

H-France Review Vol. 21 (September 2021), No. 158

David A. Guba, Jr., *Taming Cannabis: Drugs and Empire in Nineteenth-Century France*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. ix + 302 pp. Notes and index. \$120.00 CAD. (cl). ISBN 9780228001195. \$37.95 CAD. (pb). ISBN 978-0-2280-0120-1.

Review by Lauren Janes, Hope College.

France today has some of Europe's strictest drug laws as well as one of Europe's highest rates of cannabis use. France's war on drugs disproportionately targets Black and Arab individuals in France, who are far more likely to be stopped for random checks than White individuals, contributing to the mass incarceration of people of color in France. As many throughout the world are pushing to decriminalize cannabis use and sale, it's an interesting time to explore the origins of France's strict drug laws and the roots of the racial disparities in their implementation. In *Taming Cannabis: Drugs and Empire in Nineteenth-Century France*, David Guba looks to the nineteenth century to explain the roots of how cannabis came to be understood as a dangerous contaminant in France.

Guba's central question is "How did this colonial association between hashish, Islam, and violence come to form the foundation of medical and legal discourse on drug use and prohibition in France in the first place?" (p. 6). He answers this question by exploring the rise and fall of hashish in France, although the rise he describes seems to be short-lived and limited. Guba offers a wide-ranging tale that relies on weaving together science, culture, and politics from Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, to nineteenth-century medical and psychological debates, to criminal drug policy in French Algeria up to 1870. Throughout, he remains focused on the central thesis, that the powerful myth of the "hash-crazed Arab assassin" shaped French perceptions of cannabis and of Arab peoples throughout the nineteenth century (p. 4).

While certainly of interest to those researching the history of cannabis, drugs, and drug policy, this work is much more about nineteenth-century French ideas about cannabis than it is about the drug's actual prevalence or use in France. Guba's most significant contributions here will be of great interest to historians of science, psychology, medicine, and nineteenth-century French imperialism. *Taming Cannabis* is meticulously researched and tells a compelling and complex story. It is most important for demonstrating the implications of nineteenth-century Orientalist ideas in shaping the culture, science, and policy of cannabis use in France, with long-ranging and even contemporary implications. It shows how Orientalist discourse mattered as it limited medical research, shaped colonial policy, and influenced French drug laws into the present day.

Guba begins the book with a discussion of the French Public Health Article L. 627, passed by the Assembly in 1970, which still forms the basis of contemporary French drug laws. He emphasizes the us versus them rhetoric of the debates leading up to the law's passing, where drugs were labeled a "foreign scourge" spread to France by "Arab drug traffickers" (p. 1). These debates included the much-repeated myth "that the word 'assassin' shared an etymology with the word 'hashish,'" both referencing "an ancient cult of cannabis-smoking murderers in the Islamic world, the 'hachichins'" (p. 4). Though there was a cult of assassins that carried out military campaigns against Islamic leaders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the myth of the "drug-crazed Ismaili Assassins" of Alamut (in modern-day northern Iran) comes from Marco Polo's "mostly fictitious story" in his *Livre des merveilles du monde*, translated into French in 1355 (p. 4). Guba shows throughout the book that this "mythical cult of the 'Hachichins' remained central to French definitions and depictions of Arabo-Muslim cultures, and consequently, of cannabis use" (p. 4).

Taming Cannabis is a stand-out example of how paying close attention to the empire illuminates and complicates our understanding of nineteenth-century France. Following Anne Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper's call to treat "metropole and colony in a single analytic field,"^[1] Guba traces prejudices, ideas, individuals, and even a few cannabis imports across Egypt, France, and Algeria. To describe his analytical framework integrating metropole and colony, Guba adopts Gary Wilder's framing of France as an "imperial nation-state," applying this framework back to the Napoleonic period. While Guba's work skillfully connects metropole and colony, it seems a misuse to apply Wilder's phrase to the first half of the nineteenth-century. Wilder uses "imperial nation-state" to describe France in the interwar period to emphasize the contradictions in which in the Third Republic "the imperial nation-state was at once republican and illiberal."^[2] Guba somewhat misuses it here to mean reciprocal influence between North Africa and France, which he mostly examines during the First and Second Empires.

The first three chapters of *Taming Cannabis* are all structured around busting and then explaining a different myth about cannabis or cannabis history. These chapters are far ranging, dispelling three key myths: that *C. sativa* and *C. indica* are different species, that Napoleon first banned hashish in France, and that of the violent hashish-crazed medieval cult of the Hachichins. None of these myths still carry scholarly credence, though all still have some level of popular acceptance. In showing how the myths began and the Orientalist assumptions that facilitated their creation and perpetuation, these three chapters set up the book's analysis of the significance of these myths in shaping medical, psychological, and colonial discourse in the nineteenth century.

Chapter one presents the first cannabis myth to be dispelled, that *C. sativa* and *C. indica* (*chanvre ordinaire* and *chanvre indien* in the French) are biologically separate species. After a summary of the history of hemp production and use in France, mostly for rope making including at the Corderie Royale, Guba traces how intertwined scientific and cultural discourses in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries developed "the idea that cannabis had evolved (and degenerated) into two distinct species reflective of contrasting cultures of consumption produced by races of presumed unequal values and ranks" (p. 22). French authors tended to describe the differences between the plants grown in Europe and those from North Africa, the Middle East, and India as resulting from the differences between civilized production for hemp products in Europe and cannabis production for intoxicants outside of Europe. The chapter concludes, as do most of Guba's chapters, with a connection to present debates about race, drug use, and

criminality in France. *C. indica* continues to be rhetorically coded as foreign and dangerous—even falsely connected to the radicalization of terrorists—while the growing French industry for hemp-based products relies on a legal distinction that permits the production of *C. sativa* with low testable THC levels.

Chapter two opens with dispelling another myth, that Napoleon Bonaparte banned hashish throughout French-occupied Egypt, supposedly because he observed its negative effects on his troops. Guba demonstrates that the ban was actually passed by Jacques-Francois “Abdallah” Menou in October 1800, nearly a year after Napoleon departed Egypt for France. In this chapter Guba is less focused on the development of the myth itself (first printed in French in 1820), but instead offers an analysis of Menou and his “colonial policies of mixing and mimicry” (p. 70). Menou, general in chief of the Army of the Orient from July 1800, converted to Islam and took the name Abdallah. Guba argues that his governance of Egypt fit the assimilationist goals of French imperialism, while also showing “mimicry and imitation” including through relying upon and attempting to appease leading Sunni families (pp. 59–60). The ban was less about stopping some general corrupting oriental influence on French troops, than it was to serve the interests of Egypt’s Sunni elites. Guba returns later to his analysis of drug policy in the colonies, again carefully taking local politics into account, in his final chapter on Algeria.

Titled “Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy and the Myth of the Hachichins: Orientalizing Hashish in France, 1800–40,” chapter three is the real heart of Guba’s argument, dispelling a powerful Orientalist myth and tracing its origins and pseudo-establishment as fact. Influenced by Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Edward Said, Guba shows how French understandings of hashish were shaped by a powerful “imperial imaginary,” which “envisaged the drugs as stereotypical markers of Oriental barbarism and violence” (p. 86). A sect of Ismailis that became known as the Assassins did exist in medieval Persia in the twelfth century, but the Western view of them, including Sacy’s analysis, came primarily from Marco Polo’s mostly fictitious renderings. From Marco Polo’s tales of drug-crazed Ismaili Assassins and his own etymological leaps, Sacy asserted in an 1809 lecture at the Institut de France that the mysterious potion used by the Ismaili Assassins was hashish which caused their murderous frenzy. Sacy argued that the etymology of the name Assassins came from “*al- Hashihshiyā*” in Arabic, translated “*Hachichins*” or ‘*Haschischins*’ in French, roughly ‘hashish-eaters’ in English” (p. 84).

Sacy had elite Orientalist credentials as Professor of Arabic at the *École spéciale des langues orientales vivantes* and of Persian at the *Collège de France*, and he spoke as France’s leading expert on “the Orient.” His lecture and subsequent writings on the Islamic Assassins and “their use of hashish to inspire violence offered France’s scholarly community certified ‘facts’ about the Orient and hashish” (p. 84). Sacy was wrong, refuted in his time and in the present, but his linking of hashish, violence, and the Ismaili Assassins was often reprinted as established fact and has influenced anti-drug policies in France into the present. In the most compelling section of the chapter, Guba shows how Sacy’s claims about the Hachichins were repeated uncritically by scholars, including in medical and pharmaceutical journals, shaping views of cannabis far outside of Orientalist studies. Guba’s close reading of these scientific sources shows how even those who praised the medical potential of cannabis did so while asserting “that hashish, in raw form from the Orient, induced a violent delirium in users” (p. 98). This assumption tainted medical, psychological, and pharmaceutical studies of hashish. Overall, chapter three is a concise, compelling, and teachable analysis of how Orientalist myths have impact far beyond academic scholarship. For those teaching upper-level undergraduates and graduate students about how

Orientalist thinking functioned in 19th-century France, chapter three could stand alone as an excellent assignment.

Chapters four and five continue the focus on discourse amongst elites in medical, pharmaceutical, and psychological journals, while also drawing from influential writers such as Baudelaire. Each chapter focuses on a different side of the debate on the usefulness of hashish, with an overlapping chronology. Chapter four is on “Medicalizing Hashish in France, 1810-50,” and chapter five is on “De-medicalizing Hashish in France, 1840-1860.” These chapters show how interconnected discourses about hashish were situated within prevailing debates about anticontagionism in medical research and between spiritualists, physiologists, and psychologists in the treatment of mental illness. Guba reveals a brief but vibrant interest in medical cannabis in the 1840s (even for treating cholera in 1848), only to lose out to the “mythologized warning against the dangers posed by cannabis-basted intoxicants, particularly those from the Orient” in the 1850s (p. 184). While the argument is persuasive, I found the structure of these chapters frustrating and perhaps a bit misleading. By separating supporters and critics of cannabis use into two separate chapters, Guba first presents those supporting the medical potential of cannabis as the clearly dominant voice of the 1830s and 1840s in chapter four, and then in chapter five we learn of the critics with whom they were in dialogue. If these pro-cannabis authors had been first presented alongside their contemporaneous critics, chapter four might more accurately reflect the complexity of the debate. We get a better glimpse of this in the contrasting views of Brière de Boismont and Jacques-Joseph Moreau in chapter five.

In chapter six, “The Hachichins of Algiers: The Criminalization of Hashish in French Algeria, 1840-1880,” Guba’s various strains of analysis come together in a compelling way as he shows how French officials in Algeria were influenced by the myth of the Hachichins and prevailing French views connecting hashish to an “Oriental disposition to insanity and violence” as they regulated hashish (p. 190). After showing how French military officials and physicians described hashish-use as a source of barbarism, sexual deviancy, and violence in Algeria, Guba centers the chapter on the case of Soliman Ben Mohammad, who in 1857 attacked a group of Jews in Algiers after consuming hashish (p. 203). In headlines in Algeria and Paris, the attack was presented as evidence of the growing danger of hashish-fueled violence against the spread of French civilization, drawing again from that persistent myth of the Hachichins. This and other stories influenced laws against hashish in Algeria while also influencing the move towards de-medicalization and fear of hashish in France. Integrating the political context in Algeria with medical discussions bridging Algeria and France, this chapter brings together Guba’s argument in a way that clearly shows the interconnection of science, culture, and policy across metropole and colony.

Throughout the book, Guba often refers back to the same people, works, or events already described at length in earlier chapters, giving them full introductions again. Though this can feel redundant to someone reading the full book, it does set up these wide-ranging chapters to be able to stand alone. Chapters three and six would be great assignments in upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses interested in cultural history, Orientalism, Algeria, and nineteenth-century France.

NOTES

[1] Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures In a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Anne Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 4.

[2] Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 8.

Lauren Janes
Hope College
janes@hope.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172