

H-Net Reviews

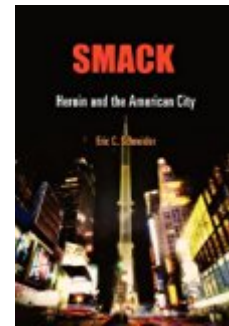
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eric C. Schneider. *Smack: Heroin and the American City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. xvi + 259 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4116-7.

Reviewed by Josiah M. Heyman (University of Texas at El Paso)

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Heroin and the American Urban Space

Smack is a vivid, powerful, and intelligent book. Eric C. Schneider offers a clear and compelling narrative history of heroin marketing and use in the United States from 1945 to 1985. Beyond this, he provides a penetrating framework linking spatial changes in American cities with the social settings of drug use. In the literature on drugs, this is distinctive.

Within the entire commodity chain of heroin—opium production and conversion to heroin, international transit (including border crossing), marketing from wholesale to retail, and use—*Smack* focuses on the domestic market pyramid and heroin use, though attending to relevant global dynamics. Drug use is shaped substantially by “set and setting,” that is, with whom one uses the drugs (the social set) and the places where drugs are accessed and used (the setting). The psychobiology of drugs in the body are intertwined with such contexts of drug use, becoming a complex and reinforcing network of addictive dynamics. Set and setting are key to learning to use a particular drug and to accessing supplies of drugs and paraphernalia; this is intensified by the illegalization of drugs.

Set and setting provide the spatial key to *Smack*. Social networks clump and interact in particular geographies; markets break bulk from wholesale to retail to reach those locations. These geographies are not purely economic and rational, but rather social, economic, cultural, and historical. They are intertwined with the trajectories of American cities. Schneider speaks of central-

ization to analyze the connection of the national heroin trade to the national urban hierarchy, extending outward from New York (but with another hierarchy entering California and Texas from Mexico). Concentration identifies the focal settings where heroin is retailed. And marginalization characterizes the sort of neighborhoods where heroin can be purchased and used, and the race and class backgrounds of its users.

Marginality, it is important to emphasize, coexists with centrality, not only in the case of heroin told here, but also in the overall pattern of post-1945 U.S. cities, the concentrations of wealth and style amid the destroyed physical capital and degraded human dignity, hollow urban centers surrounded by ring upon ring of suburban growth and decay. The mutually causal relationship of heroin and urban decline is an important theme of *Smack*. Heroin is, as Schneider says, a city-killing drug. But it draws its set and setting from the erosion of cities, including deindustrialization, population decline, and the intensification and then abandonment of building stock. Scattered throughout the book are connections between marketers, users, governance (both as rhetorical resources for politicians and sources of corruption and income), and businesses, such as fences and purchasers of looted building materials.

The agency of sellers and users, tempered by powerful structural forces, is an important theme of *Smack*. Alienation, racism, and stigma all abound, as do political and economic processes of urban job loss and decline

in capitalization. But users actively seek out knowledge about and sources of heroin, often as part of rebellious cultural movements. *Smack* integrates honesty about individual and small group choices with revealing depiction of the brutal inequalities of American society that surround such choices. What *Smack* does not do, understandably, is place heroin-use decisions in the wider capitalist-cultural theme of purchased commodity pleasure. Such a controlled and controlling “agency” (cultural, economic, and political all at once) extends beyond this one drug, and its particularly marginalized sets and settings, to constitute a core of our everyday life.[1]

Schneider begins his narrative history of heroin use with two shifts before 1945. The initial legal development of heroin by corporations changes to illegal production and distribution, which leads to the city of New York, with its port, international trade, and vast population, becoming the linchpin of the market. Meanwhile, older users, mainly white and working class, gradually dwindle while African American and Latino youth (and small numbers of white youth) enter into consumption. This takes place because heroin emerges in the 1940s with hip, rebellious, jazz connotations, intersecting with the internal migration from the U.S. South and Puerto Rico. Michael J. Piore suggested in *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (1979) that older adult migrants are largely oblivious to the status insults of the arrogant receiving society, but that youth are sharply aware of such mistreatment, and are thus resentful and rebellious—with good reason. This speaks to the story Schneider tells about heroin, though it also speaks to other rebellions—political, artistic, and so forth—of the 1940s through the early 1970s.

The set and setting of heroin, then, is the postwar neighborhoods, increasingly in physical and economic decline, inhabited by African American and Latino young people (though by no means do all initiate heroin use or persist in it). The dominant society misreads this in two ways, Schneider tells us. While there is a moral panic over youth heroin use, it focuses on fears that nice clean white people are succumbing, and if it takes note of the concentration of people of color, it does so by demonizing them. This creates or helps lock in key elements of the “drug war,” including self-promoting law enforcement bureaucracies and the policy emphasis on incarcerating individual users and sellers (often users themselves) instead of providing therapy.

Schneider focuses mainly on New York City (as an entrance point for Eurasian heroin), and sees other ma-

ior cities (Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, etc.) as spokes off this main hub. But he takes note of the more complicated geographies in the West, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Texas. The latter two have connections (via Jewish and Italian marketers and African American marketers and users) to New York, but also via Chicano users and marketers to supply sources in Mexico. Subject to intense exploitation and prejudice in the United States, and having considerable resources in social networks and trust, the Chicano heroin networks proved to be nearly impenetrable to law enforcement.

The narrative of the 1960s and 1970s broadly follows the postwar pattern: sets of rebellious youth exposed to heroin because of its underworld “cred.” This affected some young people of all races. But in this well-known history of the flourishing of baby boom culture, African Americans and Latinos were most at risk, due to greater exposure to heroin markets in specific urban settings they inhabited, and fewer opportunities to enter sustained jobs and education as alternatives. Cities declined further, both a cause and a consequence of heroin use, and the illegal economy (selling drugs, robbery, and theft) became increasingly the only alternative to the disappearing legal economy, at least in these geographies. This entered into the political process, with street crime serving as both a very real and a highly distorted, ideological basis for increasingly punitive approaches to urban social issues. Of course, both discourse and reality were racialized.

The demonization of the city occurred even though the use of heroin was becoming more diverse, including several phases of spread among white users, suburbs, and punks described by Schneider. One of the more interesting topics he covers is heroin use in Vietnam, and the return of using soldiers to the United States. A remarkably high proportion of them quit using once back home, an extraordinary demonstration that heroin is not simply an inextricable addiction and that drug use has situation specific dynamics. The set of soldiers sharing heroin use and the setting of both horrific war and very cheap supplies were altered once home. This points toward a wider contextual view of heroin use, in both war and inner cities, rather than an isolating, medical perspective on its use.

Heroin, as Schneider points out, has been in bountiful supply. Forty years of the “war on drugs” has been—in its own, supply reduction terms—a failure.[2] He argues that as long as there are marginalized zones in the world economy suitable to growing opium, supplies will pour out;

only a long-term project of integration can reduce supplies. Meanwhile, with respect to marginalization within wealthy world societies, especially the United States, the cycle of mutual causation between urban hollowing-out and heroin use continues. HIV has made injection use far more harmful to health. Mass incarceration, the dominant use control policy, has been expensive and ineffective, and disruptive of many lives.

Schneider's closing recommendations focus on addressing marginalized urban communities and people. As he points out, heroin is prone to simple policy "magic wands." Besides the established policies, he notes the limitations to legalization. Almost certainly, more easily accessible and cheaper supplies will lead to higher levels of usage and numbers of users. Medicalized control methods, such as maintenance heroin and methadone, have their place, but there are a number of ways such systems fail to encompass fully the problem (still, they may be better than current policies). He is correct to point to broad social and spatial structures as the deepest and most enduring solution—not just for heroin, but for many issues. It is unquestionably the case he builds in this regard that is the most persuasive and important part of this book.

Still, his correct observations about the limitations of legalization, or at least decriminalization, and of medicalized maintenance policies, is to some extent undercut by his own material and analysis. An important part of getting into heroin use is becoming part of the small, covert social worlds of illegal drug use—"drug worlds" for short. As I saw growing up, the idea that marijuana starts people on a slippery slope was wrong, but one drug leading to another, one peer leading to another, does have a certain insight into the set and setting of drug worlds, reinforced by the illegality. Breaking up those drug worlds seems to me to have considerable policy value.

Another insight from the historical perspective in *Smack* is the chronologically wavy patterns of heroin use. Now, the discouraging part is that it has not gone away and that it is persistent. But there is some indication that communities, even the more marginalized ones, learn about the damaging effects of drug use and build up a certain folk knowledge that pulls usage back down from the worst peaks. Given the terrible life contexts faced in such urban settings, this limits but does not stop uptake of heroin, yet it seems to be a source of resilience that could be developed more extensively, in conjunction with a more equitable, dignified, and humane urban policy. One of the striking features of *Smack* is how little the voices of the marginalized urban populace are heard in the policy process, and how massive the organizations

of repression are compared to the organizations of the poor. For heroin, as for so many other things, sustained social struggle might matter.

On the whole, *Smack* is correct to center the post-1940 story of heroin in the centers of large American cities. But some important nonurban cases are bypassed in this frame, most notably, the terrible heroin problem in northern New Mexico. There is something post-colonial in the New Mexico story (and possibly in the Puerto Rican story), rather than the de-industrial story told here. And a different sort of story also needs to be told about the attraction to "speed" of various sorts for white working classes in old urban neighborhoods and in small cities and towns in rural areas, people who are subject to related socio-spatial processes of marginalization. The theme of heroin-related police corruption is fascinating, as is its hidden connection to crime, but by ending the book in 1985, we are left to wonder about the apparent reduction in police corruption and urban crime in many U.S. cities, in particular as this might offer lessons for such countries as Mexico, Brazil, and Jamaica.

Smack is good at pointing out the main features of demonizing narratives ("conflating addiction, crime, and color" [p. x]) and offering insightful ways of going beyond them. The book provides a rich, human view of heroin users, their sets, and their settings, and its emphasis on agency is particularly important in drawing readers into a deeper understanding. It is a valuable part of the struggle to change policy, specifically by shifting discourses of race, class, drugs, and crime. Being vivid, revealing, and well written, it could be used as a case study book in a number of undergraduate courses, such as urban history, urban social geography, contemporary U.S. history, or drugs and society. Were I to teach this book, however, I would have students read the concluding chapter as well as the introduction first, to impress on them the deeper issues being examined through the (in many cases horrifying) case material on mafias, injectors, and burned out buildings. Otherwise, initial shock and rejection might drown out the ultimate lessons.

Notes

[1]. Robert G. Carlson, "The Political Economy of AIDS among Drug Users in the United States: Beyond Blaming the Victim or Powerful Others," *American Anthropologist* 98 (1996): 266-278.

[2]. "The U.S. War on Drugs 1969-2009: A Global Public Policy Forum," <http://warondrugsconference.utep.edu/> (accessed September 9, 2010).

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