Between gang talk and prohibition: The transfer of blame for County Lines

Abstract

Background

The drug supply model termed 'County Lines' has generated extensive attention over recent years in the UK. Associated street violence, the involvement of young people and exploitation have been the source of intense concern. However, little discussion has sought to situate this drug market 'phenomenon' in relation to recent austerity policies and intensifying social exclusion. Drawing on Douglas' (1995) conceptualisation of scapegoating as a process of blame transfer, this paper provides a critical analysis of the ways that attention has been diverted from the social conditions that are arguably fundamental to driving involvement in this supply model and its associated harms.

Methods

A critical discourse analysis was undertaken on publicly available content on the subject of County Lines. Sources included newspaper articles, other media outputs, official publications and parliamentary debates. These were analysed to identify scapegoating discourses. Once established, these were theoretically developed by drawing on a range of extant perspectives.

Results

Three forms of scapegoating related to County Lines were identified. A familiar process was found in the form of 'gang talk', with County Lines reduced as a product of these 'evil' groups. A notably less familiar outlet of blame was identified in the form of middle class cocaine users, with a range of powerful actors attempting to denounce this 'imagined' population as fuelling the market. A final form was identified in relation to drug legalisation campaigns, with an unwavering focus on prohibition arguably also arguably serving to obfuscate underlying structural drivers.

Discussion

Scapegoating for the issue of County Lines has taken multiple forms. The role of these discourses in diverting attention away from the fundamental social conditions that drive these market harms should be recognised and challenged. In their place, political economy and addressing social exclusion should be at the fore of policy discussions.

Keywords: Drug Markets; Political Economy; Scapegoating; Discourse Analysis

Introduction

Issues concerning drugs, violence and crime are a staple source of societal concern, intrigue and anxiety (Coomber, 2006). Because of their 'newsworthiness', they often generate significant attention, permeate public consciousness and become the subject of commentary and debate. Over recent years in the UK, one issue generating exceptional amounts of attention has been the 'phenomenon' termed 'County Lines', with urban groups involved in the supply of heroin and crack cocaine expanding from their native cities and adopting an outreach methodology to service markets in provincial towns (Andell and Pitts, 2018; Robinson et al., 2018; Spicer, 2018). Representing a distinct change in how markets in these areas were previously reported to function (May and Hough, 2004), this is suggested as representing a significant 'evolution' in the retail supply of heroin and crack (Coomber and Moyle, 2018), aligning with some indications of increased prevalence and availability of crack cocaine nationally (Public Health Matters, 2019). However, it is not simply the supply of these drugs that has made County Lines such a source of concern. Three associated 'drug market externalities' (Caulkins, 2002) have led to it being considered a particularly 'wicked' problem (Coliandris, 2015). Explicitly associated with the supply model has been a rise, both in frequency and seriousness, of street violence (NCA, 2016). The involvement of young people as runners of drugs to these satellite markets, with fears that they have been coerced into such activity and exposed to a range of potential harms, has also been the subject of intense attention (Windle and Briggs, 2015). Finally, the practice of 'cuckooing' has increasingly been reported, with vulnerable local populations having their homes taken over by 'out of town' dealers (Spicer et al., 2019).

The now widespread awareness of this drug supply practice and its associated harms can be considered welcome (Moyle, 2019). However, there has been a notable lack of willingness or ability from politicians, senior criminal justice officials and other powerful actors to connect its increased prevalence with the conditions engendered by recent austerity policies in the UK and the wider pervasive exclusionary conditions of late modernity (Densley and Stevens, 2015; Hallsworth, 2005; Young, 1999). Advanced marginality of many young people in the UK (see Rogers and Blackman, 2017) and increased deprivation in rural and coastal towns (see Petrie et al., 2018) have rarely been considered. Instead, attention has been diverted elsewhere. Attempting to be a corrective, this article seeks to identify and analyse the forms of 'scapegoating' that have emerged in the discourses surrounding the issue of County Lines and that have propagated a process of 'blame transfer' (Douglas, 1995). As a form of analysis it draws inspiration from the tenets of cultural criminology, which stresses the interplay between moral entrepreneurship, representation, meaning and political innovation

(Ferrell et al., 2015). This is an underutilised analytic lens in drug policy scholarship but one with capacity for insightful and original analysis (Ayres and Jewkes, 2012; Linnemann, 2016; Measham, 2004), especially with its more recent concerns of political economy (Hayward, 2016)

Drawing on the work of Douglas (1995), the article firstly conceptualises the wider societal context of scapegoating before discussing its historical trends in relation to issues of drugs and crime. Following an outline of the methodology used and how the critical discourse analysis was undertaken, it then applies this conceptual framework to the context of County Lines, critically discussing three core areas of scapegoating identified as deflecting attention away from the social exclusion and structural violence that arguably lie at the heart of the drug supply practice and its harms. Developed theoretically by drawing on a range of extant perspectives, these discourses are namely: 'gang talk'; 'middle class cocaine users'; and 'drug prohibition'. The article concludes by stressing the need for these forms of attention diversion to be recognised and challenged. It is argued that in their place the underlying social causes should be foregrounded and placed at the centre of policy discussions.

Scapegoating and drugs

The practice of seeking to blame groups or individuals for things that have gone wrong has such historical precedent and ubiquity that it might be considered a basic part of the human condition (Burke, 1970). In contemporary society it is employed in a multitude of contexts and for various purposes. Frequently, it is defined as a way of avoiding criticism, attention or punishment for actions or decisions that have led to deleterious consequences (Mellema, 2000). But it can also be used to justify a choice or action, as well as punish those deemed to have already done wrong and having been identified as requiring condemnation. In addition to visible residue of its mythical roots, further notions such as displacement, censure, avoidance, frustration and prejudice abound, structuring the experiences of both those undertaking the practice of scapegoating and those who find themselves targeted by it (Campbell, 2012).

Developing this practice conceptually, Douglas (1995) has usefully examined the development of scapegoating, scrutinising the similarities and differences between its origins to how it now manifests. It is argued that the ritualistic form of atonement, sin-eating and sacrifice has given way to more nuanced contemporary forms. Compared to the original, more superstitious conceptions of a transfer of evil, in an attempt to be 'free of guilt or responsibility' (Douglas, 1995, p.5) modern actors are now seen to engage in a process of 'blame-shift' or 'transfer of blame', taking aim at those who can be presented as responsible. If successfully achieved, such strategies serve to deflect attention away from

themselves or the results of their actions. Attention will typically be specifically diverted to familiar outlets, or those who the scapegoaters are personally determined to focus on (Shaver, 1985).

The search for things and people to blame is not just a societal preoccupation. It is also an increasingly identified feature of how the UK's criminal justice system functions (Dingwall and Hillier, 2016). In particular, blame attribution and resulting forms of social exclusion and criminalisation have been especially visible within the context of drugs (Szasz, 1992). People who use drugs are consistently stigmatised and blamed for societal issues, especially when their use can be presented as a 'master status' (Lloyd 2010; Radcliffe and Stevens, 2008; Valverde, 1998) and connected with societal fears and anxieties (Alexandrescu, 2018; Simmonds and Coomber, 2009; Taylor, 2008). Mackey-Kallis and Hahn (1994) highlight the scapegoating processes inherent within establishing and perpetuating 'drug-war' rhetoric, arguing that purging 'societal guilt' by constructing and then seeking to eliminate the threat of enemies and those to blame has been consistently attempted by politicians via forms of 'moral justification' (see also Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2007). Moral entrepreneurship and 'crusades' (Becker, 1963) have of course also long been visible in this area. Young's (1973, p.353) classic study illustrated not only the vilification of cannabis users and how their deviance was amplified, but also how the nature of these responses relied on the criminal justice system's negotiation of reality and the construction of a distorted, 'fantasy stereotype' of this group.

Internationally, further forms of societal scapegoating in relation to illicit drugs and associated issues have also been documented. Situating those caught up in international drug trafficking within a political economic context, Green (1998) outlined how poor, non-white drug mules from developing countries were regularly subjected to such practices. Denounced and given harsh, symbolic punishments, they found themselves blamed for the 'evil' of drug supply, while global injustices, macro-economic forces and other reasons for their involvement were swept aside. Taking a more historical perspective, Reinarman and Levine (1989) noted how 'drug scares' have been used periodically in the US, with presenting drugs and associated issues alongside an already marginalised group as a threat to the American way of life argued to be a recurring theme. This, they contend, can serve useful purposes for powerful actors. For example, in a time of fiscal austerity and when complex, intractable social problems were understood as requiring solutions too expensive to undertake, the crack epidemic of the 80s, "*could not have appeared at a more opportune political moment*." (Reinarman and Levine, 1989, p. 563). The politically safe and advantageous option of seeking to crack down on this 'scourge' presented itself and amid the acute associated media attention, matters of political economy and the underlying drivers behind exclusion of populations from mainstream society were deflected (see also Currie, 1993). Situated within this wider backdrop of contemporary drug

scapegoating, it is through this lens of underlying social conditions being silenced (see Mathieson, 2004) that an analysis of County Lines can be undertaken.

Methodology

The point of departure for this analysis was an observation deriving from the undertaking of a long-term empirical project that, despite the intense national attention the issue of County Lines was receiving, ultimately little was being said about the social conditions driving the phenomenon and those involved or affected. More specifically, this was something I became 'theoretically sensitised' to during ethnographic fieldwork (Charmaz, 2014). Interviews and observations undertaken with those responding to or affected by the issue consistently indicated intensified social exclusion to be a fundamental driver (see Spicer, 2018; Spicer et al., 2019). Yet this did not correspond to what was being portrayed when I returned home each day after data collection. By undertaking a critical discourse analysis (Wodak, 2009), the aim of this study was to understand how attention was being diverted away from these social conditions, identify what alternative discourses were being 'privileged' (Keenoy et al., 1997) and what was therefore being focused on instead. In turn, interrogating these culturally grounded meanings and assumptions was intended to the reveal the socio-political functions these discursive positions serve (van Dijk, 2001). I do not suggest that my analysis comes from a neutral standpoint. It is informed by the experiences of researching this area and the theoretical influences of cultural criminology. However, I do attempt to avoid the ontological pitfalls associated with what Stevens (2019) refers to as 'radical constructionism'. While interrogating its social construction, the analysis derives from a position that what is commonly referred to as 'County Lines drug supply' is 'real' in that it independently exists outside of the discourses surrounding it. Adhering to this 'qualified constructionism' therefore acknowledges the contingency of knowledge without falling into the paralysing analytic state of suggesting that it does not exist outside of the methods used to produce it.

Using the 'Google News' aggregator, I conducted daily searches for publicly available content related to County Lines between July 2018 and April 2019. The resulting corpus consisted of: 127 online newspaper articles spread fairly evenly between regional outlets (e.g. 'Cornwall Live') and national outlets (e.g. 'The Telegraph'); seven other forms of media output (e.g. a special edition of the BBC TV show 'Countryfile'); five official publications produced by the National Crime Agency and the Home Office; and four relevant parliamentary debates transcribed in Hansard. Using a form of 'open coding' (Charmaz, 2014) I initially identified three forms of 'blame transfer' (Douglas, 1995) that, intentionally or otherwise, served to divert attention away from the social conditions that arguably drive

involvement in County Lines drug dealing and its associated issues. Following Tonkiss (2018), I paid particular attention to what was being associated with County Lines, how the issue was being characterised, what was being emphasised and how agency was represented. This first stage of the discourse analysis was therefore broadly concerned with *what* was being focused on. Where possible, having uploaded these into the qualitative analysis software NVivo 12, I then engaged in 'adaptive coding' (Layder, 1998) and a final stage of memo writing to develop these identified forms of scapegoating discourses. I drew upon and sought to integrate a range of extant concepts and theoretical perspectives that were either specifically germane or more abstract to the issue. This second stage of analysis was therefore specifically concerned with *how* these issues were being discussed, focusing on the discursive resources being drawn upon and privileged to make subject positions culturally available to use (van Dijk, 2008). What follows is the presentation and discussion of these three theoretically developed forms of scapegoating identified as having become embedded within the discourses surrounding County Lines.

The 'gang talk' of County Lines

County lines drug gangs behind doubling in number of child slaves – The Times, 2019

The label of 'gang' is now a common source of blame for all manner of social ills in the UK. The use of guns, knives, drugs, sexual violence, dangerous dogs and urban rioting have all been proposed as products of 'gangland Britain' in recent years (Hallsworth, 2013). Notably, UK scholars have historically been reluctant to reduce crime and other social ills to the notion of the gang. Downes (1966) famously served to cool much empirical investigation by arguing that, in contrast to the US, Britain did not have such recognisable groups, at least in the area of East London where he conducted his fieldwork. This was generally taken as axiomatic until the turn of the century saw the 'discovery' of highly organised corporate gangs lurking in the shadows of Britain's inner cities (Pitts, 2008). Despite others promoting a more nuanced, less dramatic depiction (e.g. Aldridge et al., 2012; Fraser, 2015; Smithson and Ralphs, 2016), the genie was soon out of the bottle. Explanations of phenomena such as youth violence and drug market participation increasingly became comprised of a one word answer: gangs. Accordingly, an industry tasked with suppressing these groups flourished (Densley, 2011).

However, pushing back on this 'gangland thesis', Hallsworth and Young (2008) have been highly critical of these explanations and responses, now so prominent among commentators and supported by

academia's own 'gang' of researchers (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004). This, they argue, is 'gang talk', a sensationalist and epistemologically flawed discourse that not only seeks to blame these groups for things that they may not be responsible for, but reduces problems such as street violence as products of these groups and their burgeoning culture. In turn, this detracts attention from underlying socio-economic conditions and societal structures (Hallsworth, 2014). Building on this critique, some core components and familiar tropes of the 'language game' employed by gang talkers have been identified (see also Linnemann and McClanahan, 2017). Key to successfully achieving this process of placing blame on gangs, it is argued, is to represent the problem as one committed by evil, 'imagined others'. In particular, this involves stressing their: *'novelty'; 'proliferation'; 'corporatisation'; 'weaponisation'; 'penetration'; and 'monstrousness'* (Hallsworth, 2013, p.73).

Applying these features to the context of County Lines would suggest that a gang talker language game is well underway. With regard to novelty, similar to the 'discovery' of gangs in the previous decade, it is striking how County Lines has been presented as wholly unprecedented. Frequently referred to in the media as being a *"new type of organised crime*" (ITV News, 2016), interpretations of official National Crime Agency reports (e.g. NCA, 2016) have also contributed to a wider framing of it having suddenly emerged out of nowhere. However, in reality, evidence suggests the practice has been occurring far longer than these depictions suggest (e.g. Hobbs and Hales, 2010).

Relatedly, notions of gang 'penetration' abound within this discourse, with these itinerant supply networks presented as aggressively colonising new settings and "*creating*" drug markets in previously peaceful rural idylls (e.g. BBC, 2018). Again, interpretations of official reports have also projected such an image, with NCA (2017) publications consistently reporting how they are infiltrating new towns. Relating back to Douglas' (1966, p.33) notions of purity and danger, these groups are presented as 'matter out of place', reinforced by the frequent promotion of police mugshots of drug suppliers of predominantly BME backgrounds. In reality, heroin and markets in these areas have of course long existed. Yet, rather than considering why demand may be intensifying (Home Office, 2019), or recognising that outreach supply methodologies of various forms have long been embedded in many provincial markets (Coomber and Moyle, 2012), these expansions are instead presented as a product of ruthless, calculating "*gang masterminds*" (Cornwall Live, 2019).

Such portrayals of highly organised drug dealers also feeds into the sensationalism of their 'corporatisation'. The language of legitimate business has been a common way of explaining and understanding their activity (Spicer, 2018), and speculated profits of the so-called *"County Lines industry"* (Guardian, 2019) have been exorbitant. Yet, some have even gone as far as to portray those involved as akin to 'kingpins' (Pearson and Hobbs, 2003). In one parliamentary debate, Ben Wallace

MP claimed that some County Lines – who, it is worth reiterating, are ultimately servicing retail markets in provincial English towns - were being orchestrated by Columbian cartels:

> *"Those lines can be run from the very top of an organised crime group in Colombia. The group can order, resupply and get delivery so that drugs arrive on the doorsteps of our communities."* – *Wallace, 2018*

It is also not just how supposedly organised and connected these groups are that has been the source of gang anxiety. Conforming to notions of 'proliferation', much attention has also been given to their ever-increasing numbers. The first NCA (2015) assessment reported 181 lines operating. By 2017 this had risen to 720 (NCA, 2017), with the latest figures suggesting *"over 2000"* (NCA, 2018, p.2). Any perfunctory reflection should lead to significant scepticism about their accuracy. Yet the notion that the number of these groups had *"more than doubled in a year"* (Sky News, 2019) seemingly fitted a seductive narrative. Because of their supposed newly found mobility and the sheer number of lines that have emerged over recent years, the portrayal is that suddenly *"nowhere is safe*" (Mirror, 2019) from these itinerant, ruthless gangs. Corresponding to the classic formulation of 'gangtalk', the impression is that "*They were few but now they are many. Now they are multitude*" (Hallsworth 2013, pg.72, see also Conquergood, 1991).

Leaving the obvious flaws of these figures aside, even when taken at face value there has been an avoidance to understand this supposed proliferation in relation to widening inequality and the socially 'bulimic' conditions of late modernity (see Young, 1999). Rather than considering what might be increasingly leading young people to view drug supply as an attractive option from a limited 'menu' of precarious and poorly remunerated legitimate employment (Densley and Stevens, 2015; Seddon, 2006), explanations have instead rested on the 'monstrousness' of gang masters. Devoid of agency, young people's involvement in County Lines is portrayed as a result of a "*ruthless grooming process*" (Telegraph, 2018a). Exemplifying long debunked myths (Coomber, 2006), dealers are described as waiting at school gates to "*enslave*" increasingly young or "*even private school pupils"* (Telegraph, 2019) into becoming their workers. Being critical of these portrayals is not to overlook that exploitation frequently exists and the young people involved are exposed to many serious harms (Storrod and Densley, 2017; Windle and Briggs, 2015). However, it would appear convenient for those in power to promote an understanding of young people's involvement in drug markets solely as a result of grooming and exploitation, rather than responses to the conditions that their social policies have engendered. For all of the supposed 'monstrosities' of gang masters, it is perhaps far more frightening to acknowledge that many young people actively seek involvement and are the perpetrators of much harm themselves (see Robinson et al., 2018).

Remarkably consistent with the process of 'gang talk', County Lines would therefore appear to be the most recent and particularly intense iteration of this form of scapegoating. Indeed, while recognising critiques of the perspective being a 'minimal account' (Andell, 2019a) it is striking just how closely Hallsworth's (2013) features of this language game fit the discourses surrounding it. Employed by a range of figures, intensified by the media and reinforced by interpretations of official publications, explanations of County Lines have frequently rested on it as being a result of ever increasing ruthless and 'evil' gang practices. Because of the distinct nuances surrounding it and how it echoes current government priorities of exploitation, in this case 'gang talk' has also seemingly developed, with young people not only considered as 'trouble' but also as being 'in trouble'. Ultimately, however, not only does this sensationalist discourse often bear little grounding in reality, but framing it in this manner leads to a form of 'policy blame' (Andell, 2019a), diverting attention away from and silence the structural drivers behind the prevalence of this supply model and the underlying reasons for young people's involvement, most prominently, experiences of intensified relative deprivation and social exclusion (Fahmy, 2017).

Middle Class Cocaine Users

Middle-class drug users 'have blood on their hands', says Cressida Dick – The Times, 2019

The recourse to gang talk as a means of scapegoating in the context of County Lines is a somewhat predictable discourse in this context. It can also be understood as resting on and perpetuating the various 'pusher myths' that surround those involved in drug supply (Coomber, 2006). Because of their societal status and almost universal denunciation, dealers are an easy target to demonise, mythologise and portray as evil (Naddelman, 2004). However, a second far less familiar outlet of blame has also emerged, allocating responsibility to 'middle class' cocaine users. Presented by media, politicians and criminal justice officials as being complicit in these drug market harms, this 'permissive' section of society has been routinely condemned as fuelling the exploitation and violence associated with this from of drug supply. Originally proposed in relation to wider discussions on knife crime in the UK and the '#everylinecounts' campaign by the NCA (see Daly and Fleetwood, 2016), this explanation has now also permeated into the County Lines discourse.

Representing a further talking point within this increasingly high-profile issue, this narrative has been frequently uncritically perpetuated by the media (see e.g. The Times, 2018). The notion that it is selfish, hedonistic users to blame, and who ultimately have "*blood on their hands*" (The Times, 2019),

is a story seemingly too tempting to resist. To increase its 'newsworthiness', further embellishments of this story have also been added. Images are evoked of this population undertaking their cocaine indulgence within the privileged settings of "*middle class dinner parties*" (see Mirror, 2018), sitting in stark contrast to the harsh realities young County Lines runners experience in street level drug markets. The supposed hypocrisy of this group, consuming the cocaine of which the harms of the County Lines supply model are suggested to be built upon, while at the same time only buying '*Fairtrade*' legitimate products has also been presented (see e.g. The Times, 2018b).

However, it is important to note that this explanation has not simply been a result of media 'spirals' (Ferrell et al., 2015). Rather, it has been fundamentally driven by a range of powerful societal actors. Senior politicians, in particular, have regularly lined up to denounce this population and lay blame for the County Lines phenomenon and associated harms at their feet. Former Home Secretary Sajid Javaid MP, for example, stated before a speech at the 2018 Conservative Party Conference that:

> *"We need to make people understand that if you are a middle-class drug user and you sort of think, 'Well, I'm not doing any damage, I know what I'm doing,' well, there's a whole supply chain that goes into that. Youths whose lives have been abused, the county lines, other drug takers being abused, crime being encouraged. You are not innocent - no one is innocent if they are taking illegal drugs." (BBC News, 2018)*

Similarly, in a parliamentary debate, Chuka Ummuna MP spoke from a similar script:

> *"Let us also be clear that the demand for illegal drugs from well-off, middle-class people is a major driver of this violence. This is all interconnected. Young people from my area are trafficking drugs around other parts of the country. I say to people who indulge in their cocaine usage and what have you over the weekends: when you snort that line of coke, a whole heap of violence, abuse, exploitation and general criminality has led to that powder going up your nose."* – Ummuna, 2018

Adding to this chorus, senior criminal justice officials have also sought to blame middle class cocaine users for the prevalence of County Lines and its associated harms. Suffolk's Police and Crime Commissioner, Tim Passmore, for example, accused them of being the reason why his "*region and deprived communities in particular were affected*" (Ipswich Star, 2019). Perhaps most notable, however, has been the input of UK's most senior police officer, Cressida Dick, who has regularly condemned this population for escalating drug market related violence and the forms of exploitation associated with County Lines (see e.g. Guardian, 2018). In a form of 'looping' (Fraser and Atkinson, 2014; Manning, 1998), these statements have been reiterated and reinforced by others. The Lord

Chief Justice of England and Wales, for example, sought to explicitly back the recent statements by others in his annual address, stressing the importance of cracking down on affluent drug users due to *"all the county lines problems that we have where particularly young vulnerable kids are being used to run drugs all over the country"* (The Telegraph, 2018b). Through this process of referring to and building on one another's statements, this discourse has therefore been perpetuated, resulting in a coalition of condemnation.

Yet, as with 'gang talk', for all of the publicity it has received and its high-profile proponents, this discourse can be fundamentally understood as a further form of scapegoating. The veracity of these claims can be rejected due to the fact that the County Lines drug supply model involves the distribution of heroin and crack cocaine (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Robinson, et al., 2018). Such dealers do not cater for the powdered cocaine market. The regularity of the custom for these 'street' drugs provides the supply model with the profit levels to sustain and justify its itinerant nature (Spicer, 2018). But beyond these fundamental questions of accuracy, arguably the most problematic aspect of this discourse is how its prominence has been used to detract attention away from the underlying causes of why these markets thrive. As Dingelstad et al. (1996) have argued, when analysing debates on drug issues it is important to scrutinise the terms they are carried out under and the interests of the groups involved in determining them. Applied in this case, those blaming middle class cocaine users could be considered either ignorant of the realities of the drug markets they are aligning them with – perhaps almost to a point of dereliction of duty for senior criminal justice officials - or consciously misrepresenting the problem. Considering the latter as similar to an 'elite-engineered' moral panic model (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2007), attempting to shape the debate on County Lines under these terms would appear to provide a valuable function for those in power propagating this discourse. Similar to 'gang talk', blaming this imagined population serves to deflect attention away from not only why the County Lines market exist in the first place, but the social conditions that lead to them thriving and sucking in swathes of socially excluded populations. Rather than having to address root causes and policy failures, such actors can instead take something similar to a 'moral sidestep' (Stevens, 2018) and denounce this constructed group for these drug market harms.

Calls for legalisation in an era of 'late stage prohibition'

"*Only by taking the markets away from Organised Crime can we protect children*." UK LEAP, 2019

Having identified one familiar and one unfamiliar outlet of blame, the final scapegoating discourse and form of attention diversion within the context of County Lines takes a slightly different form.

Situated firmly within the context of drug policy debate, it highlights the varied forms that scapegoating can take and stresses the need to situate discourses in relation to current policy trends and wider developments in this area. Because of this, drawing on wider theorising of late-modernity therefore arguably poses as analytically valuable. For example, in '*Living in the End Times'*, Zizek (2011) talks of global capitalism entering its terminal phase. It is suggested that having to face up to this entails something of a grieving process for western societies, with the stages of the Kübler-Ross model evoked as a metaphorical device to explain societal responses to the impeding economic apocalypse. Applied to drug policy, this framework provides an arguably novel way of thinking about its current state and what it might 'sound' like in the future. If we are currently in the midst of a 'quiet revolution' (Eastwood et al., 2016), with progressive policies increasingly prevalent internationally and genuine examples of pragmatic change also visible in the UK (e.g. Measham, 2018), listening closely to current discourses could indicate the nature of prohibition's 'end times' (Buchanan, 2015).

Specifically in the context of County Lines, the two previously discussed discourses would appear to identify forms of 'denial' in the case of gang talk and 'anger' by blaming middle class users. However, for those who have long been fighting for the overthrow of the prohibition regime, another societal state in the form of 'acceptance' in this era of 'late stage prohibition' is arguably increasingly within reach. For some (e.g. Woods, 2018), the prevalence of County Lines and its associated harms further illustrates the necessity for the 'peace-time' resolution to the drug war in the form of a fully legalised market (see McClean, 2018). But, taking a step back, it would appear important to critically survey the detail of the individual fights currently taking place on the drug policy battlefield. Drug policy campaigners have played an integral part in many of the momentous steps forward in recent years, regularly highlighting hypocrisies, social injustices, and championing the pursuit of evidence-based policy. However, analysing the influence of arguments for legalisation on County Lines debates suggests a risk that, similar to the previous forms of identified scapegoating, the social conditions that drive the involvement of young people and the myriad harms surrounding these markets become 'silenced' (Mathieson, 2004).

An example of this is provided in a parliamentary debate entitled 'County Lines Exploitation in London', where Joan Ryan MP spoke of the threat of County Lines and its destructive role on the lives of individuals and communities. She briefly alluded to the role of deprivation, cuts to youth services and lack of opportunities for young people, although much more prevalent was her championing of a supposedly highly successful recent policing operation in her constituency targeting a County Lines 'gang'. This, she argued, demonstrated how greater law enforcement responses were required to solve the problem. Ronnie Cowan MP, a regular speaker on matters of drug policy, responded:

> *"I am interested in what the right hon. Lady says, but there is a slight problem with her argument. Every single time the police intervene and take down one gang, another is only too willing to step into the void. That gang will use increasing violence, because that is how these people operate: the more violent they are, the more territory they control. Every time we pull down a gang, another will step in until we get to the root of the problem: the illegal market."*
> - Cowan, 2018

As with his other contributions to debates on County Lines, his suggestion, aligning with arguments put forward by outspoken 'legalisers' on the topic (see UK LEAP, 2019) is that the only potential effective response is pursuing a fully legalised market. Prohibition is placed unequivocally as the sole cause of the problem and must be completely dismantled. County Lines, the involvement of young people and escalating violence is therefore considered as purely another consequence of the 'drug war', with blame lying squarely at the feet of drug laws.

The reply to Cowan's comment was ultimately dismissive with Joan Ryan MP arguing that:

> *"I do not think that we can leave them in place; we would be abandoning children and young people to their mercy. We need a much bigger, better-resourced operation based on national intelligence about how county lines operate. That may then help us to address the root causes of the issue." – Ryan, 2018*

On one hand this, of course, demonstrates an ignorance of what those who propose a fully legalised market argue for. Most notably, however, this response and the contrasting 'root causes' put forward by both speakers illustrates a continued perpetuation of the 'dialogue of the deaf' (Leishman and Wood, 2000), with legalisers and prohibitionists not only continuing to speak past each other, but doing so at the expense of considering arguably more pragmatic responses and social policies.

Other debates on the subject have taken similar forms. The recognition of the harms of County Lines are met with calls for legalisation, which are subsequently responded to with examples of the effectiveness of recent policing operations and the need for harsher crackdowns on the 'gangs' responsible in a form of 'totemic toughness' (Stevens, 2011a). As Murji (1998) notes, counter-reactions in drug debates often mirror and reinforce the reactions and the discourses that surround them, propagating a narrow outlook and 'sound bite culture' that plagues the reporting of crime (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). This is seemingly observable in these debates where the prominence of 'gang talk' is notably reinforced by both sides, with the threat ratcheted up to further their own position and responses. Conspicuous in their absence are concerted attempts to link the burgeoning County Lines drug supply methodology and its harms with notions of political economy. Critical

statements are left to those who ambitiously advocate legalisation, but who are dismissed out of hand with a general cross-party consensus in favour of pursuing punitive responses. The conditions of acute relative deprivation in 'hollowed out' inner cities and the creating of vast swathes of 'flawed consumers' (Bauman, 2004) is ignored, as are reductions to local council budgets in some of the most deprived areas in the country (see Petrie et al., 2018). In addition, any less strident arguments for policy change in the form of 'progressive decriminalisation' (Stevens, 2011b) that might not have the immediate transformative capacity that a fully legalised market is argued to produce but still have genuine value, get lost.

It is important to note that arguing that drug laws are being used as a scapegoat in this case is not to be unduly critical of those who are outspoken in their critique of prohibition or their much needed contributions to drug policy debates. This not an attempt to 'debunk the debunkers' (Murji, 1998 pg. 72). Nor is it to deny the failure of drug policing in line with prohibitionist aims or the frequent unintended consequences of such activity (Werb et al., 2011). Any challenge to the police 'fetishism' (Reiner, 2003) that remains prevalent especially in relation to issues such as drugs and violence is a welcome step. However, returning to Zizek's (2011) Kübler-Ross metaphor, by attempting to race ahead to a drug policy end goal of 'acceptance' in the form of full legalisation, this arguably risks missing out important aspects of a 'bargaining' stage. By propagating what ultimately boils down to the 'systemic' explanation of drug market violence (Goldstein 1985), that and the other harms associated with County Lines become an inevitability. There is very little, if anything, which can be done if the market remains illegal and formal conflict resolution is unavailable to those who participate in them (Jacques and Allen, 2015). However, drug market violence is not an inevitability (Coomber, 2015). Evidence abound where violence in these illicit environments is a rarity, even where it is suspected to be rife (Coomber and Maher, 2006; Fleetwood, 2014; Hammersvik, 2015; Moeller and Sandberg, 2017). It is important not to overlook that social context plays a pivotal, often fundamental role in determining levels of violence and other market harms (Curtis and Wendel, 2007; Daudelin and Ratton, 2018). There is therefore seemingly a risk that, as drug policy campaigners seek to use the issue of County Lines to further their goals of a fully legalised marketplace, important recognition of these social drivers gets further obfuscated and silenced.

Conclusion

Through a varied process of scapegoating (Douglas, 1995), in the context of County Lines attention on underlying social drivers has been diverted and blame transferred to both familiar and non-familiar outlets. The understanding of the intensification of this drug supply model and its associated harms

being at its core a product of intensifying conditions of social exclusion and structural violence is one that continues to be overlooked and silenced, with other discourses reproducing forms of social power and serving various socio-political functions (van Dijk, 2001). In the face of this, what is arguably required is to place political economy at the heart of considerations. This is not a ground-breaking suggestion. Returning to the work of Currie (1993), for example, provides a blueprint for how to start seriously addressing the social conditions that drive drug market issues such as County Lines. Andell (2019b) has also recently stressed the importance of macro-economic policy in this area and its connection to more micro-level policy and practice. Following Reinarman and Levine (1989), by way of making its own contribution and to avoid any charges of theoretical abstraction, this paper will conclude by explicitly outlining the implications of the discourse analysis for future critical scrutiny and policy making.

First, because of its ever-increasing prominence and uncritical acceptance, gang talk, academic or otherwise, must be challenged whenever it appears. Further research on County Lines will inevitably be undertaken over the coming years. Some of this will be critical and insightful (e.g. Andell, 2019a; Moyle, 2019). But there may be a tendency for some to confirm dominant discourses. There is a risk that researchers enter the field with preconceived ideas of the growing threat of highly organised gangs, ruthlessly grooming children and have these confirmed. Like a 'hall of mirrors' (Ferrell, 1999), this may generate significant attention and be embraced by the gang talk industry. But criminology should not be in the business of simply confirming what people want to hear and aiding the negotiation of reality by powerful actors (Young, 1971). As Wacquant (2008, p.282) notes, "*the task of social science is not to surf the wave of current events but to bring to light the durable and invisible mechanisms that produce them"*. Gangs exist, but it is not 'gang denial' (Pitts, 2012) to seek to move beyond arguments that explain drug market developments and harms as simply a product of their presence. As Andell (2019a) has recently argued, if the 'gang problem' and their specific involvement in County Lines is to be effectively responded to, a sober, critical analysis of their activities would be far better placed to do so, rather than reverting back to reductionist explanations of 'policy blame' or indeed complete 'policy denial'.

Second, caution should be taken of arguments that seek to place blame purely at the feet of prohibition and use County Lines to further their position. In particular, there is a need to be wary of how these arguments creep into the discourses and work of others, especially given observations of how policy is often formulated (Andell, 2019a; Duke, 2005; Stevens, 2011a). As evidenced in the analysis above, this type of drug policy scapegoating can include well-meaning politicians but can also include academic work. It is arguably not enough to simply state that prohibition has failed. If this conclusion is made then realistic, detailed alternatives with an evidence-base must be considered

(Maher and Dixon, 1999). This is of particular relevance to the two primary substances of heroin and crack cocaine associated with County Lines drug supply, which are notably among the least likely drugs to be legalised any time soon. But it may also relate to other substances. Robinson et al. (2018) note the potential role of cannabis use in the involvement of young people in County Lines. As indicated by recent statements by various politicians (e.g. Independent, 2019), this may lead to suggestions that legalising cannabis poses as a way that these problems can be solved. Of course, drug policy reform or initiatives are well placed to reduce harms and there are many strong arguments for moving towards a legally regulated cannabis market. But portraying it as a panacea to involvement in County Lines is not one of them. Even if cannabis was legalised, young people would still not be able to legally access it and would continue to rely on alternative sources. In this particular context, attention should therefore arguably be placed front and centre on young people's agency and why, for some, cannabis use can place them in such situations (Flacks, 2018). If cannabis and other illegal drug use is relatively normalised and widely used among this population (Aldridge et al., 2011), questions should be asked why some young people's exposure to this illegal market leads them to the types of harm associated with County Lines. An analysis rooted in the dual condition of cultural inclusion but structural exclusion (Young, 1999) and why certain groups bear a disproportionate burden of drug related harm (Stevens, 2011b) arguably promises far more than suggesting the answer lies solely in the changing of drug laws.

Finally, and most importantly, those in power should be held to account for the social conditions that drive these drug markets and their harms. Attempts to divert attention by transferring blame should be vigorously challenged. Not only do attempts at scapegoating imagined groups of middle-class users wrongly identify the consumer drivers behind these markets, but they absolve powerful actors of responsibility of those they purport to want to protect. Similar to the crack epidemic in the US, the recourse to "*blame individual immorality and personal behavior for endemic social and structural problems*" (Reinarman and Levine, 1989, p. 567) should be recognised for not only how it diverts attention but how it can detract resources away from where they are most needed. Drug markets must be taken seriously. Street violence must be taken seriously. But until the connection with political economy is taken seriously these are platitudes that will be repeated by those in power. The record will remain stuck on repeat. As a result, rehashed policies such as the 'Ending Gang and Youth Violence Strategy' (Home Office, 2016), or the use of punitive criminal justice sanctions such as 'knife crime orders' will remain, and a steady stream of those propelled into the harsh realities of the UK's crack and heroin markets will continue to flow.

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