

Travis Linnemann, *Meth Wars: Police, Media, Power*, New York: NYU Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781479878697 (cloth); ISBN: 9781479800025 (paper)

During the 2016 US presidential elections, Donald Trump's campaign purposefully aired anti-immigration adverts during airings of *The Walking Dead* TV show (Barsanti 2016). Data analytics suggested that viewers of the post-apocalyptic zombie saga would be receptive to such fear-driven messaging. The show itself is relentlessly bleak, focusing on small groups of survivors who need to be defended by violent authority figures from the roving hordes of undead which have overrun American towns and cities. In its first season, it introduced the character of Merle Dixon, a stereotypically racist, violent and untrustworthy "white trash" criminal. His sleaziness is visually cued with a shot of his personal stash of narcotics, including a bag of blue methamphetamine. This was a homage to the "blue sky meth" produced on another TV drama, *Breaking Bad*. One of the most acclaimed series of all time, it portrays Walter White, a downwardly mobile chemistry teacher in New Mexico, who after being diagnosed with cancer turns to crime to provide for his family's future. White's personal life and morality disintegrate as he enters the shadow world of meth, encountering depraved users, ruthless Mexican cartels, and white power gangs. Between 2008 and 2013, the show built a memorable visual grotesquery, from informants' decapitated heads strapped on tortoises to Dantesque drug dens.

As Travis Linnemann argues in his important new book, such nightmare images are central to the political and media discourses which have arisen around the drug. Writing as both an academic criminologist and a former probation officer, in *Meth Wars* Linnemann aims to challenge the belief that it is a uniquely terrible substance ravaging the American "heartland". The book sets out to explore how the politics of meth order social life beyond the drug itself. Its focus is on the material and ideological foundations of the war on meth, in particular its imaginaries—the media and police reports, documentaries, dramas, and word of mouth which combine to "speak of the drug in dire and spectacular terms" (p.13). The book extensively documents how this panic helps to normalize and extend increasingly coercive

government. Its argument goes beyond just criticising the war on drugs as a failure which disproportionately punishes the poor and marginal; instead, it makes the provocative claim that capitalist society *needs* regular moral panics about the perceived monstrosity of drugs. The wars on various drugs (and crime and terror) serve as “fetishistic disavowal”, in which drug use is depicted as the cause of poverty, despair and alienation, obscuring the seemingly immutable inequality and violence of social life. As he puts it at the beginning of the book:

It is no coincidence, then, that the American experiments with prohibitionist and punitive drug-control strategies did not begin with the Nixon administration but rather grew in lockstep with the inequality, unrest, slums, and ghettos of early industrial capitalism. Much like Marx’s understanding of religion, the drug war is not the cause of human misery but a symptom, the “sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions”. (p.9)

Linnemann’s central thesis is that cultural discourses around the spectacular obscenity of drugs both obscure and allow us to live with the mundane evils of late capitalist life. This is compellingly argued through wide ranging case studies.

It begins with an analysis of *Breaking Bad*. While the series has been praised for its exceptional writing, acting, and cinematography, its creator Vince Gilligan admitted to knowing little about meth when he began writing, initially basing its stories on media accounts and police discourses (p.27). Instead of being a realistic account of the drug trade, as the similarly acclaimed drama *The Wire* aspired to be, it is best assessed as a kind of deranged Horatio Alger tale, in which White and his partner Jesse Pinkman go from cooking meth in a decrepit trailer to running a small empire (p.42). At the beginning of the series White is shown as bullied and hopeless, and without medical insurance, when he is diagnosed with cancer. However, this death sentence frees him to choose a life of crime. As the series progresses it oscillates between presenting him as both a “Satanized demon” and a figure freed from the constraints of conventional society. In a climactic moment he tells his

estranged wife Skyler “I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really—*I was alive*” (quoted on p.36). White embodies the destructive freedom of late capitalism, sowing havoc and murdering while the money comes rolling in. Although the show is clear to show his corrosive effect on everything around him, it also shows his boldness and ambition (temporarily) freeing him from the “mounting insecurities and anxieties of modern life” (p.37). And White is just one of the many successful criminal entrepreneurs that cast a wide cultural shadow, from other fictional characters like Tony Montana in *Scarface* to real life drug lords like Pablo Escobar and El Chapo Guzman. The state and media present them as exceptional monsters; but it is their very willingness to do bad things which makes them successful businessmen.

Middle class home and families are starkly contrasted with the meth users who appear through the series. At best, these “tweakers” are hopeless victims; at worst, dangerous zombies. In its third chapter, the book explores how images of the “white trash meth head” are used to extend punitive class control (p.47). Anti-drug projects like *Faces of Meth* and *Not Even Once* aim to dissuade users by presenting graphic mug shots of faces rendered broken and grotesque by abuse. This resonates with wider discourses about a “white underclass”, living in trailer park squalor, serving as a rural counterpart to the conservative discourses of urban “black super predators” (p.54). Drug abuse is presented as the “cause and effect, beginning and end”, of their problems rather than being a symptom of wider poverty and other social ills (p.102). This allows the structural effects of deprivation to be blamed on the moral failings of individual degenerates, who in turn require policing and incarceration. This circuit is made most clear in the fourth chapter, which is built around first hand discussions with law enforcement officers. Linnemann demonstrates how police see themselves as patrolling a dangerous new frontier, in which they are the line dividing “a crude binary of sanctified victims, on the one hand, and monstrous offenders who exploit the permissiveness of American criminal justice and the luxuries of its prisons, on the other” (p.136).

The individual monster is part of a broader imagery about “meth land”, in which rural towns are depicted as collapsing under the weight of drug abuse. In such visions, formerly idyllic communities are destroyed by invasive threats (p.140). The only remedy is, of course, intensified state violence against the depraved “other”. The twinned narrative of decline and redemptive violence is timely when set against a backdrop of growing far-right populism and racism. Many of the interviews reminded me of Trump’s supporters’ chant of “Build the Wall”, with its focus on spatially buffering an imagined heartland from a dangerous outside, specifically the southern border with Mexico. His campaign successfully built upon an existing cultural imagery about narcotics and murderous immigrants. And the theme of meth-driven decline expressed throughout the book further resonated with such rhetoric. His inauguration speech (widely believed to have been written by his white nationalist advisors Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller) made gothic reference to “rusted out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation” and “the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives ... This American carnage stops right here and stops right now” (quoted in Blake 2017). Cleary, a heightened sense of social disorder possesses great political utility.

In the book’s final, and most impressive chapter, Linnemann explores the global projection of the meth war. A subset of the war on terror is a “cartel war discourse” in which drug smuggling and transnational gangs are described as terrifying new asymmetrical threats (p.181). State officials paint so-called narcoterror in deliberately opaque and even fantastical terms, full of unsubstantiated claims about Al-Queda and ISIS working with Mexican cartels. As one DEA official describes this lurid worldview: “If you want to visualize ungoverned space or a permissive environment, I tell people to simply think of the bar scene in the first *Star Wars* movie” (p.197). But in practice, campaigns against drugs are not about stopping the flow of narcotics or associated violence but about disciplining and organizing society according to the needs of accumulation. The ambitious “counternarcoterror” Plan Colombia provided resources to repress “dissident voices and armed revolutionaries in order to make way for Western business interests” (p.191). Drug policing is lucrative in itself with the state

seizing billions in assets from its enemies (p.210). As with the street level drug war, the global conflict needs its own villains. Most recently, El Chapo Guzman, former leader of the Sinaloa Cartel has filled this role. There is no disputing that he was the head of a brutal and murderous organization. However, official discourse goes beyond the cartel's actual crimes, depicting Guzman as a infernal force responsible for both millions of deaths and "the pain and misery of small American towns littered with burned-out buildings and degraded meth heads" (p.204). Like Pablo Escobar or Osama bin Laden, Guzman was the "threat, target, and enemy that the security state covets -its entire raison d'être" (p.208). The complex dynamics of extreme violence, refugees, state failure, and deindustrialization are cooked down to the spectacular evil of individuals who must be captured or killed. And once the threat is apparently neutralized, as with Chapo eventually being arrested, the cycle starts again, with the state drawing from a "bottomless reservoir of threats" (p.211).

Meth Wars lucidly demonstrates how the continual failure of the endless war on drugs is not fundamentally about bad policy or conservative prejudice. Instead, it comes from a cultural fetishization of nefarious substances and groups, which come to embody the manifold evils and dislocations of modern society, while obscuring its root causes. Further, the meth imaginary does the work of entrenching the power of the same state and business which are the architects of the structural misery and inequality of late capitalism. Although the book is focused primarily on the United States, it's focus on the drug fetish has a global relevance. In the Philippines, President Duterte has urged citizens to kill drug addicts, and has supported extrajudicial execution and vigilante groups. As one critic of the campaign has put it: "the results were welcomed by the public because they think that it's good for peace and order. We now have death squads on a national scale, but I'm not seeing public outrage" (quoted in Hincks 2016). In South Africa, a pervasive xenophobic discourse links asylum seekers with the drug trade, inspiring violent attacks against foreign nationals. This year a flyer was distributed in Pretoria which concluded "Nigerians, Pakistanis, Zimbabweans, etc. bring nothing but destruction; hijack our buildings; sell drugs; inject young South African ladies with drugs and sell them as prostitutes" (quoted in Davis 2016). Linnemann's book is a

key text for understanding the how moral panics about an infernal substance, and its diabolical seller, both stem from and further entrench the manifold contradictions of late capitalist society.

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