

Introduction to the topic. Prohibition from below: Moral negotiations, local contestations, and their limits?

Corentin Cohen, Gernot Klantschnig

In **Politique africaine** Volume 163, Issue 3, July 2021, pages 7 to 22

Translated and edited by Cadenza Academic Translations

Translator: Peter Collins; Editor: Matt Burden; Senior editor: Mark Mellor

ISSN 0244-7827

DOI 10.3917/polaf.163.0007

Available online at:

<https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-politique-africaine-2021-3-page-7.htm>

How to cite this article:

Corentin Cohen, Gernot Klantschnig, «Introduction to the topic. Prohibition from below: Moral negotiations, local contestations, and their limits?», *Politique africaine* 2021/3 (No 163) , p. 7-22

Electronic distribution by Cairn on behalf of Editions Karthala.

© Editions Karthala. All rights reserved for all countries.

Reproducing this article (including by photocopying) is only authorized in accordance with the general terms and conditions of use for the website, or with the general terms and conditions of the license held by your institution, where applicable. Any other reproduction, in full or in part, or storage in a database, in any form and by any means whatsoever is strictly prohibited without the prior written consent of the publisher, except where permitted under French law.

ISSUE TOPIC

*The moral landscape of drugs***COORDINATED BY CORENTIN COHEN AND
GERNOT KLANTSCHNIG**

INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC

**PROHIBITION FROM BELOW:
MORAL NEGOTIATIONS, LOCAL
CONTESTATIONS, AND THEIR LIMITS?**

Research on drugs in Africa has tended to be mired in discourses and representations inherited from the colonial period, and later from the war on drugs launched by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. This kind of research, which is often commissioned by governments and takes a primarily state-centric perspective, approaches all psychoactive substances (cannabis, cocaine, opiates) in the same manner. At a time when debates on legalizing the production of cannabis in several African countries are still largely dominated by prohibitionist discourses, it seems necessary to shift the focus and to break with an approach that remains largely security-related.

In order to study the reality of drugs in Africa today, this issue combines a theoretical reflection on the moral understandings of drugs with new empirical data. The articles in this issue provide an account of the discourses and practices of a number of different actors: consumers, traders, moral authorities, and regulators. All of them must navigate the discourses that present drugs as threats to the health of users, the morality of society, and the security of states. Our approach implies studying the meanings that these actors individually and collectively attribute to the consumption and trade of drugs, the benefits they may derive from them, and the moral frameworks they may apply. The issue thus studies the perceptions of the young, the poor, and those living in urban ghettos. It contrasts these perceptions with those of the elites and moral authorities who claim to be the guardians of order and society.

These approaches are particularly important since, until recently, Africa has received relatively little attention in social science research on drugs.

The moral landscape of drugs

There have been few studies on illegal substances like cannabis, opium, and cocaine, or legal ones like tobacco and medicines. Despite the methodological and ethical difficulties of this kind of research, which we will return to below, the studies presented here all take an ethnographic approach using interviews to collect participants' views on the trade and consumption of drugs. These young researchers' articles help to renew our understanding of drugs in West Africa.

The article by Maxime Ricard and Kouamé Félix Grodji that opens the issue is based on a close analysis of interactions around smoking rooms in the Abobo neighborhood of Abidjan, analyzing the relations of interdependence established between police officers, traffickers, and consumers, but also local potentates and religious leaders. A whole range of actors thus employ moral repertoires to negotiate the legitimacy of the sale and consumption of drugs. Annigje van Dijk and Roger Zerbo's article examines the moral dilemmas of heroin and crack users in Ouagadougou. The numerous interviews conducted highlight the conflicts that arise from users' desire to reconcile their addictions with a "good life," both with their loved ones and in their professional environments. The article by Adib Bencherif is based on empirical research carried out among Tuareg elites in Mali and Niger and highlights the changes in the moral categorizations of trafficking, and the way different forms of trafficking have impacted value systems. Lastly, Gernot Klantschnig and Ini Dele-Adedeji's article draws on observations of markets in Lagos and offers an in-depth analysis of the moral narratives deployed by state and pharmaceutical actors to legitimize and regulate the sale of tramadol, which helps to explain why it has become so widely used.

These studies draw attention to several features of the "moral landscapes of drugs," understood as the field of discussions, representations, and negotiations of values around drugs. The notion of moral landscapes has enabled the authors to view these issues through the different positions, observations, and perspectives of the actors involved. The contributions in this issue thus focus as much on the individual experiences of users and traders as on the production of group discourses and the regulation of drug-related activities, and even go so far as to consider the formation of moral communities and the establishment of order in urban contexts.

These moral landscapes are plural, fragmented, highly localized, and tend to be related to rather restricted communities of practice. We have proposed the term moral landscapes rather than moral economy because the latter term is often used in relation to practices of contestation. However, the contributions in this issue lead us to the hypothesis that drugs are linked to other dynamics and that their moral landscapes do little to challenge the representations of dominant institutions, at least in West Africa. This may

be the case because these landscapes are nourished by prohibitionist logics, which, as we shall see, are appropriated in different ways by different actors and are marked by issues of political control and respect for traditions and the authorities that guarantee them. In contrast to the dynamics observed in Latin America or the United States, the landscapes presented here do not seem to underpin practices that contest the prevailing order or question state discourses.

GOING BEYOND PROHIBITIONIST DISCOURSES AND INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

The literature on drugs in Africa is marked by its permeability to media and political discourses that seem disconnected from local populations' perceptions of drugs. There is an increasing production of knowledge that is often informed by political motives or adopts objects and categories from the international political field. This can be explained by the prevalence of institutional reports commissioned from academics, and by studies by think tanks and actors who reproduce institutions' prohibitionist discourses. This literature on drugs can be divided between medical approaches; historical and anthropological approaches, which have influenced each other over the years; and those that take a criminological perspective, which has been gradually deconstructed over the last twenty years.

There are several principal discourses on psychoactive substances in Africa that are commonly conveyed by political actors and also partially employed in the literature. The first type of discourse claims that drugs are external or foreign to the continent. They see drugs as a "Western" or "foreign" problem. This was particularly the case in discourses produced by the United Nations, which considered that before 1980 there was no drug use problem in Africa.¹ A second type of discourse emerged in the 1990s, led by international organizations and certain states particularly active in the fight against drugs, such as the United States, which insisted on the continent's lack of "preparedness" to face the problems posed by the trade and consumption of drugs.² Some of the contributions in the last *Politique africaine* issue on drugs suggested that the continent was on the verge of becoming a

1. Neil Carrier and Gernot Klantschnig, *Africa and the War on Drugs* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 79.
2. "In the last few years, West African states began to wake up to the dangers of the drug trade, which is swamping their tiny economies and corrupting—or further corrupting—their politics." James Traub, "Africa's Drug Problem," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2010.

The moral landscape of drugs

trafficking hub.³ In the early 1990s, Nigeria was reported to be in the process of becoming a “drug hub”, while from the 2000s onward, international organizations pointed out that there was a risk that the cocaine trade would turn certain countries such as Guinea-Bissau into “narco-states.” In the context of the “war on terror” following 9/11, Somalia and then Mali were described as breeding grounds for so-called “narco-jihadism,” a notion that has become a cliché. These discourses have been appropriated by African political elites, who take advantage of them to position themselves at the center of the international political agenda, allowing them to profit financially. These discourses are particularly deserving of being rejected, as they present societies that are incapable of facing the challenges posed by drugs. In 2008, for example, Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), wrote in *The Guardian* that “the cocaine used in Europe passes through impoverished countries in west Africa, where the drugs trade is causing untold misery, corruption, violence and instability.”⁴

As early as the 1950s, health professionals began to take an interest in the use of drugs such as cannabis in West Africa. They paid particular attention to certain so-called deviant or problematic social groups, such as “detrimentalized Africans,” “marginal migrant workers,” or “delinquent youth.”⁵ These initial medical studies on drugs during the colonial period led on to an extensive and dynamic field of research that uses quantitative methods and surveys to describe the evolution in consumption practices.⁶ Surveys have often been conducted among so-called captive populations, in schools, hospitals, and prisons. While the moralistic language of the late colonial period has been replaced by more technical terms, the focus in these studies on “problem” or “deviant” subgroups still prevails. These works ultimately tell us little about populations’ perceptions and moral understandings of substances. In their article, van Dijk and Zerbo have sought to move away from this traditional medical approach and to shed light on users’ own perceptions of substances, their relationship to addiction, and the way in which addiction leads to a loss of social status.

3. Roger Botte, “Économies trafiquantes et mondialisation. La voie africaine vers le ‘développement?’” *Politique africaine* 88, no. 4 (2002): 131–50.

4. Antonio Maria Costa, “Every Line of Cocaine Means a Little Part of Africa Dies,” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2008.

5. Henri Collomb, Moussa Diop, and Henri Ayats, “Intoxication par le chanvre indien au Sénégal,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 9 (1962): 139–44; Thomas Adeoye Lambo, “Medical and Social Problems of Drug Addiction in West Africa: With Special Emphasis on Psychiatric Aspects,” *West African Medical Journal* 14, no. 6 (1965): 236–54.

6. A. O. Odejide, “Status of Drug Use/Abuse in Africa: A Review,” *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 4, no. 2 (2006): 87–102; Karl Peltzer, Shandir Ramlagan, Bruce D. Johnson, and Nancy Phaswana-Mafuya, “Illicit Drug Use and Treatment in South Africa: A Review,” *Substance Use and Misuse* 45, no. 13 (2010): 2221–43.

In parallel with the medical field, a number of anthropologists also began to study psychoactive drug use in the 1970s.⁷ Brian du Toit's study was a landmark among the few works on cannabis use on the continent. This US-funded study was part of a research project on the role of cannabis in South African societies.⁸ Its ambition, in terms of breadth, depth, and duration, has not been matched by any other academic study on the subject since then. Despite its original focus on the historicity of drugs in Africa—in the sense that it proposes hypotheses about the early use of cannabis on the continent and the spread of the practice over the past few centuries—this study had little to say about the perceptions of drug users and traders. It relied in particular on linguistic data and the names given to *cannabis*, but it remained almost as prescriptive and Eurocentric as most clinical research at the time. Du Toit's study was also significant in that it was also one of the first to offer an overview of the drug issue on the continent, in a similar way to the current UNODC reports, albeit the latter pay little attention to variations in local dynamics and practices. By contrast, the articles in this issue attempt to provide a very detailed perspective on perceptions of drugs. Klantschnig and Dele-Adedeji's article, for example, shows that the same substance, tramadol, may be perceived as a drug as well as a medicine, but regardless of its "gray" status, its consumption may be considered acceptable.

Social science research on the subject did not pick up again until the late 1990s, coinciding with the United Nations' and donors' growing interest in the heroin and cocaine trade on the continent. While seizures of these drugs made headlines, these works, which understood drugs through a criminological lens, were heavily influenced by international policy agendas. The main report commissioned by the United Nations was entitled *The Drug Nexus in Africa*.⁹ Published in 1999, it drew on contributions from academics at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, the Faculty of Medicine at Addis Ababa University, the University of Ghana, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, and the Observatoire Géopolitique des Drogues in Paris. The report highlighted the social dimensions of drugs, which had been largely ignored by the research previously commissioned by international institutions, and gave rise to a conceptual renewal.¹⁰

7. Brian M. du Toit, *Cannabis in Africa: A Survey of its Distribution in Africa, and a Study of Cannabis Use and Users in Multiethnic South Africa* (Rotterdam: Balkema, 1980); Vera Rubin, ed., *Cannabis and Culture* (The Hague/Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1975).

8. Du Toit, *Cannabis in Africa*.

9. UNODCCP, *The Drug Nexus in Africa* (New York: United Nations, 1999).

10. Henry Bernstein, "Ghana's Drug Economy: Some Preliminary Data," *Review of African Political Economy* 26, no. 79 (1999): 13–32; Axel Klein, "Nigeria and the Drugs War," *Review of African Political Economy* 26, no. 79 (1999): 51–73.

This change of perspective was caused by a rethink of the alarmist and ahistorical approach of international institutions. Some historians criticized these institutions' interpretive frameworks and examined the genealogy of practices and the definitions of psychoactive drugs in Africa. Emmanuel Akyeampong and Stephen Ellis, for example, began to sketch a history of Africa's role in the international heroin and cocaine trade, while Chris Duvall repositioned the continent within a global history of cannabis.¹¹

Building on these efforts, several studies over the past twenty years have helped to change our understanding of the issue. There have been a number of studies on larger-scale legal and illegal market developments and the networks of actors they involve, calling into question these categories.¹² However, the proximity of many other studies to political actors and the use of police sources have limited a deeper or more reflective engagement with the world of drug market insiders. Insiders often continue to be represented as criminals or analyzed by means of problematic theoretical constructs such as "mafia states" or "narco-states,"¹³ seen as variations of "failed states." In the mid-2000s, the UNODC and key donors repositioned the issue of drugs in Africa at the center of the international political agenda by including it within the "fight against terrorism." Much of the research and many of the publications on the subject adopted these security approaches, particularly for the Sahel¹⁴ and West Africa.¹⁵ The articles by Bencherif on Niger and Mali and Ricard and Kouamé on Côte d'Ivoire criticize these approaches by showing that various actors believe that the drug trade may provide economic benefits to their community and reinforce the existing order.

Works adopting a criminological perspective have also often employed terms from the international political and legal spheres, such as "addiction," "drug trafficking," or "organized crime," with scant regard for local meanings of drug use, drug trading, and the ways in which these markets are

11. Emmanuel Akyeampong, "Diaspora and Drug Trafficking in West Africa: A Case Study of Ghana," *African Affairs* 104, no. 416 (2005): 429–47; Stephen Ellis, "West Africa's International Drug Trade," *African Affairs* 108, no. 431 (2009): 171–96; Chris S. Duvall, *The African Roots of Marijuana* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

12. Stephen Ellis and Mark Shaw, "Does Organized Crime Exist in Africa?" *African Affairs* 114, no. 457 (2015): 505–28; Peter Gastrow, *Termites at Work: Transnational Organized Crime and State Erosion in Kenya* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2011); James Cockayne, *Hidden Power: The Strategic Logic of Organized Crime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Corentin Cohen, "Development of the Brazilian Drug Market Toward Africa: Myths, Evidence and Theoretical Questions," *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* 1, no. 2 (2019): 134–44.

13. Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, "The Myth of the Narco-State," *Space and Polity* 20, no. 1 (2016): 26–38.

14. Wolfram Lacher, *Challenging the Myth of the Drug-Terror Nexus in the Sahel* (Accra: West Africa Commission on Drugs, 2013).

15. For example, see James Cockayne and Phil Williams, *The Invisible Tide: Towards an International Strategy to Deal with Drug Trafficking Through West Africa* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2009).

governed.¹⁶ The reliance on this set of terms makes any moral discussions on psychoactive drugs and the meanings attributed to them by their users, traders, and producers effectively invisible. Moreover, most work that approaches these objects from a criminological perspective fails to take into account the diversity of histories and experiences associated with khat, cannabis, or heroin, all of which have both local and global trajectories. Drawing on research in Kenya, Neil Carrier, for example, has described khat as a “global pariah,” but a “national hero.”¹⁷ As a counterpoint to these perspectives, our approach is based on the idea that the “problems of drugs” as a public issue cannot be understood without analyzing the largely ignored meanings attributed to psychoactive substances.¹⁸ Drawing on these historical and anthropological approaches, this issue examines the moral dimension of drugs in Africa.

BREAKING WITH “TOP-DOWN” METHODS AND DATA

The break with dominant approaches called for in this issue presents important methodological challenges. The majority of social science studies, especially those that approach drugs from a criminological perspective, suffer from obvious methodological limitations. On the whole, they fail to capture local debates about how drugs can be used beneficially, traded, and controlled. Moreover, these analyses often rely on official data that can be considered biased and untrustworthy,¹⁹ since they are based solely on states’ declarations, which rely on highly heterogeneous systems and statistical categories.²⁰ The most common data are based on police seizures and are often used to support claims about developments in illegal markets, although they probably tell us more about the intensity of law enforcement than about anything else. These data are tools that enable governments to report and justify their efforts in the war on drugs; they help to reproduce power structures

16. Axel Klein, “Drug Problem or Medicrime? Distribution and Use of Falsified Tramadol Medication in Egypt and West Africa,” *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* 1, no. 1 (2019): 52–62.

17. Neil Carrier, “A Respectable Chew? Highs and Lows in the History of Kenyan Khat,” in *Drugs in Africa: Histories and Ethnographies of Use, Trade, and Control*, ed. Gernot Klantschnig, Neil Carrier, and Charles Ambler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 105–23.

18. Jordan Goodman, Andrew Sherratt, and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., *Consuming Habits: Global and Historical Perspectives on How Cultures Define Drugs* (London: Routledge, 2007).

19. Gernot Klantschnig, Margarita Dimova, and Hannah Cross, “Africa and the Drugs Trade Revisited,” *Review of African Political Economy* 43, no. 148 (2016): 167–73.

20. Benoît Martin, “La production des statistiques internationales. Le cas de l’Office des Nations unies contre la drogue et le crime (UNODC)” (PhD diss., Paris, Sciences Po, 2018).

and criminalize users,²¹ while allowing these states to legitimize their actions. While researchers have deplored the weaknesses of these data, they remain the main source of information on psychoactive drugs and are used to create maps of illicit flows that are often valued by the media. The articles in this issue shun these sources, which can be read and interpreted as political tools.

A “new history of drugs” in Latin America has emphasized the importance of these local meanings for understanding how the terms “drug,” “trafficking,” and “addiction” have been dictated by the concerns of consumer countries, particularly the United States.²² Historians of alcohol in Africa have also explored the changing social meanings attributed to alcohol consumption and their global dynamics since the 1980s. The methods employed in this more developed research field on alcohol (the most widely used legal psychoactive drug in Africa) have inspired this issue.²³ Since the 1980s, authors have attempted to go beyond the point of view of the state and have questioned approaches that view alcohol as an intrinsically problematic commodity.²⁴ This focus on the historical context and the meanings attributed to alcohol have helped to highlight the existence of debates in African societies on “good consumption,” and more specifically on moderation and abstinence, matters often influenced by religious discourse. The focus of these debates has been primarily on consumers, revealing generational and gender conflicts.²⁵ The study of alcohol consumption has thus held up a mirror to African societies. The four articles in this special issue show that illegal psychoactive substances prompt similar debates. The drugs studied here—cannabis, cocaine, heroin, and tramadol—thus reveal debates between different social groups, between traders with differing economic interests, and between generations.

Our work engages in a comparative dialogue with similar research carried out in the United States and in Latin America. The work of Philippe Bourgois

21. Chris Allen, “Africa and the Drugs Trade,” *Review of African Political Economy* 26, no. 79 (1999): 5–11.

22. Isaac Campos, *Home Grown: Marijuana and the Origins of Mexico’s War on Drugs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Paul Gootenberg, *Andean Cocaine: The Making of a Global Drug* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

23. Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Drink, Power and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996); Justin Willis, *Potent Brews: A Social History of Alcohol in East Africa, 1850–1999* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002); Jonathan Crush and Charles Ambler, eds., *Liquor and Labor in Southern Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992).

24. Justin Willis, “Drinking Power: Alcohol and History in Africa,” *History Compass* 3, no. 1 (2005): 1–13.

25. Akyeampong, *Drink, Power and Cultural Change*.

on American drug users²⁶—which several articles draw on here—has highlighted the importance of the moral issues around drugs, as well as the links between economic logics, such as the pooling of resources to buy heroin, and social logics that seek to minimize risks and reform communities or create bonds of solidarity. More broadly, sociological and ethnographic studies conducted in Latin America have discussed the value chains involved in the cocaine trade, from production to consumption via the hands of different actors.²⁷ They have also looked at the moral codes linked to “the street”²⁸ and gangs,²⁹ helping to show that the violence often attributed to drugs is not so much linked to the existence of illegal markets as to certain public security policies and patron-client relationships.³⁰ This is especially the case since certain norms and practices linked to the economies of psychoactive drugs can be the basis for the use of violence at the neighborhood or city scale.³¹ This question underlies Ricard and Kouamé’s article on smoking rooms in Abidjan. The authors show how interactions between actors result in the regulation of points of sale and consumption of drugs.

In recent years, work on alcohol and drugs in Latin America has contributed to a revival of work on drugs in Africa. David Anderson and Neil Carrier have explored the changing meanings and moral debates over the semi-legal substance khat in Kenya,³² while Thembisa Waetjen has examined changing perceptions of opium in South Africa.³³ Other studies have analyzed changes in moral discourses on cannabis in Nigeria since the 1950s³⁴ and in

26. Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

27. Francisco E. Thoumi, *Illegal Drugs, Economy, and Society in the Andes* (Washington, DC/Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Enrique D. Arias and Thomas Grisaffi, eds., *Cocaine: From Coca Fields to the Streets* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

28. Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000).

29. Dennis Rodgers, “Bróderes in Arms: Gangs and the Socialization of Violence in Nicaragua,” *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 5 (2017): 648–60.

30. Mirella van Dun, “Exploring Narco-Sovereignty/Violence: Analyzing Illegal Networks, Crime, Violence, and Legitimation in a Peruvian Cocaine Enclave (2003–2007),” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 43, no. 4 (2014): 395–418.

31. Enrique D. Arias, “The Dynamics of Criminal Governance: Networks and Social Order in Rio de Janeiro,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 38, no. 2 (2006): 293–325; Gabriel Feltran, *The Entangled City: Crime as Urban Fabric in São Paulo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

32. David Anderson and Neil Carrier, “Khat in Colonial Kenya: A History of Prohibition and Control,” *The Journal of African History* 50, no. 3 (2009): 377–97.

33. Thembisa Waetjen, “Drug Dealing Doctors and Unstable Subjects: Opium, Medicine and Authority in the Cape Colony, 1907–1910,” *South African Historical Journal* 68, no. 3 (2016): 342–65.

34. Axel Klein, “Trapped in the Traffick: Growing Problems of Drug Consumption in Lagos,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 32, no. 4 (1994): 657–77; Gernot Klantschnig, “Histories of Cannabis Use and Control in Nigeria, 1927–1967,” in *Drugs in Africa*, 69–88.

the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.³⁵ Lastly, Neil Savishinsky has also provided an insight into representations of cannabis among the Rastafarian-inspired Baye Faal brotherhoods in Senegal.³⁶

All the articles in this issue emphasize the diversity and ambiguities of moral landscapes. To do so, they have had to adopt new research strategies and overcome several methodological obstacles. For example, to conduct their interviews van Dijk and Zerbo enlisted the help of former drug users in order to circumvent the difficulties and biases related to the acceptability of researchers in these fields and users' fears of being scrutinized and stigmatized. This revealed the fact that the moral conflict experienced by users serves as a foundation for what appears to be the emergence of a shared consciousness. In a similar urban setting, Ricard and Kouamé's approach employed detailed observations and interviews with both actors involved in the drug trade and actors responsible for maintaining order and producing forms of indirect regulation—the latter being more easily accessible than the former. In particular, the researchers challenge the concepts used to talk about drugs when they describe the vast network of actors that might be dubbed members of "organized crime" networks in Western criminological jargon. Klantschnig and Dele-Adedeji took advantage of the quasilegal status of tramadol to conduct interviews on its legality and trade, a fresh approach made possible by extensive fieldwork. Bencherif draws on the existing literature on the morality of trafficking in the Sahara to capture the differences with his own more recent interview-based research, which highlights a transformation of these moral landscapes. Drawing on immersive methods and original data, the articles in this issue offer a unique insight into the world of drug markets, from the point of view of consumers, regulators, and traders.

THE NOTION OF MORAL LANDSCAPES

To explore the meanings of drugs and their moral dimensions, we have chosen to use the term moral landscapes. The term landscape refers to structures and positions that are not fixed, that involve different individual and social perspectives, and that can be countered or contested. One could also propose the term "moral compass" to describe the individual and group perspectives within these landscapes. This would reflect the idea that actors

35. Ann A. Laudati, "Out of the Shadows: Negotiations and Networks in the Cannabis Trade in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo," in *Drugs in Africa*, 161–81.

36. Neil Savishinsky, "Rastafari in the Promised Land: The Spread of a Jamaican Socioreligious Movement Among the Youth of West Africa," *African Studies Review* 37, no. 3 (1994): 21.

navigate and adopt different positions depending on the context, establishing different arrangements each time. The notion of moral landscapes thus allows the authors to understand these issues through the different positions, observations, and perspectives of the actors involved.

This notion also seems more appropriate than the related term moral economy. For several years now, the concept of moral economy has been widely used in African studies as a means of analyzing relations between normative and ethical expectations and the economic (or sometimes non-economic) dynamics of different societies.³⁷ But the success of the term is mainly linked to its diverse interpretations and applications. It has been used to account for the points of view of users and actors of corruption,³⁸ the effect of liberalization policies and adjustment programs on individual values and practices around money,³⁹ confrontations around elections to underline the tensions between a so-called civic morality and a patrimonial morality,⁴⁰ etc. While the concept has been widely used, it has lost much of its heuristic value.

Fragmented and disputed moral landscapes

We choose to speak of moral landscapes in this issue because the articles refer to highly heterogeneous sets of principles and values that are specific to each of the social groups studied. The landscapes presented are largely fragmented and disputed, except at very localized scales or within the framework of specific and relatively closed communities of practice.

These moral issues, which affect the lives of users and sellers, are inseparable from different political economies, configurations, and highly localized alliances. In the case of tramadol markets in Lagos, discourses on the substance and its uses are connected to material interests: pecuniary in the case of traders and health-related in the case of users. The concept of “quasi-legality” used by Klantschnig and Dele-Adedeji helps to show that the state, vendors, and pharmacists to some degree agree locally on what constitutes good and bad uses of tramadol and thus tolerate certain aspects of its trade. In both Abidjan and Lagos, the line between legal and illegal markets seems

37. Johanna Siméant, “Three Bodies of Moral Economy: The Diffusion of a Concept,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 11, no. 2 (2015): 163–75.

38. Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, “A Moral Economy of Corruption in Africa?” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 1 (1999): 25–52.

39. Jörg Wiegatz and Egle Cesnulyte, “Money Talks: Moral Economies of Earning a Living in Neoliberal East Africa,” *New Political Economy* 21, no. 1 (2016): 1–25.

40. Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis, *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa: Democracy, Voting and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

equally porous. And in the smoking rooms in Abobo, there is a fluidity between the categories of “licit” and “illicit.”

Analysis of the relations between actors as diverse as vendors, owners of smoking rooms, neighborhood leaders, union leaders, and “generals” reveals a “coercive moral community,” a notion introduced by Laurent Fourchard⁴¹ and used by Ricard and Kouamé to understand how social and moral order is maintained locally. Alliances between different actors are thus at stake in these discourses on drugs. Far from being isolated spaces, the smoking rooms studied are incorporated within forms of “neighborhood” management that emerged in the wake of Ivorian electoral crises. These repressive and regulatory alliances can also be found among certain Tuareg groups in northern Niger or Mali, and also in Ouagadougou, with the emergence of communities of users who are caught between the moral order of their societies and their addictions.

There are several caveats to the idea of fragmented moral landscapes. In empirical terms, although they provide an insight into the specificity of dense urban configurations and arrangements around points of sale and consumption of drugs in so-called subaltern neighborhoods or among so-called dangerous classes, the studies presented here are extremely localized. They are also limited to West Africa. The situation would certainly be very different in the South African townships that have historically demonstrated their opposition to the state and the apartheid regime, or in certain rural areas where cannabis or khat are produced.⁴² Moreover, we cannot forget the existence of groups, like the Rastafarian community, that have developed their identities as a counterpoint to the dominant norms.⁴³ Lastly, we should also mention the singer Fela Kuti’s use of cannabis to challenge the Nigerian military dictatorship and, more recently, the songs of Davido, such as “Fans Mi.” It seems to us, however, that these discourses and practices are characterized either by a form of elitism or by their deliberately utopian visions.

Limited resistance and contestation

The second reason for proposing the term moral landscapes is that the contributions in this issue highlight the lack of a clear challenge to prohibitionist discourses on drugs. We know that in Latin America, groups involved in the

41. Laurent Fourchard, “Mobilisations contre le gangstérisme et production d’une communauté morale coercitive en Afrique du Sud,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 15 (2012).

42. Christopher A. Suckling, “Chain Work: The Cultivation of Hierarchy in Sierra Leone’s Cannabis Economy,” *Review of African Political Economy* 43, no. 148 (2016): 206–26.

43. Savishinsky, “Rastafari in the Promised Land,” 21.

drug trade may ban their members from using them, prohibit consumption in certain spaces or communities, and ultimately support a morally conservative order. But one can also identify in Latin America certain imaginaries transmitted by songs⁴⁴ and films⁴⁵ that are inspired by networks of traffickers. Based on a certain representation of “social bandits” and a “narco aesthetic,” this has contributed to the birth of a “narcoculture”⁴⁶ that has specific ethics, while fueling certain forms of masculinity.⁴⁷ Conversely, the moral landscapes discussed here do little to question the dominant discourses on drugs, though they do not necessarily identify them as threats. These moral landscapes are rather more accommodating and prepared to accept drugs under certain conditions.

This configuration seemed to us to be best captured by the term landscapes. Indeed, in E. P. Thompson’s work, the idea of moral economy helped to show that the peasant revolts of the eighteenth century were based on “a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking.”⁴⁸ Thompson distinguishes this moral economy from a political economy that was being formalized at the time and was leading dominant groups to free themselves from their former moral obligations. He highlights the passage from a system of “pre-market” goods, which was an economy “in the social,”⁴⁹ to an autonomous economic field. This process of disembedding is also found implicitly in several academic and expert works on drugs. In recent years, there has been talk of the emergence of local drug markets, particularly in the Sahel, Guinea-Bissau, or Mozambique, using terms such as the “Uberization” of the drug trade or the “fragmentation of trading monopolies.”⁵⁰ These processes of disembedding are seen as precursors to the emergence of new moral communities, although there is no empirical support for this in their work—or, indeed, in

44. Paul Sneed, “*Bandidos de Cristo*: Representations of the Power of Criminal Factions in Rio’s *Proibidão Funk*,” *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 28, no. 2 (2007): 220–41.

45. Corentin Cohen, “Politiques des images dans les conflits armés contemporains. Cas de l’insurrection de Boko Haram et de la violence urbaine liée au Primeiro Comando da Capital à São Paulo” (PhD diss., Paris, Sciences Po, 2017).

46. Miguel L. Rojas-Sotelo, “Narcoaesthetics in Colombia, Mexico, and the United States: Death Narco, Narco Nations, Border States, Narcochinguadazo?” *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 2 (2014): 215–31.

47. Hettie Malcomson, “Negotiating Violence and Creative Agency in Commissioned Mexican Narco Rap,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 38, no. 3 (2019): 347–62.

48. E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 79.

49. Didier Fassin, “Vers une théorie des économies morales,” in *Économies morales contemporaines*, ed. Didier Fassin and Jean-Sébastien Eideliman (Paris: La Découverte, 2012), 19–47.

50. Joseph Hanlon, “The Uberization of Mozambique’s Heroin Trade,” *LSE Working Paper Series*, no. 18-190 (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2018).

this issue. On the other hand, James C. Scott's work⁵¹ on the moral economy of Southeast Asian peasants highlights discreet forms of popular resistance to the state and elites.⁵² Scott shows the different strategies that are adopted on a daily basis by the peasantry and describes what they reveal about the moral conceptions of the dominated and the way in which, in certain cases, it appears possible and justified to use violence. While the contributions in this issue highlight practices of circumvention of prohibition, they show no such forms of resistance.

One could hypothesize that the plurality of moral landscapes studied in this issue and the absence of a strong tendency to challenge the dominant orders could be explained by the lack of a sufficiently strong and structured drug market. Contrary to the dominant discourses of international institutions, the development of trade and consumption on a continental scale—which this issue attests to—does not appear to have led to the emergence of a counterculture.

The study on the experiences and moral conflicts of drug users in Ouagadougou shows that users are largely integrated within society and the dominant order. They seek to reconcile their addictions with their families' or employers' social expectations of what constitutes a "good life," and this can result in "moral breakdown." In Ouagadougou, this period of addiction and social immobility is associated with youth and can therefore be tolerated. This ambiguity is also the case for tramadol use in Lagos. It is seen as a medicine, and its capacity to improve performance at work can make it morally acceptable even when it is being used outside the medical and legal framework. All the articles presented show how social actors seek to regulate consumption and trade without prohibiting them completely.

In line with theses on the criminalization of the state,⁵³ the articles also study the way in which both states and social actors play on norms to better assert their power. The discourses of Tuareg elites on the drug trade should be seen as attempts to regulate populations involved in trafficking and to define what is and is not licit when it comes to practices and key players, particularly with regard to subcontracting and transport. Given this issue's focus on various phenomena of negotiation and accommodation, it can be suggested that the drug trade and drug use even reinforce existing social orders and the moral authorities that produce discourses on drugs. In Ouagadougou,

51. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

52. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

53. Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Béatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

for example, the normalization of practices and the “good life” sought by users limit the possibilities of disruption. In the same way, in the northern regions of Mali and Niger, there does not seem to be a general exclusion of drug trafficking actors on the part of Tuareg elites, but rather an effort to provide a moral framework for their activities by setting conditions and limits: activities must not result in independent mercenary groups, nor be politicized, and must benefit the community. The Tuareg elites interviewed by Bencherif recognize that trafficking may be considered a way of gaining respectability and even status, notably through matrimonial practices and dowry payments.

Under these conditions, drug use and trade seem to fit into the dominant order without jeopardizing it. In Abobo, drug users may be equated with “dangers” in some discourses, while in practice they are tolerated and normalized as long as the illegal economies benefit state agents or the guardians of urban order. And former “microbes” who wish to make a fresh start and leave a life of crime behind are attracted to a career as owners of smoking rooms. In Lagos, public and private actors involved in tramadol distribution are also engaged in strategies of normalization and the competition for profits through debates about what counts as licit or illicit practice. In all of these cases, there is no clear evidence of the emergence of new registers of protest, new forms of mobilization, or rhetoric that challenges the established order. The moral prohibition and constraints on sale and consumption are accepted and accommodated by both consumers and sellers, as long as their practices continue to be tolerated or are open to negotiation.

Moral regulation by a plethora of different actors

The limited scope for contestation in these moral representations ultimately highlights the effectiveness of instruments of social control and forms of moral regulation that seem to be in line with those used by states with regard to prohibition.

The contributions in this issue highlight the links between top-down international discourses advocating prohibitionist approaches, in particular by encouraging states to adopt bans, and the day-to-day application of such prohibition by means of the law, state agents, and moral authorities such as pastors, imams, and traditional healers. Axel Klein, for example, has described the religiously inspired discourses on drug use in Christian re-education centers in southwestern Nigeria and the way in which drugs are “identified

as the instrument of the devil and condemned as inherently evil.”⁵⁴ This prohibitionist morality is reflected in the discourses on the danger of drugs and the need for redemption discussed by Klantschnig and Dele-Adedeji. It can also be fueled by non-governmental organizations fighting drug addiction, as van Dijk and Zerbo reveal in Ouagadougou, or by traditional leaders, as Kouamé and Ricard have observed in Abidjan. Traditional leaders, in particular, seem to have appropriated the prohibitionist discourses initiated by colonial states and renewed by the “war on drugs” in the 1980s. A moral and social consensus on prohibition has thus been established among these different institutional agents, limiting the possibility of debates on the legalization of drugs, or confining them to the issue of producing cannabis for export.

More attention should therefore be paid to the discourses and practices of these religious figures, traditional authorities, and NGOs when it comes to drug control. These moral entrepreneurs, who at times may advocate treatment of addictions and users, seem to us to primarily advocate moralizing conceptions about the danger of drugs, and to encourage the criminalization of sellers. At a time when South Africa is legalizing the use of cannabis, and when other states such as Lesotho, Morocco, Malawi, and Ghana are considering liberalizing cannabis production, it seems crucial to understand the role of these actors in the debate over drug policy.

Corentin Cohen

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford

Gernot Klantschnig

University of Bristol

Translated and edited by Cadenza Academic Translations

Translator: Peter Collins; Editor: Matt Burden; Senior editor: Mark Mellor

54. Axel Klein, “‘Have a Piss, Drink *Ogogoro*, Smoke *Igbo*, but Don’t Take *Gbana*’ – Hard and Soft Drugs in Nigeria: A Critical Comparison of Official Policies and the View on the Street,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 33, no. 2 (2001): 117.