

Overview: Exploring the onto-politics of cannabis

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journals.sagepub.com/home/nad**Thomas Friis Søgaard** 

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Abstract

The composition, use, policies, and the societal position of cannabis are changing and diversifying internationally. Cannabis has emerged as an object of much controversy and is subject to varying forms of regulation. Its role and regulation are also debated in the Nordic countries. To shed light on such developments, this special issue sets out to explore how the phenomenon of cannabis, and related policies and subjectivities, are currently *made*, *unmade*, and *transformed* in multiple ways through discourses, practices, and materiality, and with different consequences.

Keywords

cannabis, ontological turn, onto-politics, post-structuralism, Nordic

Diversification of cannabis ontologies

Cannabis has been used for millennia across the globe, and in 2018 it was estimated that 192 million people worldwide used cannabis, equivalent to 3.9% of the global population aged 15–64 years (United Nations Office on Drugs and

Crime, 2020). Typically, cannabis is described as a substance derived from the female hemp plant *Cannabis sativa* (Iverson, 2007; McLaren et al., 2008), and plant products are classified into “cannabis resin” (pressed plant secretions, known as, e.g., “hashish”), “herbal cannabis” (dried leaves and flowering tops, known as, e.g., “marijuana” and “weed”), and “distilled

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plant ingredients” (cannabis oil) (Room et al., 2010). Cannabis can be smoked in a pipe, rolled into a joint, or cooked and eaten, but while there are variations in preparation and use, it has commonly been approached as a stable singular entity; as an object with a coherent and universal essence and identity (Duff, 2017). In recent years, however, this has been called into question.

Several factors lie behind the change. For instance, the production of cannabis has always involved the use of technologies, but the recent spread of knowhow as well as new cultivation techniques and equipment have resulted in a proliferation of novel productions. These include products of high- and low-content THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) (Thomsen et al., 2019), which is the main psychoactive compound in cannabis that produces the sensation of a high. Other novelties are hybrid variants and even synthetic cannabis (Dargan et al., 2011). Such developments challenge our understanding of the ontological status of the object we call “cannabis”. Contributing to the destabilisation of a singular cannabis entity/object is also the increasingly diverse legal and sociocultural status of cannabis.

While production, trading, and use of cannabis remain prohibited in most jurisdictions in the world, an increasing number of countries – such as Portugal, Canada, Uruguay, and several US states (e.g., Colorado) – have recently moved towards different forms of legalisation and/or decriminalisation of cannabis production and/or cannabis use (Decorte et al., 2020). The diversification of legal contexts is also evident in the Nordic countries: for example, Norway is currently considering decriminalising drug use and possession of smaller quantities for personal use (Marthinussen, 2018), while Sweden maintains a prohibitionist approach (Egnell et al., 2019). In Finland, changes might also be underway, as a citizens’ initiative aiming to decriminalise cannabis gathered the required 50,000 signatures at the end of 2019, and was given consideration by the Finnish parliament in November 2020 (Parliament of Finland,

2021). Internationally, the diversification of legal contexts has resulted in a situation where the very same cannabis product when consumed in Stockholm is an *illegal drug* obtained on an illegal market, while in Denver it is a *non-drug* or a legal consumer good, purchased from a legal dispensary. Despite an apparent homology, the consumed objects are not identical given their signification and position in these very different legal, social, cultural, and political contexts (Duff, 2017).

The therapeutic use of illegally obtained cannabis has also increased, for instance, to alleviate pain or stress (Sexton et al., 2016; Ware et al., 2005), and legislative changes officially construct certain types of cannabis products (typically Sativex) as a legal *medicine*. All of the Nordic countries have recent official schemes, which make it possible to obtain cannabinoid medicine on prescription. Both of these developments draw cannabis into the medical sphere, where users view themselves as patients rather than criminals (Hakkarainen et al., 2015; Kvamme et al., 2021; Pedersen, 2015).

In user discourses and through consumer practices, cannabis has also long been constructed as an *object of pleasure* (Järvinen & Demant, 2011). It is used, for instance, recreationally for relaxation, for de-stressing after work, and at social gatherings or weekend parties (Dahl & Demant, 2017; Ekendahl et al., 2020; Holm et al., 2014). With the spread of the internet, users have gained easier access to a wider range of cannabis products, which come in various designs, ranging from substances to smoke, tablets, oil, cakes, chocolate, gummy bears, balm, gel, bath soap, eye drops, tinctures, drinks, etc. The increased heterogeneity of cannabis products both reflects and generates novel and more varied intake modes (Russell et al., 2018), which in turn also shapes the capacities and effects of “cannabis”. It is a common assumption that (herbal) cannabis has relatively fixed psychoactive and dependency effects, but studies show that socio-material contexts, including the methods of administration

(smoking, eating, drinking, vaping, smearing on the skin, etc.), can impact the onset, intensity, and the duration of its psychoactive and social effects as well as its addictive potential (Julien, 1995, cited in Borodovsky et al., 2016). A key argument in this line of research is thus that cannabis effects are not inherent, but rather produced through assemblages of social relations, discourses, and practices, including users' methods of administration (see also Duff, 2013). In addition, given the international growth in legal markets for medicinal and recreational use of cannabis, the legal cannabis industry has expanded rapidly. For instance, many US states, which have legalised cannabis, have developed profit-driven markets resembling alcohol markets (Decorte, 2018). Cannabis is thus also a marketised commodity in a multi-billion-dollar legal industry, at times termed "Big Cannabis" (Subritzky et al., 2016), and in some developing countries in the Global South, export of cannabis is now part of an official strategy to attract foreign investments and foster local economic growth (Bloomer, 2019; Rychert et al., 2021).

This illustrates how increasingly difficult it is to see and treat cannabis as a singular, stable, and definite object. Today, cannabis is better understood as a volatile and "fluid object" (Law, 2002), which exists in different versions and with different effects depending on the socio-political contexts and webs of relations "it" forms part of (Duff, 2017).

Thinking onto-politically about cannabis

These developments have led scholars to argue for the need to explore how different versions of cannabis (and other drugs) are enacted through varying discourses and socio-material practices (Dwyer & Moore, 2013; Fraser, 2020; Kolind et al., 2016; Lancaster & Rhodes, 2020; Lancaster et al., 2017).

To examine the heterogeneity of cannabis, its divergent natures, cultures, and materialities, researchers have, either implicitly or explicitly,

drawn theoretical inspiration from science and technology studies, post-structuralism, and anthropological or feminist perspectives. Reflecting the general "ontological turn" in social sciences (Woolgar & Lezaun, 2015), some researchers hold that the term "ontological politics" (Mol, 1999) is particularly useful for exploring the ongoing making and unmaking of drug objects, policies, and subjectivities (Dwyer & Moore, 2013; Fraser, 2020; Lancaster & Rhodes, 2020; Lancaster et al., 2017). As defined by Annemarie Mol (1999), "ontological politics" is a composite term. While *ontology* refers to that which belongs to "the real" and the conditions of possibility we live with, *politics* suggests that the conditions of possibility are not pre-given but are rather shaped by the mundane practices in which we interact. The concept of politics thus works to underline the active and processual mode of shaping, and assumes that the making of "reality" is always ongoing, open-ended, and contested (Mol, 1999, pp. 74–75). As outlined by Kari Lancaster and Tim Rhodes (2020), three things can be seen as crucial: the conditions of possibility we live with are not immutable; that which we take as the real is not anterior to, but rather made in practices; and because realities are enacted in a variety of practices, relations, discourses, and social locations, realities are multiple, continually in-the-making, and might also be made otherwise (see also Law, 2004; Mol, 1999).

Rather than treating drugs as singular, given, and existing a priori, the study of onto-politics envisages drugs, drug use, drug problems, and drug policies (in fact, all objects) as emergent and contingent, as always in the process of becoming, and as a matter of representation and enactment. Thinking onto-politically requires researchers to explore the work and politics that go into the enactment and production of different versions of cannabis objects, subjectivities, and policies. This entails, for instance, asking questions such as what relations and ideas are assembled to make cannabis emerge as an illegal drug, a non-drug, or a medicine? What is

made present in such productions, what is absent, silenced, or made Other? Which practices require regular repetition to hold cannabis together as a particular object, and what effects accompany “its” productions (see Dwyer & Moore, 2013; Lancaster et al., 2017)? Such a perspective shifts our analytic focus from individual subjects and presumed stable objects to the *relations* and material-discursive *practices* involved in their becoming.

Enacting cannabis

While cannabis exists as a multiple object, the boundaries between different cannabis objects (such as a medicine, a recreational substance, an illegal drug, a de-stigmatised non-drug, and a commercial commodity) are often blurred in practice (Duff, 2017; Hakkarainen et al., 2019; Månsson, 2017). This not only gives rise to complexities, overlapping interferences, and ambiguities (Kolind et al., 2016), but also creates a need for ongoing boundary-making which serves to produce, stabilise, and maintain cannabis as particular objects. As an example, Lancaster et al. (2017) describe how policy enactments of cannabis as a “medical object” often rely on an active discursive silencing (i.e., an exclusion) of sensational pleasures such as “the munchies” associated with recreational use, in turn conjuring up certain cannabis effects and user experiences at the expense of others. Willy Pedersen (2015) also discusses how cannabis users sometimes justify their use of illegally obtained cannabis by narratively enacting symbolic boundaries between cannabis used for medical and for intoxicating purposes: they may, for example, link their use of cannabis to sometimes self-diagnosed medical conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (see Pedersen, 2015). By categorising the cannabis they use as “medicine”, users are able to construct self-identities as responsible subjects in contrast to irresponsible “Others” (either their younger alter ego or other users) who enact cannabis as an intoxicating substance.

Likewise, users might also seek to distance themselves from the stigmatised position of the deviant and criminal “drug user” (Sandberg, 2012) by drawing on discourses that emphasise the “naturalness” of cannabis (Duff, 2017; Morris, 2020; Tupper, 2012). In Western discourse, “nature” and “the natural” are typically associated with notions of virtue, morality, cleanliness, purity, vigour, and goodness (Lypton, 1995). As illustrated by Craig Morris (2020), cannabis users may lean on a discourse of the “natural” to enact cannabis as a benign and safe substance, as not really a drug (a non-drug). Such enactments enable users to both downplay the perception of cannabis as risky/problematic and to shift the potential stigma associated with illicit drug use onto users of “chemical” (i.e., dangerous) substances such as crack cocaine, heroin, and ecstasy. Similarly, cannabis may also be enacted as a healthier “natural medicine” through juxtapositions with conventional prescribed medicine depicted as chemical and non-natural (Morris, 2020). The enactment of cannabis as a natural “non-drug” is also evident in studies of small-scale cannabis cultivation, describing how cannabis is sometimes grown in greenhouses, and is materially and symbolically situated within a landscape of horticulture (Hakkarainen et al., 2011). It has been argued that articulations of cannabis as a natural non-drug reflect general cultural developments, including what Parker et al. (1998) have called a “normalisation” of cannabis among some in society (Duff, 2017).

However, despite some cultural normalisation trends (for a critique of the “normalisation thesis”, see Sandberg, 2013; Shiner & Newburn, 1997), and in spite of all of its ontological proliferations, cannabis remains a prohibited “drug” in most countries, with some jurisdictions imposing heavy sanctions for possession, distribution, and/or consumption of the drug (Duff, 2017). Importantly, “illicit drug use” is not a pre-existing *natural* problem triggering policy responses. Like with cannabis as “medicine” or as “non-drug”, it too is a becoming, an accomplishment (see also Lancaster &

Rhodes, 2020). For the onto-politically sensitive researcher, the task thus becomes to study what goes into the (ongoing) making of cannabis (use) as “problematic”.

As outlined by Cameron Duff (2017), the relational networks through which cannabis is produced as a problematic and prohibited substance include knowledge constructions derived from biomedical studies. Characteristically, this research has sought to identify casual links between cannabis consumption and mental health problems, such as psychosis, depression, anxiety, and cognitive impairment. Within such research, “cannabis” is typically constituted as a uniform substance with measurable, mainly negative health effects. For instance, in their review of research on cannabis-related harms, Eugènia Campeny and her colleagues (2020) found that cannabis use is often associated with harms in the mental health domain (psychosis, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, and cannabis dependence), the organic domain (respiratory, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, nervous system, cognitive functions, and some cancers), and injuries (motor vehicle collisions, violence, and suicidal behaviour). However, the authors argue that the evidence of causality for many of these outcomes is missing, and there is still little data on the dose-dependency of these effects, which is central to attempts to define what from a public health perspective can be considered risky use of cannabis.

Notions of cannabis as an unhealthy harmful substance are today widely adopted by and reproduced through drug education, prevention, law enforcement as well as in politicians’ resistance to liberalisation of drug policies (Duff, 2017), at times in combination with moralistic discourses that construct cannabis use as a deviant consumer practice fuelling organised crime (Søgaard & Nielsen, in press). This network or policy assemblage, and the ongoing work undertaken to stabilise cannabis as an unhealthy and criminogenic “drug”, is very different from the network relations through which “cannabis” is constituted as a medicine or as a recreational

object of pleasure. In line with this, Josefine Månsson (2017) has concluded in her study that in contemporary Sweden there is not one fixed idea about cannabis that everyone can agree upon but rather several co-existing constructions that dominate different arenas. These constructions envision cannabis as a medicine, a light recreational substance, and as a harmful and addictive drug. What the constructions have in common, Månsson argues, is that they all try to fix cannabis as one stable object and hence tend to ignore or downplay the complex meanings, use values, and materialities of other cannabis objects, as they unfold in other contexts and relations.

Implications for future research and policy

Exploring how different cannabis objects are made and practised into existence is important for several reasons. First, each enactment of cannabis may be said to have certain use values and engender corresponding subject positions (Kolind et al., 2016). While the enactment of cannabis as medicine often implies constructing users as deserving patients, the enactment of cannabis as a harmful drug is often coupled with notions of cannabis users as either irresponsible and irrational (youths), and/or as immoral and bad criminals (Hakkarainen et al., 2015; Kvamme et al., 2021; Pedersen, 2015). This in turn has implications for how users see themselves and how they are regulated through policies and law enforcement. Second, a focus on the enactments of divergent cannabis objects also enables critical reflections upon their underpinning frameworks of meanings, their effects and limitations (Lancaster et al., 2017), which can function to inform public debates and drug policies. And third, to explore how cannabis objects are made in practice and policy also raises the point of how they might be made otherwise (Lancaster & Rhodes, 2020).

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