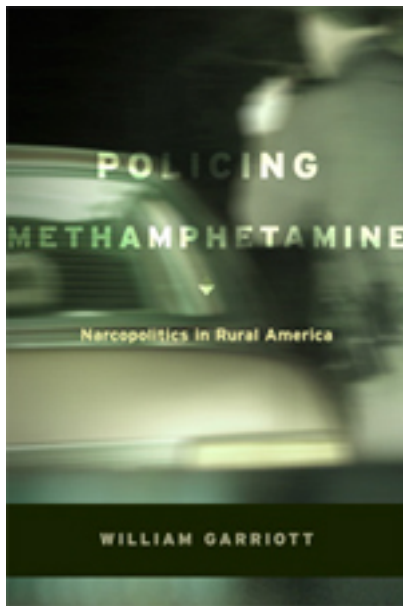


## ***Policing Methamphetamine: Narcopolitics in Rural America* by William Garriott**

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The important lesson Franz Kafka teaches us in the *Metamorphosis* is that when we seek to understand the impact of events, we often focus on the wrong thing. Yes, it is Gregor Samsa who wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a cockroach, but we should not look to him to understand the meaning of his ordeal. What is more important, and Kafka might even say devastating, is how his family members change—how they transform as a result of his transformation. And so too in the story William Garriott tells about methamphetamine we are asked to rethink the way we understand the impact of drugs in the United States. Drug use has serious effects, but these are less transformative than the response, namely: war.

Garriott's *Policing Methamphetamine* is organized around the unsettling premise that to focus on drug users would be to misunderstand the ways and extent to which drugs, and in particular methamphetamine, have impacted life in America. Those looking for depictions of emaciated white people with sunken eyes will find them, but Garriott moves beyond these familiar accounts. He turns the reader's gaze away from these individuals and instead focuses on how the response to methamphetamine, another episode in this country's long "War on Drugs," has remade life in the United States.

Garriott conceptualizes the War on Drugs as a complex of ideas and practices that he traces to legislation ranging from the Harrison Act of 1914, which levied taxes as way to regulate drugs,

to more recent measures such as the 2006 Patriot Act, which included increased penalties for possession and production of methamphetamine. Although the historical survey is unsatisfyingly brisk, Garriott effectively locates three central principals that form the ideological backbone of America's response to drugs and, importantly, the set of policing practices which they made possible. The first of these is the targeting of the substance and its effects, rather than particular actions. In this formulation, the concern is less with "punishing crimes" than it is with "policing threats;" the ideological claim here is that in order combat drugs, one needs to limit their availability. The second is the use of multiple agents and methods of policing, so that while policemen may be the most visible, they are only one of a number of agents who act as soldiers in this war. The third, and seemingly most consequential idea, is the assessment of drug use and distribution not simply as a morally licentious behavior, but as one associated with criminality, drugs become a target of policing because of their supposed association with crime; involvement with illicit drugs is conceived not so much as a, "moral failing to be reproached but a risk factor to be managed" (11). It is out of these three ideas that a wide array of response measures and practices emerge, from techniques like drugs testing to drug sweeps.

To see the impacts of these ideas and practices, Garriott takes us down to a place he calls "Baker County," a cluster of five rural communities in Western Virginia where methamphetamine is both widely used and produced. In fact, along with poultry, meth now stands as one of the region's lone locally produced goods. From teachers, to doctors, to friends, to husbands, to shopkeepers, and particularly agents of the criminal justice system, everyone has been changed in this community as a result of the War on Drugs. Every role has been altered. These changes take place not in exceptional moments but in the routines of everyday life. Consider for example a local shopkeeper whose role now includes monitoring purchases of particular products used to concoct homemade meth, or a pharmacist writing down the names of people with prescriptions for non-existent ailments.

The analysis in *Policing Methamphetamine* is indebted to Michel Foucault, who taught us that power in modern society operates not in a top-down fashion from a centralized location, but rather is dispersed through various institutions and positions of authority. Moreover, power is "productive," in that it forms the foundation for ways of life and ways of being in the world by establishing the very content of an identity. Building on this, Garriott understands the response to methamphetamine, which he calls "narcopolitics," as a set of ideas which rationalize and enable a set of practices for dealing with narcotics. Following from this, he argues that while drugs destroy lives, they also sustain them—"narcopolitics" has given life to a whole range of practices and professions. As Garriot puts it, "The most striking aspect of this research was the range of individuals, institutions, and groups whose very sense of identity and purpose was tied to the concern with narcotics" (163).

Garriott's argument is an important one, and the theoretical frame opens up new horizons of research. Unfortunately, that research still needs to be undertaken. Although he suggests that his account is principally an ethnographic one, Garriott does not really attend to interactions

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between the people he writes about, only statements from interviews. Furthermore, although he suggests that the impacts are diffuse, and, like Foucault, that power is not centralized, our primary sources in this study are agents of the state. The problem with having these particular people as our guides to how the War on Drugs has impacted Baker County is that it limits the extent to which we can fully grasp how it has remade lives of people in the broader community in the ways Garriott suggests. Except for a few scenes from courtroom trials, we are left with isolated statements made by civilian residents of Baker County. In order for the core of Garriott's argument to hold, it is necessary to see how these people interact with each other beyond the reach of the state.

This is connected to another shortcoming. There is one important aspect of identity that Garriott, and one could even say Foucault himself, leaves mostly untouched: relationships. If Garriott is going to claim that husbands and shopkeepers have been changed, we need to see this change in practice, not simply as a set of ideas, but as something actualized in interaction. For example, instead of listing the various protocols and ideas behind a drug awareness program at a local school, it would have been more incisive to see how these programs shape the way in which a teacher interacts with students. Without this, the reader is left with a very limited account of the nature of community life, and of how the War on Drugs has remade it.

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