

Review of *Synthetic Panics—The Symbolic Politics of Designer Drugs*

Author: Philip Jenkins
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In the late 1920s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) planned and then implemented a nationwide system for reporting and recording crime. The way Michael Maltz tells the story, the primary motivation for the new crime statistics program was the fact that the members of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) were concerned about “the publicity about ‘crime waves’ generated by the press” (1977:32). At that time neither the FBI nor the IACP would have thought about their problem in these terms, but in fact they were trying to avert what apparently was about to become an early twentieth century moral panic.

According to Howard Becker, in society there are moral crusaders who are so offended by certain social actions or phenomena that they create moral panics to stigmatize as evil that which they find offensive (1963:147-8). Over the years, Philip Jenkins has demonstrated that he has a good eye for a moral panic. For example, he showed it when he explored the popular image of serial killers as a phenomenon that never really was what it was proclaimed to be (1994a), and he showed it again in his analysis of the public response to a menacing ice age that never arrived (1994b).

In his new book on moral panics related to manufactured chemicals, sardonically named *Synthetic Panics*, Jenkins again shows his ability to understand and appreciate a good moral panic. Using his own words to describe what others have argued about twentieth century drug scares, in this book Jenkins shows how “the intensity of cultural reactions to a particular chemical does not necessarily reflect the actual social harm or individual damage it causes” (p. 2-3). Specifically, using several examples of what are popularly known as “designer drugs,” Jenkins demonstrates how American culture in the late twentieth century has repeatedly responded to symbolic crusades that have been grounded in the uncertain terrain of public hysteria about synthetic chemical substances.

In the first chapter, Jenkins identifies and explains the sociological themes he is writing about and places his argument about synthetic drugs in the context of earlier research on drugs, drug scares, and symbolic crusades. In this chapter he highlights the semiotic value of drugs for symbolic crusaders intent on fomenting moral panic in America, the importance of the media in this process, and the interest of contemporary scholars—particularly social constructionists—in this phenomenon. He also acknowledges the difficulties of conceptualizing “synthetic drugs” and defining “designer drugs.”

Each succeeding chapter tells a story of a moral panic and a symbolic crusade involving a particular synthetic drug. For example, in Chapter Two, “Speed Kills,” Jenkins tells the story of methamphetamines in the 1960s. He describes how this manufactured drug was associated with “such familiar villains as the Mafia and outlaw motorcycle gangs” (p. 30) and consequently “developed a powerful, damaging association with extreme aggression and violence, through

its ability to turn users into amoral speed freaks” (p. 29). He shows how a synthetic drug originally manufactured by legitimate pharmaceutical companies that was once not only legal but also widely popular became the object of a moral panic that ultimately resulted in “strict legislation and a significant expansion of federal criminal-justice powers” (p. 38).

In Chapter Eight, “Rave Drugs and Rape Drugs,” Jenkins writes about a class of synthetic drugs that gained notoriety during the middle of the 1990s. He tells the story of how the party culture associated with teenagers resulted in fear among their baby-boomer parents and consequently an anti-drug response by the media and government agencies. These drugs, such as GHB and Rohypnol, were linked to wild parties and sexual molestation. In his conclusion to the chapter he wrote, “For all their inaccuracies, media reports about Rohypnol and GHB had an overwhelming impact on public perceptions of the substances, which were now irrevocably labeled rape drugs” (p. 182).

Other chapters tell the stories of PCP, Ecstasy, Ice, CAT, and Redneck Cocaine. In the last chapter, Jenkins leaves us with a troubling and fatalistic conclusion. He writes, “As neurochemistry and chemical technologies advance, the stage is set for persistent confrontations between an entrenched anti-drug bureaucracy and the demonized phantom chemists, the evil scientific masterminds. The outcome, in short, will be recurrent synthetic panics” (p. 197).

In the end, this book is about the public hysteria about the illicit use and manufacture of chemical substances and the symbolic crusades that were nourished by the moral panics that were constructed in response to that hysteria. That being the case, Jenkins needs to do two things for his readers. First, he needs to make sure that we understand and appreciate the social processes by which drugs have come to serve as an appropriate if not propitious object around which to construct the hysteria that is needed to arouse a moral panic. He tries to do this when he writes, “The idea that drugs can reduce users to primitive savagery is inextricably bound up with the racial fears that have always been so critical an element of America’s drug scares” (p. 11). That’s true, but it’s more complicated than that. Since the symbolic value of drugs as a particularly valuable object of moral scorn underlies the specific argument of the book concerning the public response to synthetic drugs, more on the symbolic value of drugs would have been helpful.

Second, because his focus is specifically on synthetic or designer drugs, Jenkins needs to convince us that there is something uniquely interesting about such drugs that makes them particularly well-suited to the construction of moral panic. Related to this second concern, he needs to explain clearly how and why some drugs are called synthetic while other are not. Starting on page 5 he writes, “[Synthetic drugs] terrify precisely because they are manufactured by scientific processes, thus drawing on fears concerning the fearsome potential of unchecked experiment.” That’s an interesting explanation, and as he writes on page 7, it does indicate why “synthetic chemicals arouse deep-seated fears concerning the power of science and technology to reshape human nature and subvert or corrupt humanity in a well-intentioned quest for social betterment.” What it does not do is clarify for the reader how the process by which heroin was produced by Bayer is any less scientific than the process by which MDMA was produced by Merck.

The book is interesting more for the stories it tells than for the explanations it provides. The social constructionist argument relative to drugs has been

expounded as well if not better in the past, notably by Jenkins, and the argument that synthetic drug panics are uniquely interesting or important is not particularly convincing. Nonetheless, the stories about synthetic drug panics and the symbolic crusades they stimulated are fascinating, and not many people could tell them better than Philip Jenkins.

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References

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