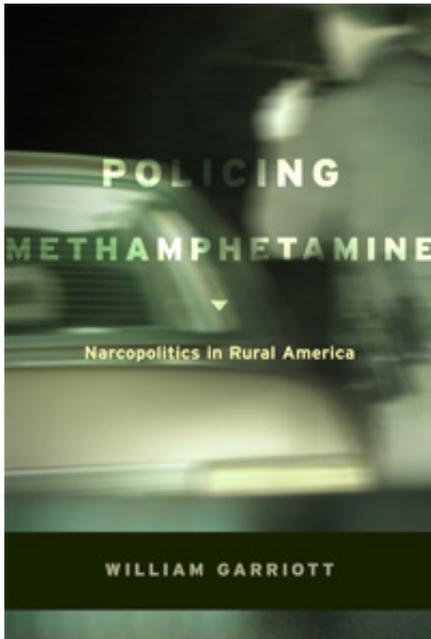


<http://somatosphere.net/2011/10/william-garriott-on-narcopolitics.html>

William Garriott on narcopolitics

2011-10-17 13:26:37

By Eugene Raikhel



My colleague [William Garriott](#) of James Madison University's [Department of Justice Studies](#) was recently interviewed by the website [Left Eye on Books](#) about his recently published monograph [Policing Methamphetamine: Narcopolitics in Rural America](#) (NYU Press: 2011). In the [interview](#) Garriott discusses the concept of narcopolitics, the particular role ethnography has to play in understanding an emergent phenomenon like methamphetamine, the relationship between meth and the labor economy in rural West Virginia, and the failures of US drug policy.

An excerpt:

“I use the term narcopolitics to refer to a mode of political practice that works to rationalize governance in terms of the problems associated with illicit drugs, a.k.a. “narcotics.” It is an adaptation of Michel Foucault’s concept of “biopolitics” — an attempt to theorize the same dynamics of governance he examines from the perspective of “life,” but from the perspective of narcotics.

I introduced this term because I felt I did not have the conceptual language I needed to describe what I was witnessing in Baker County. This was rooted in a more fundamental problem: we (both

scholars and citizens) lack a robust conceptual language to think and speak critically about the political and cultural effects of America's ongoing encounter with illicit drugs. The term "War on Drugs" is often used, but the meaning of this term is already over-determined by its origins in and association with official political discourse. I felt we needed a language that explained the effects of the War on Drugs and placed them within the broader political culture of the United States, while also enabling comparison between countries, regions or even local contexts. Introducing the term narcopolitics was an attempt to do that.

Narcopolitics is everywhere, though it manifests itself differently in different locations. It shapes the administration of public schools, family dynamics and the work of the state (both distributive and retributive), just to name a few. In poorer neighborhoods narcopolitics may take the form of over-policing and hyper-surveillance; in wealthier neighborhoods it may manifest itself as the drug test that is used in the negotiation of tensions between parents and children; in public schools it means that drug searches by police are now taken-for-granted components of the educational experience, just as anti-drug programs such as D.A.R.E. have been fully incorporated into the curriculum; prenatal care today routinely involves drug testing; and the receipt of work-related benefits, such as workers compensation after injury, are usually contingent on the ability of the worker to demonstrate that he or she is drug free, and that their injury was not the result of drug use. Failure to prove this typically results in loss of those benefits and termination from the job. The criminal justice system is probably where the impact of narcopolitics has been the most pronounced. Indeed, it is hard to even imagine criminal justice in the United States today apart from the focus on illegal drugs. So across these institutions, which are some of the primary sites where the work of governance takes place, drugs have come to play an important, though often under appreciated, role," ([Cole and Garriott 2011](#)).

For the entire interview, see "[Narcopolitics is Everywhere: An Interview with William Garriott](#)" by Nicki Lisa Cole, *Left Eye on Books*.

I should add that Garriott and I are working on an edited volume on the anthropology of addiction.

AMA citation

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