

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Kyle Grayson**, *Chasing Dragons: Security, Identity, and Illicit Drugs in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, 304 pp. \$29.95 paper (978-0-8020-9479-7), \$65.00 hardcover (978-0-8020-9287-8)

**S**ecurity, identity and illicit drugs are topical issues in Canadian society and Canadian sociology. One need not look farther than the on-going public debate over the Vancouver supervised injection facility to witness in practice the intermingling of the three concepts. Addressing them collectively is a challenge that Kyle Grayson tackles with vision and detail. *Chasing Dragons* examines through case studies how the intertwining of individual and political actions surrounding illicit drugs with discourses of security have influenced the construction of Canadian identity, reinforcing misrepresentation and marginalization and generating uncontested knowledge.

Grayson succinctly informs the reader in the preface:

all of the case studies analyzed ... demonstrate that Canadian discourses of security centred on illicit drugs, including their constitutive parts such as discourses of race, medicine, policing, and fear, have been central to and a reflection of relations of power that have produced particular definitions of 'Canadian' as well as the body politic that Canada has been said to represent" (p. xii).

Situating the case studies in their social and political discourses reveals a disturbing historical pattern in Canadian responses to illicit drugs that has been largely left unquestioned.

Grayson draws on Foucault's understanding of power and knowledge, and Butler's conceptualization of the other to illustrate the theory and practice of security and identity in Canada. He deconstructs drug policy and practices on the social and individual levels to help situate our current understanding of the "drug user" and "others" as the "problem." His corresponding attention to political processes situates his presentation of what it consequently means to be "Canadian."

A theme throughout Grayson's book is captured in the adage that "the more things change the more they stay the same." His case studies leave the reader wondering whether North American society is destined to repeat history without learning from it. The book's underlying mes-

sage, in chapters ranging from concerns with the 1908 *Opium Act* to the merits of the Le Dain Commission, is the need for critical examination that accounts for historical context. For example, Grayson explains that the Le Dain commission

abandoned the term ‘addict’ and replaced it with ‘user.’ What emerged was a fundamental shift within the power/relations made possible by the drugs discourse ... It opened up ... discursive space ... which would have been almost impossible ... within the Canadian drugs discourse a decade earlier. (pp. 152–153)

In addition to examining concepts of security, identity and illicit drugs, Grayson succeeds in providing an orderly, succinct, and yet detailed history of drug legislation and policy in Canada and North America generally, including current issues such as medical marijuana and ecstasy.

Less impressive is the empirical support for the book’s positions. At times the reader is left wondering about the depth of some details in support of Grayson’s arguments. The government reports he has largely drawn upon are written for intended audiences, and so it is difficult to take them as a representation of understanding illicit drugs, security and identity outside of one space and time. The book would have been strengthened considerably by interviews with key players in the field. In Grayson’s own words,

the analytic focal point of this study is how it has become possible for substances, people, places, and things to be interpreted in certain ways and not others, and how these interpretations change (or do not change) over time based on shifting appeals to, and interpretation of ‘facts’. (p. xiii)

It is likewise necessary for Grayson to support the facts he presents outside the views captured in existing, but not necessarily contextualized government documents.

*Chasing Dragons* leaves the reader with quite the lingering question of where we as consumers in society get our information? Grayson notes that “liberty and security are now to be considered an economy” (p. xi). If we cannot freely consume the information we require to make informed decisions, then how can we address the problems that we are faced with? How do we generate understanding outside such an economy? I am not convinced that Grayson provides the reader with an answer, but I am also quite sure that he did not set out to. Rather, his intent has been to raise critical awareness of our collective “insecurity” in our Canadian identity in the hope that it will lead to social action. As he says in the final page of his book, “it is my sincere hope that I have made

Canadian security and identity as interpreted through the issue of illicit drugs in Canada extraordinarily difficult for the reader to think about in relation to any prior certainties” (p. 252).

*University of Saskatchewan*

Colleen Anne Dell

Colleen Anne Dell is the Research Chair in Substance Abuse at the University of Saskatchewan and a Senior Research Associate with the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Her research is grounded in a community-based participatory approach. Her research interests include the relationship between identity and healing from drug addiction, substance abuse programming, self-harm among women and girls, the connection between youth resiliency and inhalant abuse, and equine assisted learning as a healing approach to addictions. Her research areas are specific to Aboriginal populations, criminalized women and drug using populations.

[colleen.dell@usask.ca](mailto:colleen.dell@usask.ca)