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## Drugpeace

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## RESPONSE

## **Drugpeace**

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In his introduction essay, Dennis Sullivan explores some of our most important and contested concepts and practices: justice, virtue, human needs, freedom, power, well-being, self, and needs-based justice. Dennis sadly notes that today, 'justice has come to mean punishment.' Our students in criminology and criminal justice become 'experts' in repression, punishment, and state violence. He points out that few people examine how they contribute to the 'creation of pain and suffering for others;' yet, punishment destroys and corrupts everyone's lives. Rather than equate justice with punishment and retribution, Dennis reveals how justice is about human needs and the relationships among people to satisfy those needs. In his essay, he makes clear the relationship between justice and needs, for justice is shaped by the economic and social arrangements we create. If we build communities that insure the well-being of all of its members by meeting their needs, a needs-based model of justice will flourish. Dennis states that needs-based justice requires participation, compassion, and understanding of the needs of others. He is not espousing equality rights for all; rather, he is advocating equal well-being, where the needs of all are taken into account equally. Dennis urges readers to effect change and to become demonstration projects, 'to implement principles of needs-based justice in our families, schools, places of work, and the global village.'

In this essay, I take up Dennis' challenge to foster a demonstration project that embodies principles of needs-based justice in our families and communities. One 'demonstration project' that would foster justice and peace, would be to end punitive drug prohibition, the war on drugs, and to strive towards 'drugpeace.' Drugpeace would require us to interrogate the whole premise of drug policy and the war on drugs and to move towards a needs-based society that acknowledges that historically; people have always sought to alter consciousness and that plants and drugs are an intrigal part of life that contributes to the social well-being of people and communities. There is a growing global movement today to end drug prohibition and the violence that stems from law and order approaches to regulate states of consciousness. I have long been an advocate of ending prohibition, yet I acknowledge that ending the war on drugs in itself will not necessarily lead to a more peaceful, caring, or needs-based society. Unless, we re-imagine our relationships with one another, the social and economic structure, power hierarchies, and practices of punishment, little will change in the long run. Ending the war on drugs is not separate

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from creating a needs-based society; rather, it is an integral step towards this aspiration.

I have hope for change, because historically we can see that repressive regimes and practices come to pass; that people seek well-being and loving relations. Yet, it is true, that the harms that are imparted by repressive regimes and practices resonate for generations. I live in Canada, and since 2006 we have witnessed a radical change in our political environment. The federal Conservative party led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, first elected in 2006, now has a majority in government.<sup>1</sup> Their party advocates a neo-liberal, law and order, and fear of crime agenda. Authority, namely the military, police/Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and the Queen, are being newly refigured as national symbols of Canadian identity. The Conservatives are busy reshaping Canada to distance itself from earlier economic and social policy that fostered what is perceived by the Conservative party as lenient and liberal policy. Thus, a law-and-order agenda has been taken up with a vengeance, especially in relation to drug law and policy. Where some nations like Portugal (who decriminalized possession of all drugs in 2001) are moving away from solely prohibitionist policy, official Canadian drug policy is reverting to a more US style of prohibition, even though today a number of US states are abandoning some of their more repressive practices such as mandatory minimum sentencing and two and three strikes out legislation.

Since the election of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Canada's national drug strategy was abandoned and a new strategy was launched in 2007. Its focus is on drug-related crime and its new name: 'Anti-Drug' Strategy makes clear its direction. Federal harm reduction funds have been cut, four separate crime bills have been introduced to Parliament that include mandatory minimum prison sentences for drug offenses (three died on the floor and the most recent, Bill C-10, the Safe Streets and Communities Act, was enacted in March 2012). Whereas social supports are being cut in Canada, massive prison building is well funded. Alongside these initiatives are a federally funded media campaign that borders on hate literature and a rejection of social science and scientific evidence about illegal drugs, addiction, and crime. It seems that old, well worn out myths about drugs, drug users, and crime are easily picked up again and refashioned to fit the needs of political agitators whose mode of operatic is fear and punishment. Justice, as Dennis points out, is most often understood today as punishment. Criminalized drugs, or illegal drugs and the people who use, produce, and sell them, are often seen as the culprits who are threatening the nation, destroying the fabric of our communities and families. More than a century of myth and propaganda and the construction of fear support punitive prohibitionist drug policy and punishment. Yet, it is all smoke and mirrors.

Rather than the exception, most readers of this journal will know someone who uses criminalized drugs, whether in the form of marijuana, our most popular illegal drug in most western nations, or another drug. Given drug use rates in western nations, readers might have experimented with this plant themselves and other drugs such as ecstasy, or even cocaine and heroin. Most readers will have used legal drugs such as caffeine in coffee and soda, alcohol, nicotine in tobacco, overthe-counter drugs such as Advil and aspirin, and prescribed drugs such as Paxil and Prozac, or narcotics such as OxyContin, codeine, or even demoral or morphine. Ingesting drugs is a normalized activity in western nations. The alcohol, tobacco, and pharmaceutical industries are billion[s] dollar enterprises. However, the line

between illegal and legal is quite murky unless one is caught up in the labyrinth of the criminal justice system.

Conventional discourse about illegal drugs, for example 'just say no' and abstinence-based programs, ignores the diversity and complexity of contemporary drug consumption, drug consumption historically and the importance of plants/drugs to individual and societal well-being. The state, state agencies, and moral reformers seek to take away consciousness-modifying resources from the populace by repressive means. The war on drugs demonizes and renders invisible the varied cultural practices and understandings of plants/drugs around the world. Even so, conventional representations of drug consumption, addiction and trafficking, are rampant in dominant discourse (government discourse, Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous, and treatment discourse) and in popular culture. In contrast to conventional discourse, popular culture representations (in art, film, HBO and TV shows, music lyrics and videos, poetry and books) of drugs, both legal and illegal, are quite diverse and point to our ambivalence about drugs, pleasure, and the war on drugs. They also point to our collective and varied experiences with drugs. British drug researchers Ross Comber and Nigel South call for a shift in our thinking about drugs: rather than understand drugs as 'essentially damaging,' deviant, or criminal, we can begin to shift our perspective to understand how some forms of drug use are positive, beneficial, and enhance the social health of individuals and groups of people (Coomber & South, 2004). Without romanticizing mind altering plants and drugs, it is clear that the benefits of contemplation, dream states, reflection, visionary experiences, rituals and exploration of consciousness, shamanic traditions, healing and spiritual practices have been violently repressed in western cultures and by extension around the world by colonizing nations, industrialists (and now corporations), and Christian authorities. It was and continues to be well understood that rituals and explorations of consciousness are powerful activities, a basic human need and a collective ritual which communities and groups of people have participated in throughout history.<sup>2</sup> Even today, although contested, peyote and Ayahuasca are revered by many groups and individuals for their spiritual potential. Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD) and later ecstasy continue to be championed for their healing and visionary properties. Cannabis, our most popular illegal drug, is mostly used for recreational and medicinal purposes. However, it is also consumed by Rastafarians and other groups in and outside of Jamaica who believe that cannabis is a sacrament and a blessed substance. Recently, Bolivia withdrew from international drug conventions, to be followed by re-accession, to allow the legalization of coca leaf chewing within their borders. Coca leaf chewing is deeply rooted in Indigenous culture of the Andes, the leaf is both a food and a mild stimulant that is an essential part of people's diet. The leaf is also recognized for its medicinal, spiritual, and cultural importance. 'Just say no' abstinence programs and pledges, render invisible the ritual, cultural, and healing use of plants/drugs, including tobacco use by some North American Aboriginal groups.

Although the use of drugs varies throughout the world, as do techniques of repression, today prescribed drugs (synthetic drugs are favored by the pharmaceutical industry because unlike plants or natural drugs they can be patented and a limitless amount of new compounds can be discovered and marketed) and alcohol and tobacco are the favored drugs of western nations. However, it is not my contention to contribute further to a hierarchy of drugs, to elevate some and demonize others. Rather, I am more interested in how the demonization of some drugs/plants and the

categorization of bad and good drugs (and medical and nonmedical drugs) are linked to prohibitionist policy and violence. Since the twentieth century, the criminalization and demonization of specific drugs like marijuana is justified by their perceived danger, but there is no evidence that marijuana is more dangerous than alcohol and tobacco. Drug prohibition is fueled by fear of the other, racialized bodies, foreigners, and threats to the nation and white space. Historically this has been so. Societal fear of altered states of consciousness, drugs/plants, and the people who consume and sell them sustains drug prohibition, a regime that has been essentially damaging and costly to individuals and society with no sustained impact on drug use rates, addiction, or the global illegal drug trade.

When I speak about drugs at community forums and academic conferences, someone always brings up this question; what about the horrors of addiction? Won't addiction rates surge if we end prohibition and if we move toward a legal regulated market for all currently criminalized drugs. My answer to this question is that drug use does not equal addiction. Nor is all addiction negative or problematic. An addiction to a good cup of free trade tea or coffee every morning does little harm to people or society. Nor does a person's daily dose of methadone or opium tea if the drug meets their needs. Certainly one's addiction to work may be viewed in a neo-liberal or corporate context as a positive activity, although in the long-term it may harm the individual, their family relations, and society as a whole. We are encouraged by corporations to develop addictions: addiction to consumerism, sugar, and the internet (to name just a few). Yet, we fear addiction to criminalized drugs, and through legally mandating abstinence we hope to protect our children and ourselves from addiction. Negative addiction does not stem from a particular drug; rather the way we use drugs, our relationship to them, and our expectations of them are shaped by social, legal, cultural, psychological, biological, and economic factors. This is not to discount the suffering of problematic addition, rather it is to point out that negative addiction cannot be fully understood or addressed without attending to the structural violence that prevails in our society and shapes human relations. Nor can addiction to criminalized drugs be understood outside the context of prohibition. All drugs have risk, but prohibition assures that people who use criminalized drugs such as heroin are subject to a host of dangers that would not exist otherwise. It is well documented that drug prohibition, a reliance on the criminal law (and punitive treatment and social service regimes) to eliminate illegal drug production, selling and use, has worsened the health and well-being of drug users through increased imprisonment and undermining of health services including prevention and treatment services that would more effectively counter the spread of HIV and Hepatitis C epidemics, and drug overdose deaths (Room & Reuter, 2012). Effective countermeasures are undermined (e.g. needle exchange) at the same time that prison and law agents' budgets and incarceration rates expand. Prohibition also fuels social and legal discrimination and stigma, and the marginalization of people who consume illegal drugs. What we assume are characteristics of drug use and addiction, might very well be the effects of prohibition.

Rather than understanding addiction solely through the lens of 12-step or disease models (abstinence-based models), or misleading brain imagery and biological explanations, critical researchers argue that addiction does not need to be 'understood' as a fixed pathological identity; rather, it could be understood as matters of 'habit and conduct' (Keane, 2002; Valverde, 1998). Helen Keane explores 'addiction' in terms of the search for intimacy, whereby humans make 'connections

with substances, things, and other humans.' She illuminates how 'the production and solicitation of repetitive, serial desire is a central goal of consumer societies.' Thus, she argues that addiction can be understood as a form of intimate and emotional attachment, rather than 'compensation for its absence' (Keane, 2004). Canadian scholar Bruce Alexander notes that addiction is neither good nor bad; he argues that problematic drug use or negative drug use is one social response (among many) to 'prolonged dislocation' that emerges in free-market economies, where traditional culture and social relationships are destroyed (Alexander, 2001). Alexander defines dislocation as poverty of the spirit. In her moving essay on the history of New Mexico and heroin addiction and overdose death in Northern New Mexico's Espānola Valley, Angela Garcia also illuminates how addiction is shaped by historical dispossession, longing, chronicity, and melancholy ('mourning without end') (Garcia, 2001).

Both Dennis and Larry Tifft have long written about the harms stemming from social structural violence in today's world of global capitalism (see Sullivan & Tifft, 2000). They reveal how few people's needs are met in today's world of global capitalism. Hierarchal power relations, including the harms stemming from the war on drugs, destroy the lives and relations that we have with one another.

Although official discourse about addiction and the horrors of currently criminalized drugs abound, around the world normalized drug use is the norm. Drugs provide medicinal relief, life support, pleasure, fun, and transcendence from the material world. Drugs also provide spiritual and ritual experiences. Yet, punitive prohibition regimes dominate in most nations around the world and they fuel much violence. Drug trade violence is directly linked to the illegal trade, yet we are mistaken if we paint all drug producers, cultivators, and sellers with the same brush or make assumptions about links to organized crime and drug cartels. There is a plethora of literature that reveals that the illegal drug trade is diverse, fluid, and made of many otherwise law-abiding people. Economic incentive is not always the driving force. For many cannabis users, growing one's own crop, rather than buying from the illegal market, provides access to local organic, good quality marijuana to be used for recreational or medicinal purposes. The joys of cultivation and the final product are espoused by many cannabis growers and users (for easy reference take a look at the popular magazines *High Times* and *Cannabis Culture*).

Since the late 1980s, compassion clubs or community-based medical marijuana dispensaries, where people can obtain cannabis for medicinal purposes, have sprung up in the USA, Canada, and elsewhere (14 US states and the federal government of Canada legally recognize medical marijuana). Cannabis offers relief from symptoms related to serious diseases such as glaucoma, epilepsy, migraines, etc. and nausea due to chemotherapy and AID's wasting syndrome (marijuana stimulates appetite). Cannabis should be available to people who wish to obtain it through community dispensaries or their own home gardens. However, by categorizing medicinal use as more worthy than pleasurable or recreational use of the plant we maintain existing power hierarchies. We risk the continued demonization of cannabis and the millions who use it outside of medical use; thus maintaining prohibition ideology (about categories of medical/nonmedical use and good and bad drugs) and practice. We also risk contributing to drug hierarchies and prohibition ideology when we elevate the use of some plants mixes like Ayahuasca or drugs like LSD as more transcendent than other drugs. This is not to say that drugs are similar, they can have very different properties, effects and risks, some being central nervous system depressants, or

stimulants, etc. but the meaning we attach to plants/drugs and the experience we derive from them are very much linked to the culture and social setting in which we live or are introduced to.

In the late 1990s, I had a student from Jamaica in my course: 'Sociological perspectives on drugs.' We were discussing cannabis and the readings for that week and a number of students commented on recreational use of marijuana and how it is a normalized youth practice in Canada even though it continues to be illegal. My Jamaican student interrupted them and said he did not understand their discussion of cannabis as a recreational drug and a youth practice in Canada. He said he had grown up with his parents donning their Sunday best and sitting down to read the Saint James Bible while they smoked marijuana. For him, cannabis was an activity his conservative, religious parents participated in, not one associated with youth, recreation, and pleasure. There are numerous studies that demonstrate how the cultural and social setting shapes our experience and expectations of a drug's effect. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, over 100 patients at a Canadian mental health clinic associated with McGill University were given massive dosages of LSD without their consent in experiments for the Central Intelligence Agency. They were also subjected to electroshock, sleep deprivation, and other brainwashing and reprogramming experiments. Those patients suffered terribly and many have lifelong physical and emotional problems stemming from the experiments. For other users outside of this setting, LSD offered a window to healing and an exploration of altered states. LSD has the potential to be positive or destructive, depending on the social and cultural setting and the individual consuming the drug.

Another question that I am commonly asked is about the drug trade and the violence that stems from it. The illegal market is directly related to prohibition. If currently criminalized drugs were legal, it is less likely that there would be much illegal production or selling, nor drug trade-related violence. Drug use, cultivation, and selling vary around the world and in different regions and communities. As noted above, the drug enterprise is not simply the domain of organized and/or criminal gangs. Producing and selling criminalized drugs helps some people sustain themselves in economically strained communities that have been and are adversely affected by war, global capitalism, downsizing, and the abandonment of social and economic supports. Drug prohibition also provides opportunity for violence and organized crime, cartels, and criminal gangs to profit from the illegal market. Prohibition provides a fertile environment for the prison industrial complex to thrive. Prisons around the world (including those in Canada and the USA) are filled with poor, racialized, and marginalized people, not the elites, and rarely the heads of organized crime and cartels. Yet, we are hesitant to end prohibition or to close our prisons down even when it bankrupts society.

There seems to be little sentiment for human kindness and sharing among western elites. Led by vocal heads of state and vectors of war, they espouse punishment for illegal drug users, producers, and sellers. Canadian criminologist and restorative justice advocate, Liz Elliot (2011), who sadly passed away this past fall, worked endlessly with others to abolish punishment regimes and to advance community restorative justice movements. Liz had been invited to contribute to this volume and she was looking forward to doing so. In her seminal book, *Security with Care: Restorative Justice & Healthy Societies*, she highlights that punishment in the criminal justice system has not been proven to be effective. She examines the scholarly literature and notes that there is no 'evidence that punishment effectively deters

crime or teaches moral values' to 'lawbreakers.' She also argues that rituals of punishment weaken societies (as history demonstrates in relation to totalitarian and fascist states). She argues that societies dominated by hostility may produce 'legal justice' but this justice does not produce peace nor safe communities (Elliott, 2011). Liz asks if there *can be justice without peace*?

The war on drugs and social and economic structural violence around the world leaves little space for justice, love and peace. War, neo-liberalism, corporate greed, colonization, to name a few major factors, leave the majority of people struggling and unable to have their needs met. Even in the richest nations in the world, the USA and Canada, the majority have little peace and rarely even peace of mind. Most of us worry about – our jobs, lack of jobs, housing, food, proper medical care – essential needs that should be available to all. In addition to our basic needs not being met, we worry about larger factors such as the wars of aggression our countries are engaged in and outside our borders, systemic racism and sexism, and poverty that negatively affects our lives.

For many, the war on drugs touches them personally. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, drug prohibition, or the global war on drugs has been accompanied by terrible harm inflicted on individuals, families, and communities, the erosion of civil liberties and democratic civil society, prison building, and the fueling of fear: fear of others, fear of crime, fear of fellow citizens, and expanding criminal justice and civil regulation and the militarization of civil society, the erosion of vigorous investigative journalism, intellectual discourse, and activism. Prohibition also inhibits human creativity, contemplation, spiritual, and intellectual exploration. It is anti-communitarian and supports a hierarchal view of the world in which we live. Early anarchists such as Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin, questioned moral reformers and advocates of prohibition. Goldman noted how socialists advocated prohibition in order to win votes; thus suggesting that prohibition has never been a question of critical thinkers vs. conservative pundits. We are all complicit.

Rather than bringing security, justice and peace, punitive drug prohibition is linked to domestic and international instability, violence and war. Over the last century, police, military, and prison budgets have increased and individual civil liberties and social supports have eroded. Prohibition and criminal justice and military initiatives are expensive endeavors and in direct opposition to peace and social justice.

One 'demonstration project' that would foster justice and peace, would be to end punitive prohibition and legally regulate all criminalized drugs. This could be achieved through local, national and international initiatives. For example, in 2012 a small village in Spain, Rasquera, voted to rent out 17 acres of land to a group to grow cannabis for recreation/therapeutic use in order to pay off their city debts. In the same year, Victoria, BC's city council voted unanimously to support a regulatory approach to cannabis control rather than prohibition. Other initiatives involve community activism. In the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver, Canada's poorest neighbourhood, a diverse group of community activists are striving to create a prohibition free neighbourhood. The 'End Prohibition in the DTES' group hosts public forums on the harms of prohibition and the possibilities for post-prohibition. These forums are educational, with speakers and considerable time for questions and discussion. They provide a social space for people to talk about their experiences of the war on drugs and their hopes for the future. Concrete actions are being developed to move towards a prohibition free space in the DTES and other communities. At both the local, national and international levels, drug user unions have

been effective in providing support, advocacy and education. Ending prohibition is integral to their mandate. National and international groups, such as the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, Drug Policy Alliance (USA) and Transform Drug Policy Foundation (UK), also work locally to bring about change. There are many more organizations, grassroots groups and initiatives that exist, including collective art works, theatre, festivals, etc. that can be understood as demonstration projects. All these initiatives provide opportunities and inspiration for other local and larger demonstration projects to end drug prohibition. The end of prohibition can only come about when we shift our focus to recognize and eliminate the structural and personal violence that impedes a needs-based society from developing. Without this, we risk reproducing another punishment regime. We could strive towards 'drugpeace.' Drugpeace would require us to interrogate the whole premise of drug policy, the war on drugs, punishment, prisons, and the world we live in, for the very foundations of our social and economic institutions are corrupt: including treatment programs, and addiction and crime research. We need to move outside of this discourse and practice in order to achieve justice and drugpeace.

Drug prohibition arises out of social structural violence and unsupportable discourse that generates fear in the absence of compassion. We can hardly imagine a world where drugs are not criminalized. We can hardly imagine a world where our needs are met. But this is changing around the world. Justice and drugpeace awaits us, all we must do is embrace it.

### Notes

I was thinking of using the title, "Drugs as a source of peace", when I heard Canadian activist Ann Livingston, one of the founding members of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), use the term Drugpeace on 11 October 2011 at an End Prohibition in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver meeting. In this article, I define what the term means.

- 1. The Conservative party only received 39.6% of the popular vote in the 2011 federal election. Such is our unrepresentative voting system in Canada.
- 2. For a fuller discussion see Sullivan's (2007). He introduces his Special Issue, Part I: Drugs, Healing, and the Expansion of Repression of Human Consciousness. Part II, III, and IV of the Special Issue are included in: 10(4); 11(2 and 4). In addition, see the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies at: http://www.maps.org/.
- For example, VANDU emerged in early 1998. They are an inspirational group of active and former drug users who offer support, advocacy, education and much more to their members and the community at large.

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