

BOOK REVIEWS

Dope Girls - The Birth of the British Drug Underground. Marek Kohn, Published by Lawrence & Wishart. 1992 (pp.181)

Opinions concerning when to date the beginning of the modern era, that time when many of the institutions, ideas, preoccupations and problems of our own age first took shape, are diverse. If Britain's current drug phenomenon is tested, then the modern era evolved during the Great War and its aftermath. Indeed this fascinating period is the focus of attention of *Dope Girls*. Marek Kohn explores the origins and development of Britain's drug underground with such creativity and novelty. The book must be seen not only as a valuable contribution to the historical literature of the period, but as an important text that adds to our understanding of the role drug misuse plays in society today.

Kohn's elegant combination of narrative and analysis, his skills and empathy for the subject, allow him to explore in an illuminating way, how drugs like opium and cocaine became a part of the *society* culture to London's West End. He focuses specifically upon the young women who worked in the theatre and music halls, some of whom 'became exposed' to 'dope' as wartime conditions fostered a new kind of cultural modernity. Particular attention is drawn to women like the actress Billie Carlton, who became the subject of sensationalist press coverage when she died of an alleged cocaine overdose. Emphasis is simultaneously placed upon the way the settlement of immigrants and the influx of foreign soldiers during the period, introduced opium and cocaine use to London.

The fundamental premise of the book is to illustrate 'that the modern discourse about drugs is about far more than drugs, and that these other themes are far more interesting than drugs themselves'. The 'transforming' effect of the Great War created conditions where the cultural fabric of society was in a state of flux. As women became more publicly visible and the economic status of some increased, anxieties prevailed concerning their social role. At the same time, this period was marked by powerful xenophobic attitudes and values. The drug underground was a creation that brought young working women of the theatre and 'men of colour' together. Public opinion, as dictated by the popular press at the time, held the

view that the drug underground facilitated the seduction of young white women by men of other races. The book is essentially concerned with exploring how and why the drug panic that materialised during the 1920s became a way in which anxieties about women, sex and race were articulated.

The success of *Dope Girls* can be seen in the way it tackles many of the important issues that shape the nature of drug use in society. Writing in an historical context, Kohn illustrates how the 'menace of drugs' is often used as a vehicle for the expression of wider concerns and anxieties inherent within the culture of society. His approach to this fascinating episode in British history makes this a stimulating book, and a must for anyone interested in this area.

Drugs and Drug Use in Society: A Critical Reader. Edited by Ross Coomber. Published by Greenwich University Press. 1994. pp.415

This collection gathers together a comprehensive array of articles with the aim of providing the reader with access to what Ross Coomber considers as the main perspectives within the literature. This is not an easy task as much of the drugs literature cuts across a broad spectrum of disciplines and perspectives, albeit in a unique and complementary way and for this Coombes must be congratulated. Certainly the book offers a much welcomed contribution and one that will be of value primarily to undergraduates, particularly those in psychology, sociology and social policy, but also to others interested in the field.

The book's broad scope and largely policy orientated approach provides a useful basis for the interested reader and at its minimum, a useful reference text for undergraduate research. Sections focus upon the nature of drug addiction, drug control, treatment and rehabilitations and drugs education amongst others and include articles by an array of distinguished British, American and European authors. That said, *Drugs and Drug Use in Society's* shortfall in this context and given the title, is the omission of any real discussion of issues associated with licit drugs and the misuse of prescribed drugs, and also its lack of any real sociological analysis. Whilst acknowledged in the preface, it could be suggested that illicit and licit drug use should not be understood in isolation, and any

distinction it can be suggested is merely a result of cultural and historical factors. For example, there is no pharmacological dimension, equivalent to dangerousness, which separates legal drugs such as tobacco and alcohol from illicit drugs such as heroin and cocaine.

As already stated, the strength of the reader lies in those chapters which focus upon the policy dimensions of illicit drug use. The articles by David Musto, Phillip Bean, Dorn, Murji and South and Jerry Stimson on drug control offer a useful comparison of the British and American systems from an historical context. Similarly, the legislation debate is tackled well by E J Mishan, James Q Wilson and Thomas S Szasz, providing a balanced summary of the main elements that constitute the debate. It is satisfying to see the inclusion of a detailed section which selects representative readings from Robert Power, James Collins, and Jan and Marcia Chaiken to illustrate the drugs and crime connection. Indeed this section is a good example of the way the book succeeds in terms of its overall objective. It goes some way in questioning common assumptions and dispels some of the misconceptions which surround the drug-crime relationship. Of interest also is the selection of a number of chapters which explore moral panics, drugs and drug use. Here, readings address an important and too often neglected element of the drug phenomenon; the role of the media.

Drug use, like most social activities, is socially patterned, and both culturally and locally defined. Issues around race, gender, class and area of residence, in the context of drug using behaviour are important to uncover for any book that is concerned with drugs and society. A prominent theme of the book is its emphasis upon 'problem drug use', perhaps at the expense of exploring drug use per se. Overall it can be suggested that the reader falls short of grappling with the wider sociological dimensions of drug misuse in society; its meaning and the myths that prevail. That said, while the reader may not go far enough in some important areas, it stands as a valuable and comprehensive text that recognises the significance of this growing area of interest.

Kate O'Brien is a researcher in the Division of Sociology at the University of Northumbria.