marihuana is adding in the sense that it is a dangerous intoxicating drug... [22]

So far as I can see, I do not think it is irrational to legally define marihuana as a "narcotic drug." [23]

Although cannabism does not lead to an addiction in the classic sense of morphinism, the subjection to the drug is fairly serious. To a considerable extent, it decreases the social value of the individual and leads him to manifest physical and mental decadence.

The tendency to an unsocial conduct of relaxed morals, of listlessness, with an aversion to work or the inclination to develop
psychotic phenomena, is greatly intensified by marihuana. [24]

In each case, the reader thinks that he understands the distinction being made while, in fact, the writer is actually making a very different one: a logical sleight of hand, in a sense. Notice the transition; we think we know what addicting means, and we feel assured that marijuana is not addicting. But we know that addicting is bad, and such labels are useful for persuasion purposes. So, marijuana must be labeled addicting, making it bad. We know that narcotics are bad, and that narcotic refers to an analgesic, a pain-killer. By defining marijuana as a narcotic, one quality of the narcotic is isolated out (its image in the popular mind as evil), and its actual pharmacologic property (pain-killing), which marijuana doesn't share, is ignored. Thus, we have narcotic-evil-marijuana.

Although this procedure might seem strange to the logician, the methodologist, the scientist, it should come as no surprise to the student of primitive tribes. On such processes major elements of whole civilizations are built. Consider the uproar a generation ago in a tiny Indian village in Mexico following the discovery that an inoculation serum contained horse blood; no one wanted this substance injected into his body. Inoculation, as a consequence, had to be postponed until a more enlightened age and the population of the village exposed itself to the threat of lethal disease. What Westerners consider the major characteristic of the serum (disease prevention) was ignored; the minor characteristic (horse blood) was emphasized. To the Indian, the attribution of importance was reversed. Such are the powers of conceptualization.

When the law, such as in New York State, defines marijuana as a narcotic, it is actually using the definition as a code—a kind of cryptograph—for unprovable assumptions about the drug's properties, the moral nature of its use, and the character of its clientele. The fact that in a pharmacological sense, the legal definition is erroneous and absurd, should not trouble us unduly. Actually, the pharmacological property of the drug has been suppressed in favor of a moral and evaluative properties. Narcotic is a code word for evil and (putatively) dangerous. The evaluation of marijuana as dangerous contains both moral and empirical judgments, as we pointed out earlier. It involves two processes: deciding what may be defined as dangerous, which is a value judgment, and how the evidence concerning marijuana's dangers may be evaluated. The law does not purport to make a scientific evaluation of the drug's characteristics; it is making a moral and conjectural judgment; by labeling the phenomenon it is criminalizing, the coupling is made powerful, and the elements are almost inseparable.

In fact, the entire marijuana controversy could be viewed as a series of semantic constructs. We could make generalizations about the position of one or another combatant on the basis of
specific key words—even without examining his argument. These words could serve as linguistic devices or symbols for a whole line of reasoning. We know, for instance, that if Oriental studies are cited, the author thinks that marijuana is harmful. Or that if the alcohol-marijuana comparison is made, that the person presenting the argument feels that alcohol is more harmful than marijuana, and that pot should be legalized. Thus, the words, "India" or "alcohol" serve as a symbol for a position taken. Arguments are invoked; linguistic symbols are manipulated. It is a form of shorthand for an ideological position. Similarly, in many cultural forms, such as film, there are popularly understood and taken-for-granted summing-up devices which represent larger universes of discourse. At one time, in Westerns, the villain had to be dressed in black and ride a black horse: the hero was symbolized by white. We know today that sexual intercourse takes place when accompanied by the appropriate symbol referents, even without viewing the action; a musical crescendo and a fadeout tell us as much as an explicit rendition about what actually happened. (Sexual explicitness, however, is coming into style. All this means is that different cryptograms are utilized.) By examining the marijuana controversy as such a cultural fragment, we are able to see with crystal clarity the humanly fabricated nature of the issues and the ideological character of the arguments invoked.

Overview

It is the sociologist's job to discover and explicate patterns in social life. One side of a protracted and apparently insoluble controversy activates arguments that involve such putatively repugnant components as "socially irresponsible," "vagabond existence," "outlandish fashions," "long hair," "lack of cleanliness," and "disdain for conventional values." The other side emphasizes factors that it deems beneficial: "discovery," "optical and aural aesthetic perceptions," "self-awareness," "insight," and "minute engagement." 

So we are led to the conclusion that the controversy is a matter of taste and style of life, that it revolves about basically unanswerable issues, and its adjudication will take place on the basis of power and legitimacy, not on the basis of scientific truth. In fact, given the nature of the disputation, it is difficult to know exactly what is meant by scientific truth. The problem becomes one of getting support for one or another bias, rather than the empirical testing of specific propositions, whatever that might entail.

The American Medical Association urges educational programs as an effective "deterrent" to marijuana use. It is not, however, the sheer accumulation of information about marijuana which the AMA is referring to, since the marijuana user knows more than the average nonuser about the effects of the drug. Attitudes toward the drug are referred to, not factual information:

... district officials are so fired up, they'd interrupt the routine of the whole district just to make sure our kids hear a good speaker or see a movie that will teach them the basic fact: stay away
from drugs.

In order to know exactly what it is that they should stay away from students must know the nature of drugs... they're provided with basic facts. These facts aren't given "objectively"—they're slanted, so there's not the slightest doubt that students understand just how dangerous drugs can be.

You can call it brainwashing if you want to. We don't care what you call it—as long as these youngsters get the point. [28]

Not only is the "meaning in the response," but both meaning and response are structured by power and legitimacy hierarchies. Society calls upon certain status occupants to verify what we wish to hear. These statuses are protective in nature, especially designated to respond to certain issues in a predetermined manner. Threats to society's security must be discredited. An elaborate charade is played out; debater's points are scored—with no acknowledgment from the other side—and no one is converted. Inexorably, American society undergoes massive social change, and the surface froth of marijuana use and the marijuana controversy changes with it.

NOTES

5. Peter Ludlow, "In Defence of Pot: Confessions of a Canadian Marijuana Smoker," Saturday
Chapter 3 - Marijuana and the Politics of Reality

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