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The Evolution of the Political and Media Framing of Drugs (2003–2022)

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ABSTRACT

The way of framing drugs has clearly evolved in the last twenty years. The concept of addiction has become generalized and no longer concerns only substances, but also behaviors. We are also witnessing a form of generalized decriminalization of drug use and even drug trafficking in artistic representations, with sometimes sympathetic heroes of films or series who use or *deal drugs*. The tendency to emphasize the public health approach of harm reduction has also increased. In the United States, where the legalization of cannabis is progressing, the major phenomenon that has struck a chord is the use of opioids, whereas in France, the political framework of the subject seems likely to remain confused, as no major change has occurred.

Keywords: framing, representations, law, politics, drugs, entrepreneurs, cinema, series

La evolución del encuadre político y mediático de las drogas (2003-2022)

RESUMEN

La forma de enmarcar las drogas ha evolucionado claramente en los últimos veinte años. El concepto de adicción se ha generalizado y ya no se refiere sólo a las sustancias, sino también a las conductas. Asistimos también a una forma de despenalización generalizada del consumo de drogas e incluso del narcotráfico en las representaciones artísticas, con héroes a veces simpatizantes de películas o series que consumen o trafican con drogas. También ha aumentado la tendencia a enfatizar el enfoque de salud pública de la reducción de daños. En Estados Unidos, donde la legalización del cannabis

avanza, el principal fenómeno que ha tocado la fibra sensible es el uso de opioides, mientras que en Francia, el marco político del tema parece seguir siendo confuso, ya que no se ha producido ningún cambio importante.

Palabras clave: encuadre, representaciones, derecho, política, drogas, empresarios, cine, series

关于毒品的政治建构和媒体建构：2003–2022年间的演变

摘要

过去20年，毒品的建构方式显然发生了变化。成瘾的概念已经变得普遍化，不再只涉及物质，还涉及行为。还出现了一种关于毒品使用的普遍去罪化，甚至在艺术表现中反映了贩毒——有时电影或电视剧中会出现一些使用或交易毒品的讨喜英雄。强调公共卫生方法（以减少危害）的趋势也有所增加。在大麻合法化正在取得进展的美国，引起共鸣的主要现象是阿片类药物的使用，而在法国，由于未发生相关的重大变革，该主题的政治框架似乎很可能保持混乱。

关键词：建构，表现形式，法律，政治，毒品，企业家，电影，电视剧

Things have changed a lot in the field of drugs since the meeting that took place at the Sorbonne with Howard S. Becker in 2003. It is interesting to underline the extent to which the approach in terms of political framing, both on the theoretical, normative, and discursive levels, remains relevant. From this point of view, significant changes can be observed over the last twenty years. While trying not to characterize or oversimplify these transformations, the contribution briefly presented here will aim to grasp the main developments in this framing.

We will first recall the meaning of framing that we use, still inspired by the work of Jacques Gerstlé (2001), around whom we met with Howard S. Becker in 2003, in an approach that is mainly related to political communication. The framing of a social fact is the way in which it is regulated and mediatized, as well as the interactions between its law and its representations. It is assumed that the way in which the drug is shown and perceived influences its legal status and vice versa.

The sources available for this study are therefore easily accessible, since they are the norms governing the drug markets, from production to consumption. The different media fields, from journalistic production to works of fiction and the invasion of social networks, cover a vast surface. We will limit ourselves here to a work on a few audiovisual creations (cinema and series), without any pretension of exhaustiveness and by taking up some of the methodologies that made the success of the days “The reality of fiction,” which we have been organizing with Benoît Petitprêtre at the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers since 2018 (Petitprêtre, Perseil, Pesqueux, 2018).

We shall retain here four salient facts, which seem particularly representative of the evolution of the drug framework. Two very general evolutions, and two more national facts, one American, the other French.

The first element that appears particularly clear in our societies and in the media representations of them is the trivialization of life with drugs. The concept of addiction has become widespread and tends to be confused with the equally “catch-all” term drug. In 2014, the MILDT (Interministerial Mission for the Fight against Drugs and Drug Addiction) changed its name to MILDECA: addictive behaviors replaced drug addiction. Thus, in 2023, we are *addicted* not only to substances, whose use is legal or illegal, but also to video games, gambling, work, sex and even TV fictions (*binge-watching*) or luxury. This multiplication of addictions seems to de-dramatize the life of addicts: we would all be, more or less, addicted to something. All the more so since the limit between the licit and the illicit is less and less able to be grasped, especially if we refer to the use of drugs or cannabis, which has been legalized in many North American states for a few years.

Living with drugs, to use the title of the book edited by Alessandro Stella and Anne Coppel (2021), has become not only a socially and politically accepted reality in many parts of the world (though a practice that is opposed in many others), but also in many audiovisual creations where the protagonists are drug addicts. This trend is not completely new, since in his time Sherlock Holmes was also portrayed as a cocaine addict in the novels of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.¹ Much more recently, on television, drug-loving heroes are proliferating, drugs of legal use—alcohol, tobacco (whose presence has been less marked for several years now, particularly in France, due to the application of the 1991 Évin law) —but also more and more often drugs, whose use is precisely on the borderline between the legal and the illegal. Two examples are medical series in which the main actors’ addiction to opioids such as Vicodin constitutes one of the main dramatic springs: *House* (USA, 2004–2012) and *Nurse Jackie* (USA, 2009–2015). At the same time, other series feature characters who live happily with their addictions, often multiple, such as *Shameless* (United Kingdom, 2004–2013; USA, 2011–2021), or *Irresponsible* (France, 2016–2019). In the profusion of French and American comedies, both in the cinema and on television, the character of the pot-smoking “slacker” seems

to have become an almost recurrent feature, again contributing to the trivialization of “living with drugs.”

And yet—this will be the second point—there must be suppliers and therefore merchants, entrepreneurs. The most important recent evolution in the framing of drugs is undoubtedly economic. To retrace the path of the last fifty years in broad strokes, one could say that at the beginning of this period, drugs were essentially represented as a vector object of certain forms of deviance and even criminality. This is what Howard S. Becker showed in *Outsiders*. During the 1980s, with the influence of a subject outside the debate but still interfering with drugs, AIDS, it was the medical point of view that emerged to promote, progressively, harm reduction and therefore a health-oriented framing of the theme. In 2003, during our first-round table at the Sorbonne, we were confronted with this evolution. However, since the end of the 2000s, or even the beginning of the 2010s, drugs have also become an economic issue. Its protagonists are no longer only criminal actors or individuals suffering from addiction, but also entrepreneurs.

In fiction and the media, these entrepreneurs, whose legal activity has become established in some North American states, are no longer just the dealers of mafia groups. More and more frequently, they are portrayed in a sympathetic way as small businessmen or shopkeepers. The number of creations, French and American, that rather positively show the exercise of these small illicit businesses has become important, from *Weeds* (USA, 2005–2012) to *Family Business* (France, 2019–2021), through *High Maintenance* (USA, 2016–2020) or the films *Paulette* (France, 2012) or *Five* (France, 2016). The characters are “nice” traffickers who come to this activity in order to make ends meet and their little business is not described in a critical way but appears most of the time justified. If many fictions continue to deal with the existence of large criminal enterprises living off of drugs, the series *Breaking Bad* (USA, 2008–2013) aims to show that in fact an opposition can exist between a small business and a large mafia group, led in this case by a fast-food owner. In all cases, including the darker creations of police inspiration, such as *Gomorra* (Italy, film, 2012, and series, 2014–2021) or *Cannabis* (France-Spain, 2016), the fictions show that the production and distribution of drugs obey the laws of the market and conform to the uses of management and marketing.

Finally, we will briefly discuss what seems to be the main elements of the American and French frameworks today.

In the United States, the priority drug issue now seems to be opioid-containing drugs, whose overuse has led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people, making them the most dangerous drugs. It is even claimed that these opioids kill more people than guns and car accidents combined and contribute to lower life expectancy.² So much so that there is now talk of an epidemic and even President Trump had seized on the subject by declaring it a public health emergency.³ Two quick comments, in terms of framing. First, if it were still necessary, this situation

vividly confirms the ideas developed by François-Xavier Dudouet on the role of the pharmaceutical industry that controls the legal drug market. There is no such thing as an illegal drug, there are only drugs whose use is illegal for certain social actors, but practically always legal for the big pharmaceutical groups. On the other hand, to take up part of the analysis of the doctoral thesis of Rufin Nzalakanda (Lirsa / Cnam) on the frauds committed by this type of company, they are able to enlist prescribers, experts and the media, who are able to promote the advantages of their drugs, even if they are dangerous drugs such as opioids. These groups have been successful in positively framing mass-produced and marketed substances, as Purdue Pharma did with OxyContin.

Finally, very briefly, a few words on the confusion that prevails in France in terms of framing. Confusion because the theme appears irregularly on the political and media agenda, irregularly in terms of time and in terms of the sense of framing. Indeed, if the general evolution of the framework described earlier—criminalization, then public health, then economic angle—seems to have started in France, with not only numerous fictions de-dramatizing drug use but also parliamentary works initiated in the field of cannabis well-being and economic exploitation—an interesting event occurred four years ago, which corresponds perfectly to an attempt of reframing. On September 17, 2019, four ministers (Interior, Justice, and Public Accounts) went to Marseille to outline the government’s new—essentially repressive—strategy against drugs, including a reform of the “anti-stups” office. Similarly, after extensive parliamentary work on recreational cannabis, fueled by numerous expert hearings, which led to a relatively consensual report between the French left and right in 2021,⁴ Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin (implicitly endorsed by the Élysée) closed the debate by recalling a formula that had been used in prevention messages in the 1980s: “Drugs are shit!” For the national elections of 2022 in France, the subject of “drugs,” which had been much discussed the previous year, was hardly discussed at all, as the war in Ukraine and, before that, the candidacy of Éric Zemmour, had monopolized the media attention.⁵ In this way, we understand to what extent, before any political action in this field, the issues of framing—the way of posing the problem, to synthesize to the extreme—remain fundamental and their analysis primordial in research on drug policies.

Endnotes

- 1 See in particular Conan Doyle, A. (1890). *The Sign of the Four*, and, among the many studies, <https://www.ulyces.co/longs-formats/sherlock-holmes-cocaine-docteur-wats-on-drogue/>
- 2 “In the U.S., opioids kill more than guns and car accidents combined.” *Raw/France TV Info*. 26 January 2018.
- 3 See, for example, “Donald Trump Makes Opioid Crisis a ‘National Health Emergency,’” <https://www.letemps.ch/monde/donald-trump-crise-opiaces-une-urgence-sanitaire-nationale,10/27/2017>.
- 4 <https://www2.assembleenationale.fr/content/download/341940/3351816/version/1/file/210505+Report+cannabis+recreational.pdf>
- 5 See S. Perseil, “La problématique des drogues dans les élections françaises de 2022: un rendez-vous raté?” *Politiques des drogues*, n°3, November 2022.

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