Book Review


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The War on Drugs is one of the most critical problems of our time. Its enduring effects on the individuals it targets, the communities it devastates, and the institutions that support it have been the subject of considerable debate, analysis, and critique. Anthropologists have made important contributions to this drug war conversation, and Jarrett Zigon in his new book, A War on People, is no exception.

Based on 15 years of research, A War on People offers a unique window into the drug war by emphasizing the responses to it by activists (whom Zigon calls ‘agonists’) in three locales: Vancouver, Copenhagen, and New York City. Their activities in these specific milieus serve as the book’s ethnographic material. However, Zigon fervently argues from the outset that these examples speak volumes to the broader anti-drug war movement. In fact, he suggests that the drug war is best understood as a globally dispersed situation whose extensively networked movement consisting of diverse groups and organizations and so-called ‘junkies’ and ‘addicts’ offers an alternative socio-political vision for the future. Its main goal is to improve the lives of people who use drugs through political activity, such as legislation. But it is also about creating ‘new worlds through political and ethical activities and relations’ (p. 180).
This worldbuilding takes center stage in Zigon’s book as he examines how the anti-drug movement enacts a world that could be, how it invents a possible future and way of being that not only counters the drug war but shows it for what it really is: a war on people.

To follow this political vision, Zigon engages in an anthropology of potentiality. He sees this kind of project as ‘disclosing, tracing, and describing the contours of the not-yet’ (p. 15), one that he argues does not easily lend itself to classic Geertzian ‘thick description.’ Zigon instead carries out an ‘assemblic ethnography’ to study the widely diffused phenomena and relations in which anti-drug war agonists are entangled across different scales. This is the book’s methodological intervention. It is not an ethnography of a social movement, but one that follows various relations of the drug war as they become situated in certain locales. Moreover, it focuses not on overt political activity, but on ‘onto-ethical-political activity’ as a way to show how agonists create the type of change that is not possible through legislation alone.

The book begins with a discussion of the primary narrative of protection that undergirds and sustains the drug war. Populations need to be protected from drugs, so the story goes. However, it is not about protecting people at all. This is one of the book’s critical anchors, as Zigon shows that the war produces two, distinct populations that are subject to differential forms of treatment. The war enacts several forms of violence against the first population—people who use drugs—through multiple physical, structural, and discursive mechanisms of marginalization. These same mechanisms create a second population that must be ‘defended’ against the scourge of drugs and those who consume them. In essence, the protection of one group stems from the exclusion of the other. What is so important about this are the ways in which agonists use this division to undertake the worldbuilding that is at the heart of this book. Demonstrating the violence that comes from this kind of partitioning allows the anti-drug movement to create new onto-ethical forms of being and relating; this is their strategy for long-term change. As Zigon notes, this ‘sticking and enduring is key to a politics of worldbuilding’ (p. 11). The book centers around this worldbuilding by analyzing three interrelated ‘interventions’ in which agonists are engaged.

The first intervention is addressing the drug war as a complex global condition, a ‘non-totalizing and widely diffused complex phenomenon that manifests temporarily and locally as a situation’ (p. 22). Zigon notes that an achievement of the anti-drug war movement is the illustration of this complexity. This ‘situation’ materializes differently around the world and intersects with other assemblages (anti-drug legislation, infectious disease surveillance, and the prison-industrial complex, to name just a few) that influence the site where it is temporarily localized. Zigon convincingly argues that it is necessary to approach the drug war as a situation and to attend to its ‘situated manifestations’ (p. 43) if it is to be politically addressed and effectively anthropologically analyzed.
An important part of Zigon’s argument is showing how this situation provides the conditions for ways of ‘being-in-the-world’ for those entangled in the drug war. One condition is the ideology that produces an ‘Other’ against with the war must be waged. If, as Zigon claims, war is a fundamental to biopolitical governance, then it is fought against internal enemies. In the drug war, the internal enemy/Other is the ‘addict’ who is the personification of addiction, the ‘evil’ that supposedly threatens humanity’s existence. The ‘addict’ is in turn also rendered subhuman and disposable. After all, Zigon asserts, it is the evil ‘addict’ whose ‘expendability grounds the biopolitical order of things’ (p. 56). The devaluation and dehumanization of the ‘addict’ has long been a topic of concern in the social sciences and humanities (cf. Singer and Page 2014). But, Zigon’s analysis uniquely illustrates how agonists’ efforts unsettle the ‘fantasy world’ where people who use drugs are considered less-than-human. Exposing the fiction that undergirds this construction lets agonists address its very real consequences, such as high overdose and incarceration rates. Such productively disruptive work paves the way for an important task: ‘imagining new world possibilities for how to live in worlds with drugs and drug users without the latter being that world’s exclusionary ground’ (p. 73).

The second intervention is the creation and reconceptualization of concepts related to ethical ways of being. Zigon shows that the disruption undertaken by agonists enacts conditions that are inclusionary (rather than exclusionary) that allow for the reimagining of what the world could be like. He first examines how agonists’ efforts help rethink the idea of ‘being-with’ in a community. Zigon tells us that community making is central to the anti-drug war movement because the war ‘seems to foreclose the very possibility of community’ (p. 80). How then is a sense of community regained for the excluded and those without a community? One way is a shared proximity to drug-related death. Those who have survived an overdose or who have experienced the death of a relative, friend, or even stranger from drugs are all part of community based on ‘being-with’ death. It is not restricted to certain members in a particular locale; it is a community ‘open’ to ‘everybody that walks by’ (p. 93).

The community building that Zigon thoughtfully describes in New York City, Vancouver, and Copenhagen is also characterized by a key component of the anti-drug war movement: freedom. However, it is a specific variety that is a ‘condition of open potentiality’ that permits beings ‘always to be in a process of becoming’ (p. 108). This ‘disclosive freedom’ is the openness to develop into something else. Zigon notes that those who arrive at the community fashioned by the anti-drug war movement are able to experience disclosive freedom because of what he calls ‘attuned care.’ Theories that envision ‘care’ as only ‘caring-for’ do not account for other ways in which care is experienced. Attuned care, rather, accommodates to different modes of being-human-together. It broadens the conceptual scope to show that care, when based on ‘an openness that welcomes whoever and however one arrives’ (p. 156), can provide the conditions for the possibility of creating another world and way of existing.
In the book’s epilogue, Zigon briefly turns to the third and final intervention: thinking through and demonstrating the slow emergence of an ‘otherwise’ through sustained political activity. Zigon is very clear that this otherwise is not necessarily futures that are radically new, utopian, or even ‘better’ (p. 160). He instead reminds us that, when it comes to the anti-drug war movement, an otherwise – something different – emerges when there are small not big shifts in what is deemed possible.

A War on People is a theoretically complex book that grapples with issues of major global concern. Amidst the book’s difficult conceptual material is ethnographic data that seems to support Zigon’s multilayered argument. But, as an anthropologist and critical drug scholar whose research is primarily in Latin America, I am left wondering if Zigon’s argument would look different if his research took him to the global south. Would it change if he included the work of agonists in places where the local ‘situation’ is heavily influenced by drug war geopolitics or other experiences that may not be observable in the global north? Zigon does speak to a “sharedness” of the global drug war’s general condition, but what if there are specific conditions that are more distinct or spatially situated? These questions merit consideration in future analyses of a drug war that unfortunately still rages on.

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References