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Narrative Policy Analysis

Abstract

This review explores the book *All Hell Breaking Loose: The Pentagon's View on Climate Change*, written by Micheal Klare, highlighting how the US national security offices are viewing and responding to the ominous looming threats posed by climate change.

Keywords

Climate Change, National Security

Disciplines

Defense and Security Studies | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration

Comments

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Jack Burns
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Anne Douds
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Theory Paper
Narrative Policy Analysis

1. Introduction to Narrative Policy

While some trace its origins in politics back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, narrative policy has long played a role bringing issues to light that have been either overlooked, misunderstood, or neglected by the government. Narrative policy describes the ways in which general policy issues are illuminated by personalized narratives (Jones, 2014). It is these narratives that work to garner attention for unresolved and overlooked issues, as these stories invoke an emotional attachment to the issue that inspires people to action.

These narratives, however, can also be crafted by media outlets and policy makers to promote a biased or untruthful agenda. While narratives can be used to bring legitimate policy concerns to light, it is often used as a device by certain stakeholders to mislead the public into supporting a policy that benefits minority stakeholders rather than the majority of the public. The principal way in which policy makers and stakeholders gain support for these biased and unethical policies is fear. This is dangerous but often effective, as a scared public turns to their leaders in time of "crisis" for answers.

This paper explores three areas in which the narrative policy framework was used to manipulate the public into believing under researched, biased, and even downright untruthful stories in order to benefit certain powerful stakeholders. My analysis will

explore the decades of policy mistakes pertaining to inner city policing activity, marijuana and illicit drug policy, and most recently the opioid epidemic. All of the policy mistakes pertaining to these issues highlights the dangers of biased or uninformed policy narratives, false narratives that can cause decades of public misconceptions that work to divide our country's citizens, and profit from their naivety.

2. The “Super Predators” Narrative

Through the 90's and 2000's, increased policing in inner cities was supported by many as the best means for fighting violent and drug related crimes. These crimes were purportedly being committed by a new breed of inner city criminal juveniles; so called “super predators” who were speculated to cause a new and unparalleled spree of violence in inner cities in the 90s and 2000s. Both violent and drug related crime rates however, have been on the decline since the 90's, with little evidence to show that increased policing has been the cause of this decline (Sullivan & O'Keeffe, 2016). Inner city African American children and young adults have been more disproportionately targeted and affected by these increased policing tactics (Sullivan & O'Keeffe, 2016). This is evident from the disproportionate rates at which African Americans are incarcerated for misdemeanor crimes compared to white people. This story, of adultifying and criminalizing African American youth in order to subjugate and control them, is a narrative as old as the country.

In his book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. DuBoi, poses the question for black males in America: “How does it feel to *be* a problem?”. This core understanding of oneself as a black youth in America still controls the psyche of many African Americans today. While racial discrimination policy has a long and dark history expanding over

centuries in the United States, my analysis seeks to better understand the narrative of the adultification of black and brown youth in America in recent decades, and determine how this narrative was driven and supported.

Adultification, or the institutional perception and engagement of black boys as adults, troubles black male lives in American society (Dancy, 2014). An interesting case study from which to begin understanding this narrative problem is that of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed black teenager who was murdered in 2012 for nothing more than looking suspicious. Many who thought his murder was justified dismissed the construction of him as a child, choosing instead to give him labels such as “suspect” or “thug” (Pitts, 2013). Sybina Fulton however, mother of Trayvon Martin, went to extensive lengths to remind the public and the courts that Trayvon was a child, a boy, not a man (Joseph & Somaiya, 2013). This narrative of the murdered Trayvon Martin as being culpable for bringing about his own death, labeling him as a thug and not an unarmed child, is a narrative that denies his humanity as a black American.

Narratives similar to Trayvon’s have long endured despite the success of the civil rights movement decades ago. This narrative of adultification of black American children has been raging since the 1990s, when sociologists and eventually prominent politicians began labeling black american children as not only “thugs”, but “super predators”. The theory, first propagated by criminologist John DiIulio in 1995, suggested that the country would soon be plagued with an increase of what he referred to as “super predators”, who have no sense of morals or justice (Vitale, 2018). His unfounded theory claimed that “super predators” were usually inner city teenagers of color, capable of unparalleled violent crimes compared to other american children (Vitale, 2018).

The term was scary. The term evoked fear in millions of Americans. Parents scrambled to protect their own children from this vague but apparently palpable danger. But it wasn't just the narrative as crafted by DiIulio that caused this reaction, it was how policy actors throughout the government grabbed onto this buzz word in an effort to gain new support from fearful and distressed citizenry.

Just a year later in 1996, then first lady of the United States Hillary Clinton used the term on a CSPAN when discussing Bill Clinton's efforts to ramp up police forces to contain violent crimes in inner cities. She describes the apparent danger by referring to gangs, saying “They are not just gangs of kids any more. They are often the kinds of kids that are called “super predators”. No conscience. No empathy (CSPAN, 1996).” She continues by claiming that they need to be “brought to heel” (CSPAN, 1996). This painting of American teenagers as dangerously incapable of human emotions, suggesting that they must be forced to obey into a submissive position, reignites the centuries old narrative that African American youth are morally unbounded and dangerous.

3. Marijuana Policy

This narrative of adultification of African American children can be viewed as an extension of the policies surrounding non violent illicit drug use in America. The marijuana policy narrative in particular has played a significant role in perpetuating the false and unjust narrative of super predators, along with many others. One of the most profound justifications in recent years for supporting the federal legalization of Marijuana is that it has created one of the widest reaching racial justice issues in recent decades. African American men and teens are disproportionately sent to prison, and for

longer terms, than their white counterparts for nonviolent drug crimes relating to Marijuana (Resing, 2019). To understand how we got here, we must look back to the origins of Marijuana policy narrative in order to understand how a relatively safe drug became imbued with so many negative and often racial stereotypes.

The prohibition of alcohol in the 1920's began the war on drugs to come. The general attitudes towards alcohol during prohibition, and who would actually get prosecuted for having it, varied across racial and socio economic grounds. Alcohol was allowed to be stockpiled before the start of prohibition, so many affluent white Americans were able to stockpile it, throw lavish parties and never think twice about potential legal implications. The narrative ascribed to a belief that the rich were well to do, had no issues consuming alcohol, and therefore couldn't harm anyone by drinking it. It was the poor immigrants and men of color who were getting drunk in public, causing fights, and domestic abusing their families. These were the people for whom alcohol was made illegal, the people that the white government establishment felt could not be trusted with such privilege. This narrative very similarly mirrors how people get prosecuted for marijuana usage across racial and class boundaries today, with affluent stakeholders being allowed to joke about their usage on live television while poor people of color serve prison sentences for the same usage.

Near the end of prohibition in the early 1930's it became clear alcohol prohibition was generating far more crime than it was preventing. In an effort to justify their failed crusade against recreational substances, the government began heavily pursuing marijuana users by painting marijuana to be more dangerous and deadly than alcohol (Siff, 2014). Marijuana was a drug that came primarily from Mexico at the time, and was not generally popular in smoking form for white Americans (History.com). This made it

easy for the government to compound the narrative of marijuana to align with the evils posed by immigrants and people of color in general. It took one xenophobic federal agent to create the narrative that marijuana was a dangerous drug used by criminals of color, and the narrative largely stuck until the past several decades.

His name was Henry J. Anslinger, and he is largely responsible for the majority of negative connotations that have surrounded marijuana policy narrative since the 1930's. After he was out of work at the end of prohibition, he used his personal biases to sell like minded federal officials the narrative that Marijuana was a dangerous drug of immigrants and african americans. Anslinger headed the Federal Bureau of Narcotics for over three decades (History.com). In his time, he would enact strict drug laws and unreasonably long prison sentences for offenders, helping give rise to America's prison industrial complex. Much of Anslinger's crusade against marijuana was predicated on his personal racist fear that drugs in the hands of immigrants and black Americans posed a danger to white women and children, and he imbued this narrative upon the American public (Smith, 2018). Through this narrative he created palpable public fear over the drug, as journalists, politicians, police, and middle-class readers had no similar familiarity with marijuana. Anslinger pushed his narrative by using the case of an Italian man who chopped his family to death while purportedly high on marijuana (Smith 2018). He consulted thirty doctors over the connection of marijuana to the killings. Only one agreed it was possible, and it was this doctor's testimony he used to rally congress and create fear that marijuana was "The Murder Drug" (Smith,. 2018). This allowed it to become the vessel for the public's worst fears: addicting, personality-destroying, violence-causing (Reising, 2019).

Marijuana being a “dangerous” drug however was far from the truth, but these biases persisted even as white Americans began associating with the drug from the 60’s and 70’s into modern day. Marijuana has been a schedule 1 drug since the 70’s, the highest scheduling, indicating it has no medical purpose. Over the past several decades however this has been proven to be far from the truth. Marijuana has been proving to aid a variety of conditions; anxiety, depression, ptsd, epilepsy, and crohn's disease (Lava, 2018). Today however, in the eyes of law enforcement, Henry Anslinger’s narrative remained in tact. While white Americans rarely face jail time, people of color in inner city’s face disproportionately more jail time, as their association with the drug has remained in the eyes of the law as dangerous and a means to violence.

4. Opioid Crisis

The Opioid Crisis in America over the past several decades had been shaped through a policy narrative nearly opposite that of the marijuana narrative. When opioid derived pain medication blew up the pharmaceutical market in the late 1990’s, they were heralded as the ultimate achievement in pain science for being able to quickly, safely, and consistently battle pain in patients. It soon spiraled out of control however, as these prescriptions were becoming excessively easy to gain access to with just minor pain issues. In 2012 for example, 259 million opioid prescriptions were distributed in the United States, enough for every American adult (cdc.gov).

This largely began with Purdue Pharma, who sold the opioid Oxycontin as being “safer and less addicting” than traditional pain medicine (washington post). In 2007 however after the opioid crisis began ramping up, the federal government fined Purdue

Pharma for over \$600 million dollars for false advertising (Washington Post). In the years leading up to 2007, Purdue helped change the culture of prescribing opioids through an extensive marketing campaign that persuaded the medical community that addiction was rare and patients were suffering needlessly. They created this narrative in order to sell their “miracle” drug, and other drug companies soon followed in suit. Other drug manufacturers too began aggressively marketing their opioids even after the Purdue fine, leading to a surge in opioid overdoses. The number of pills made with oxycodone, the main ingredient in OxyContin, rose from 2.5 billion in 2006 to 4.5 billion in 2012, an 80 percent increase (Washington Post).

While big pharma knowingly created these false marketing strategies, they likely ignored thinking about what would happen to the millions of Americans who could no longer gain access to or afford these prescription opioids. This became a huge problem, as it led to people venturing into the illegal drug market for street opioids such as heroin or fentanyl to continue treating their pain and addiction. Not being able to know what else is in these street opioids, or their potency, it led to a surge of heroin overdoses in the late 2000s and 2010's. Everyday people who were following their doctors' recommendations to help their pain were suddenly being blamed for lack of self control and poor life choices when they became addicts, when in reality it was the “miracle drug” narrative pushed by doctors and the pharmaceutical industry that got them to where they were. Now many are stuck, dying, and being blamed for ruining their lives.

Luckily in recent years as people have begun understanding the true nature of these deceptions, along with better understanding the physical dependence on opioids, the narrative of opioid addicts is beginning to change. Instead of looking at addicts as the problem, and using the old adage of “you have a problem”, the federal government

and the families of those affected are beginning to understand the true narrative of an addict is a victim of disease, not a careless drug abuser. This narrative has allowed families to fight back against these pharmaceutical companies, and the government to begin establishing new policies for education, prevention, and effective rehab.

5. Conclusion

When juxtaposed to the narrative policies regarding inner city youth, marijuana, and the opioid crisis, one can begin to see how class and ethnicity have shaped such a great number of narrative policy initiatives. Unfortunately, as my analysis has made evident, these narratives can be racist, xenophobic, and classist in order to push the agenda of a stakeholder at the expense of these minority groups. As noted in my introduction, the main driver for the success of all these unjust narratives is fear of the unknown. From this analysis, one can learn that when people of power tell you to fear something new or unfamiliar, do your own research before you decide to let your raw emotions lead to blind subscription of what is supposed to be the status quo.

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