



Cannabis Britannica: A History of the Present

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review of: J. Mills (2003) *Cannabis Britannica: Empire, Trade and Prohibition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (PB, pp. 252, £18, ISBN 0-19-927881-4)

Introduction

When in 2003 James Mills launched his book *Cannabis Britannica*, the issue of the policy regarding cannabis was being discussed at the political and social levels. Just one year earlier, in 2002, the British government had announced that cannabis would be reclassified, after almost thirty years of social pressure calling for a review of this piece of legislation. It was expected that the book would shed some light on the historical origins of British legislation on cannabis, and in this way challenge or confirm many of the 'facts' or 'myths' that are still a matter of debate. History, as the author rightly observes, is at the heart of policy.

Mills in this book begins the task of examining the historical origins of the laws and policies regarding cannabis in the United Kingdom. The book covers the period between 1800 and 1928: from the time that the British learned about the uses of cannabis in India until the establishment of national and international legislation on cannabis and other drugs in the 1920s. Through addressing history, the author aims to reveal the origins and development of the legislation, attitudes and discussions in relation to cannabis, in the United Kingdom.

The interest in studying different drugs seems to change according to the political and social context. Indeed, the interest in cannabis is related to changes in the legislation of many European countries. The last thirty years have seen the publication of a number of titles related specifically to cannabis. The nature of these titles is quite diverse: illustrated guides, pharmacology, literature, 'pot art', industrial uses, conspiracy theories, cookery books, psychology, anthropological studies, shamanism and healing,

medicine and pharmacy, or general history, in relation to one of the most infamous illicit substances in the Western world. In this context it is thus hardly surprising that cannabis legislation has come under review in the United Kingdom. Therefore, a renewed interest in this substance has encouraged not only publications but also different cultural expressions. In films, TV programmes, comedy, or music, the reference to cannabis seems to reflect a more tolerant approach to the substance.

Although there is the impression of a surfeit of information on cannabis, there are few studies rigorously to have approached the task of examining the historical aspects and circumstances that have constituted the sources to British attitudes towards, and legislation on, cannabis. Moreover, much of the available literature is based on the repetition of anecdotes lacking sufficient verification of the historical facts. *Cannabis Britannica* aims to fill that gap.

Research about illicit drugs in the United Kingdom has seen a number of important publications, mainly from an historical perspective. Due to the particular characteristics of what is known as the British system of drug control, many of these texts have focused on the way in which this system has developed. In particular, these studies have focused on opium and heroin (Berridge and Edwards, 1981; Stimson and Oppenheimer, 1982; Strang and Gossop, 2005). However, as Mills observes, a similar exercise had not been undertaken specifically about the politics of cannabis. While other books about cannabis have tackled the history of cannabis as a single entity in particular approaches to the substance, i.e., pharmacological, psychological, cultural, economic, etc., Mills addresses history as a subject in itself. His extensive research into files, archives, official documents, old manuscripts and, particularly, his work in recovering documents in Indian Archives, represents a substantial effort in the recompilation of first-hand material.

The debate on cannabis policy in the United Kingdom has evolved during the past three years, thus a reading of the book suggests many more coincidences and similarities than one might expect with events that have occurred in the past. In some way, as the title of this review suggests, many of the ideas supporting political and agendas on the topic of cannabis produced in the past and are still reproduced in the present. The irony is that many of these conceptions and attitudes, produced as they were in the context of colonialism and in the moral environment of the nineteenth century, have generated our current policy on cannabis. Nevertheless, the same arguments are used today to defend or to oppose changes in a long overdue review of the legislation. Some examples can illustrate these similarities.

Medicine, Poison, Vice, Badness, Illness... a Vicious Circle

The first aspect in Mills' historical review is related to the diversity of opinions about cannabis and its effects. Similar divergences are found in the political discussion on cannabis reclassification. In particular, it is interesting to see how the reiterative ambiguity between those who consider cannabis a poison, on the one hand, and those who regard it as a remedy, on the other, tends to be replicated in the existing debate.

The origin of this ambiguity can be found in the way in which cannabis has been defined by medical doctors, temperance campaigners, politicians, or entrepreneurs. As Mills argues, the manner in which current considerations of cannabis are constructed finds an echo in the way those officials and scientists have defined cannabis. In other words: that the interests and personal opinions of those who have had the task of informing others about cannabis throughout history have determined the evaluation (positive or negative) of the substance.

For example, in Chapter Two, the different ways cannabis was described by travellers and traders prior to 1842 are presented. Mills describes how the first account about the use of ‘bhang’¹ was part of ‘lurid tales of exotic vices’, when its use was associated with inebriation and aphrodisia. Here, he suggests that in the context of colonialism, and with stricter behavioural codes, the moral superiority of the Europeans was reinforced by comparison with the ‘exotic’ traditions of the natives of other continents.

One of the first reports on cannabis published by the British government, aside from the accounts written by Spanish and Portuguese doctors, was issued by Whitelaw Ainslei. His *Materia Indica* (1826) became the first attempt by the British at compiling a list of the drugs and medicines used in India. Ainslei took on the task, yet when writing about the uses of cannabis or Indian hemp, he preferred to emphasise its inebriating effects rather than its ritual and medical uses. As suggested by Mills, Ainslei’s views could have been influenced by the fact that he was a committed Christian and a teetotaler who, besides his view on cannabis, was also the author of a range of publications with moral and religious content.

In contrast, the medical properties of cannabis have also been praised. Later on at mid-century, Dr. William O’Shaughnessy (O’Shaughnessy, 1842) published the *Bengal Dispensatory and Companion to the Pharmacopoeia*. The section on cannabis was extensive and was based on his experiments with the substance. O’Shaughnessy’s work “was the most comprehensive assessment of the properties of cannabis preparations and of their effects as drugs and as medicines to appear by the hand of a British scientist in India during the entire period of colonial rule” (p.41). Here, again, Mills adds his interpretation of the enthusiastic tone of this account on cannabis. He suggests that the perception of cannabis as a ‘wonder drug’ advocated by O’Shaughnessy can be related to the fact that this was a “period when fortunes could be made from medical innovation”. O’Shaughnessy, as Mills explains, was “casting around for the means to establish a reputation and some degree of financial security” (p.45) .

The second aspect refers to the way in which ‘the cannabis problem’ emerged as a political issue in British government. Mills dedicates Chapter Five to an analysis of the discussion of the issue of cannabis in Parliament. In 1891 MP Mark Stewart denounced that “the lunatic asylums of India are filled with ganja smokers”. Mills suggests that in Stewart’s doing so, his purpose was also to attack the opium politics in the Far East, which at that time were increasingly under scrutiny as being morally questionable. Following Stewart’s allegation, the issue of cannabis was again adopted by another MP, William S. Caine, who proposed the formation of a Commission of Experts to inquire

1 Beverage made of Indian hemp flowers.

into and report on the cultivation, trade, and consumption of cannabis in the colonies. Thus, the Indian Hemp Drugs Commission (IHDC) was established in 1892. As Mills describes, the IHDC gathered information throughout the subcontinent; it compiled eight volumes of statements and conclusions over a period of seven months covering 1893-1894. Their investigations brought together evidence about the extension of cannabis use; the ritual, religious and medical uses, and the variety of appreciations of the substance. Finally, the IHDC stipulated that cannabis use was harmless if it was taken in moderation. Rather than recommending its prohibition, the IHDC opted for suggesting the government to encourage moderate use.

These recommendations are frequently cited in publications and contemporary reports; however, Mills encourages us to view their assertions with a “healthy dose of suspicion”. He refers to the fact that the members of IHDC were officers in the service of the Government of India, and they were quite aware of the economic revenue represented by the cannabis trade. On the other hand, he also points out that MPs Stewart and Caine were temperance campaigners who might have seen the issue of cannabis as a strategy towards pursuing the discussion on the use of opium in the colonies, and thus express their opposition to the Government of India.

In general, with these and more examples, Mills shows how there are different views on cannabis, depending on the personal appreciation of those experts, officers or doctors who reported on it. Despite the diverse opinions on cannabis, provided by scientists, officials or temperance campaigners, the prevalent view has associated cannabis with insanity, criminality, and with those “other suspicious substances, cocaine and opium”. As a conclusion, Mills states that “the development of this distrust of the drug was due to political, moral, and cultural factors that often resulted in exaggerated, ill-founded, and downright mistaken perceptions” (p.218).

Evidently, this is a sufficiently logical explanation about *why* cannabis has become a problem. Nevertheless, this argument is not strong enough to providing an understanding of the extent to which the same factors may be influencing the present discussion on cannabis: in other words, *how* the ‘problem’ of cannabis is constructed. Moreover, Mills fails directly to tackle contemporary discussion of drug research, related to the ‘problematization’ of cannabis use; the emergence of the concept of ‘drug addiction’; or the dynamics of power and knowledge in the construction of those social problems such as ‘insanity’ and ‘criminality’ that are associated with cannabis.

In the examples cited, it is possible to see how knowledge of cannabis is inseparable from the dynamics of power amongst different perspectives on the uses and effects of cannabis. For instance, when Ainslei decided to portray cannabis as a ‘moral poison’, or when O’Shaughnessy advocated for a definition of cannabis as a ‘miraculous remedy’, the underlying question is how those ideas, still prevalent in current debates about cannabis, become formed.

Taking into account contemporary discussion about drug research, it would be expected from a history of cannabis – as of any other similar substance – for it to be framed in the context of ‘problematization’; in other words, the task of the researcher should include an analysis of the historical and cultural conditions under which the perception of

cannabis as a problem was constructed, the specific actors and institutions that promulgated this view, and the discursive procedures through which it has been reproduced.

In *Cannabis Britannica*, the analysis of the discursive formations and the actors behind those statements are explained following what can be called the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. Nevertheless, the aim of revealing the origin of the current attitudes towards and policies about cannabis remains unsolved. If the purpose of *Cannabis Britannica* is for it to make a diagnosis of the present, solely the interpretation of historical facts is insufficient.

A possible alternative for answering the questions is by reframing Mills’ history of cannabis within the wider discussions concerning contemporary drug research. In particular, it is proposed that the work of Michel Foucault be used as one possible avenue, among many others, of addressing the past, towards understanding the present. In order to develop this idea certain concepts from the work of Michel Foucault will briefly be presented.

A Post-Structuralist Approach to the History of Cannabis

Many of the topics in contemporary drugs research are similar to those studied by Foucault; for example, the issues of ‘madness’ or the ‘criminalisation’ of drug use are topics central to Foucault’s work. However, given that there are exceptions in some works, such as those of Levine (1978), Bourgois (2000), Duff (2004), Zibbell (2004), Acevedo and Valero-Silva (2005), it is possible to say that Foucault’s ideas concerning drugs research have remained relatively unexplored.

Foucault was interested in understanding the origin and definition of problematic situations in Western culture, by focusing on the process or normalisation of particular aspects of human experience. His objective “has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (Foucault, 1983: 283). He approached history as the source for his material, yet he was neither interested in the sequence of facts, nor had he tried to demonstrate the veracity of those facts. Instead, he addresses history in order to understand processes of normalisation in Western societies.

In his earliest books, Foucault analysed historical facts in order to disentangle systems of institutions and discursive practices (Dreyfuss and Rabinow, 1983: xiv). For example, in *Madness and Civilization* (1973), Foucault analysed the origin of madness by revealing a number of discourses from different disciplines that define and categorise insanity. When studying the ‘problematization’ of madness, he focused on the development of the asylum. He shows how within the asylum, various discourses about mental illness/health, multiple identities (such as the medical staff, politicians, managers, clergy, the public, and the insane), and the individuals who assume those identities, interact and how this interaction changes over time. The same can be said for his studies on illness, punishment, and sexuality (Acevedo and Valero-Silva, 2005).

Foucault called our attention to examining the historical context as the realm within which to understand how some ‘problems’ emerge. As mentioned before, he was interested not only in the sequential facts, but he also considered the environment in which political, social, economic, and cultural dimensions determines ‘*who*’ (actors and institutions) talks about problems, and ‘*how*’ those problems are defined (discursive formation). Moreover, it is possible to say that his interest in history was not necessarily in the collection of historical events, but what is between those events. It must be noted that Foucault was not concerned with a period-based problem (i.e., the classic era), but as a ‘problem-based’ approach (i.e., the emergence of madness). His purpose was neither to validate one or other form of defining madness, nor to prove that those definitions are biased or reliable; he attempted to analyse how these discourses or statements emerge in the context of a particular period.

From this brief summary it is possible to see how Foucault analysed different institutions in order to further his quest into explicatioin of the emergence of problems in Western societies. Foucault’s general method is called by Dreyfuss and Rabinow (1993) ‘interpretive analytics’. The method combines both ‘archaeological’ and ‘genealogical’ stages. Let me describe those concepts briefly. The aim is to introduce discussion of how to develop the rich material collected by Mills in the creation of a ‘history of the present’.

The first stage is referred to by Foucault as ‘archaeology’. ‘Archaeology’ signifies the work of collecting facts, in the form of statements, representations or expressions, about a particular situation (or problem) during a given period of time. The idea is to collect those statements without offering any judgement on their veracity or whether they make sense. Instead, Foucault proposed to treat what is said in the human sciences as a ‘discourse-object’ (Dreyfuss and Rabinow, 1983: xiv).

Archaeology is not necessarily history, in the sense that:

The archaeologist is not interested in the empirical succession of events, nor is he interested in transcendental historical rules, which would state the conditions of the possibility of all change. Rather, the archaeologist is interested in the way one discursive formation comes to be substituted for another, that is, in how to reveal the relations that characterise the temporality of discursive. (Foucault, 1972: 167)

In summary, archaeology allows the identification of discursive formations about a particular problem in a certain historical period. This must be complemented with a second stage: genealogy. Genealogy aims to reveal the hidden origin of discourses, the material context in which they emerge, and the ways in which they may favour particular interests. Nevertheless, Foucault warns us of the temptation to ‘interpret’ those collected facts, in the sense, of trying to find a ‘deeper’ truth. On the contrary: genealogy avoids the search for depth. Instead, “it seeks the surfaces of events, small details, minor shifts, and subtle contours”. Foucault’s genealogy focuses on the duality power/knowledge as the driving force in the conformation of discourses, normalisation of practices, and definition of subjects. In fact, genealogy and archaeology are complementary.

From this brief reference to Foucault's 'method', it is possible to say that 'archaeology' represents a way of collecting information, in which there is neither interpretation of the facts nor a linear organisation of those facts. In this archaeology, the aim is merely to collect facts, not even in a chronological fashion, but indicating the nature of discourses exposed in a determined period of time regarding a particular situation. As a result, the information collected in the form of statements or discourses is part of a configuration of the problem.

Now the question for this review is whether or not Mills' *Cannabis Britannica* can be considered a form of 'archaeology' of the cannabis problem. His attention to detail, his rigorous method of presenting historical documents, and his effort in going further beyond events represents a very important effort in collecting historical material of a high quality. However, his concern regarding interpretation of the circumstances and the intentions of 'discourses' and their 'authors' may differ from the 'purely archaeological' approach in Foucault's view. Nevertheless, Mills' account of history actually informs us of current perceptions of cannabis. For example, he describes how the practices of 'inebriation' were evaluated by the 'moral standards' of British officers and travellers influenced by the Temperance ideas of their time. In addition, he reveals how the 'criminalisation' of cannabis issues could have been produced by the resistance tactics of local entrepreneurs when the British tried to impose a taxation system onto the production and thus sale of cannabis.

These attitudes have prevailed throughout the twentieth century, and are still unquestionable. In particular, I would like to emphasise Mills' analysis of the Indian asylum as an interesting case to understand the origin of the link between cannabis and madness. By comparing some ideas between Mills' analysis and Foucault's study of problems such as madness and criminality, it is possible to open up certain avenues to further exploration.

'Cannabis Psychosis' or the 'Indian Asylums are filled with ganja²-smokers'

In Chapter Five Mills argues that the Indian asylums, alongside other colonial institutions such as prisons and schools, served as instruments of domination in the colonies. In the case of the asylum he states:

Throughout the nineteenth century the British had set up a network of lunatic asylums across colonial India. At first these had been established to separate out Indian soldiers that had gone mad from the rest of the regiment and later on the British found that they were useful places in which to place those that they found dangerous and disruptive in the local population. (p.85)

This idea was developed in a previous book by Mills, '*Madness, Cannabis and Colonialism*' (2000). In it Mills argued that institutions such as clinics, prisons, schools, and reformatories were used as means of disciplining the colonies. In *Cannabis Britannica*, Mills re-examines the issue and demonstrates how "cannabis use and

2 Common name for cannabis.

cannabis users became categorized as a social problem in the asylums of colonial India". Mills explains the process. Firstly, the asylums had established a process for registering their patients, which involved completing a form. One section of this form described the possible cause of dementia. This was often difficult to determine at an initial examination. Nevertheless, the form needed to be completed. In addition, police officers were normally responsible for completing this form and they could have thought that '*ganja*-smoking' was a convenient and believable cause of dementia to use in completing the form. In this way, cannabis became part of the process of marginalisation of this part of Indian population.

The next step came when the superintendents decided that those individuals in their care were in fact representative of cannabis users as a whole across the country (p.87). In Foucault's terms, it can be said that this 'dividing practice' of confining part of the population in the asylum allowed the development of a 'scientific discourse' on dementia, in which cannabis was associated with this condition.

The third step was to delimit, both within the walls of the institution and the body of the cannabis users, the 'typical signs' of the disease. Recalling Foucault's ideas, the asylum and similarly the clinic became the spaces where signs, symptoms and marks can be observed (Foucault, 1975). In Mills' words:

The asylum was the place where the British medical officer created an image to be attached to a human type or category and it was where the hemp user of the colonial imagination was 'given flesh'. (p.89)

The final step in this process of creating a social problem out of cannabis use and cannabis users was to translate this issue into a statistic. Mills argues that the asylum statistics convinced many of the link between cannabis use and mental illness. In fact, the register of this and other types of information by the British can be understood as part of the changing role of the State in administrating people and goods.

Based on the monopoly of violence and the presence of the British army in India, colonial domination was possible. From there, the administration of Indian resources was part of the economic interest of British officials. This process of administration and register was carried out by British officers and doctors, which could explain their interpretation of what was a normal practice in India:

The asylum statistics ...were compiled by British doctors in India who were driven by a need to fill in the forms and who were mystified by much of the behaviour of the locals because of their profound ignorance of the societies they govern. (p.216)

As mentioned by Foucault, statistics constitute the science of the State. In his approach to the notion of governmentality, Foucault pointed out the increasing role of the State in administrating social issues:

[T]he art of government ... is concerned with answering the question of how to introduce economy – that is to say, the correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the family, ... how to introduce this meticulous attention of the father towards his family, into the management of the state. (Foucault, 1991b: 92)

In this process, described by Mills and enhanced by Foucault's ideas, it is possible to understand the way cannabis became a problem of mental health. Interestingly enough, a similar discussion is being highlighted as a dominant argument against the re-classification of cannabis in the United Kingdom. When examining the current debate, the issue of cannabis and madness is at the centre of the controversy on cannabis re-classification. Redefined under the term 'cannabis psychosis', and without attempting to verify the scientific authority of those studies, it is interesting to note how the connection cannabis/madness *suddenly* has attracted the attention of the government and media.

However, as analysed in previous paragraphs, the association is not at all new, and it has been given different names. It is interesting to note how the notions 'cannabis and madness' in the nineteenth century, the 'reefer madness' of the 1920s in America, and the current 'cannabis psychosis' are similar terms for an old association. Ironically, this association, developed more than one hundred years ago in the context of colonialism, seems to take prevalence in contemporary political debate. In synthesis, a careful reading of *Cannabis Britannica* can tell us more of the history of the present.

A History of the Present

The examples provided by Mills in his rigorous approach to the history of cannabis reveal a number of coincidences with and resemblances to the present discussion. In *Cannabis Britannica*, the author pays special attention to the historical detail. He goes further and deeper in trying to discover more about what was said, and why it was said. By describing the facts and the circumstances in which cannabis was made a 'problem', the author attempts to present an objective view of many subjective accounts on cannabis. As suggested in this review, a reading of *Cannabis Britannica* can provide valuable material for diagnosing the present. This diagnosis can be enhanced by using Foucault's ideas regarding the emergence of problems, and the way in which people are rendered subjects. The discussions about cannabis re-classification in the last three years represent a privileged moment to see how many of the arguments that have remained covered by history or restricted to certain institutions emerge in the context of the political debate. In this context, different discourses about cannabis have emerged, and they have defined not only the problem to be tackled but also the type of subjects that must be addressed by the policy.

Many more similarities can be drawn from reading *Cannabis Britannica*. Although Mills recommends that politicians and policy-makers take advantage of the historical lessons, the scope of the book goes beyond specialists and experts. The level of detail, the rigour of the investigation, and the richness of the historical sources represent a work of compulsory reference for those who wish to go beyond the anecdotes and popular belief. The second volume of this saga is eagerly anticipated.

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