

*The Cannabis Papers: a citizen's guide to cannabinoids*  
by Publius

#31

## Drugism/Racism

*We were born into the drug war the way slaves were born into slavery.*

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### **Drugism**

In Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, we are shown a vision of America's new form of discrimination as understood through the "felon":

What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it. In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice to label people of color "criminals" and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African-Americans. ***Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination – employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service – are suddenly legal.*** As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow.

At the opening of this essay we quoted something that we kept saying at our meetings: *We were born into the drug war the way slaves were born into slavery.* Then when Alexander's book was published in 2009, she provided the theoretical framework for what we were feeling – the concept of "drugism."

If you think pot causes cancer or if you believe using cannabis makes you dumb – those are drugisms. They are ideas that thrive on myth-making and stereotypes. They are easy to use (convenient even) because they support things that people want to believe – like people who use drugs are bad. That can't be true though in a nation where pharmaceutical sales topped \$300 billion last year: that, my friends, is drugism par excellence.

In terms of the pursuit of happiness, people who consume cannabis are overwhelmingly peaceful when compared to the violent effect of other legal and illegal drugs. Cannabis culture has continued its pursuit of happiness for personal, spiritual or

medical reasons regardless of the rule of law. Although arrests continue to rise, science and awareness favor cannabis. Ending America's draconian laws represents a shift in this transformation. We can expect the conflict between two truths, the 800,000 arrests versus the cannabinoid system, to reveal itself in the near future on a multitude of social and legal fronts.

### **Racism**

Cordelia Stevenson lived near Columbus, Mississippi. She was the mother of a son suspected of wrongdoing. It was during the time when mobs lynched people:

Once having settled on lynch justice, mobs were not overly scrupulous about determining the guilt of the black victim. The idea, after all, as one black observer noted, was to make an example, "*knowing full well that one Negro swinging from a tree will serve as well as another to terrorize the community.*" After a barn burning near Columbus, Mississippi, suspicion fell on the son of Cordelia Stevenson. Unable to locate him, a mob of whites settled on his mother, seized and tortured her, and left her naked body hanging from the limb of a tree for public viewing. A jury rendered the usual judgment in such cases, deciding she had come to her death **at the hands of persons unknown.**

Terror overwhelms with our fear of helplessness. We discuss the deaths of three citizens in this book. These three faced impossible situations and preventable deaths. *Jonathan Magbie* died in the custody of local law enforcement; *Robin Prosser* died in fear of federal custody; *Cordelia Stevenson* died in the custody of her community. All three died with fellow citizens watching and in place to protect them. Anyone could have yelled something like – "**Stop! This is wrong!**" That might have made someone else think the same thing. Sometimes that's all it takes to stop evil. One person speaking out when it is most needed. It's courage in the face of adversity.

Magbie, Prosser or Stevenson did not commit a crime worthy of being denied compassion. They also did not die "**at the hands of persons unknown.**" People knew these citizens needed relief. Compassion is not a difficult morality to exhibit. It means helping those in need. Magbie, Prosser and Stevenson were all in need of protection from their fellow citizens. No one offered respite or relief. No one helped them in their need on the day they died. In real terms, one can't imagine another's thoughts at the moment of death. One can imagine feelings like the *ensconcing terror of helplessness* and the *determining horror of hopelessness* and feel empathy for their last moments. Traditionally, compassion has been a higher human feeling valued as exceptional.

What is the effect on us when we accept the arresting of 800,000 Americans for herbal cannabinoids? Perhaps arresting citizens for plant crimes is not good government.

That depends though: as Alexander points out – all those felons are serving more than time; they are serving a purpose as well.

Young black men are a large part of the 800,000 arrests. So are other minorities. It's easy to imagine there are plenty of would-be Dizzy Gillespies, Cab Calloways, and Barry Obamas being arrested.

When you look at the history of racism you immediately see the language games it involves – which leads you to see how changing the language has changed racism. We haven't ended racism and won't. It is the effects that are changing. Power now uses the felon to discriminate. When you look at the effects of racism in the context of 70 years of cannabis prohibition, it is clear that something wrong is taking place. Racism is a component of drugism and it is complicit in keeping citizens from helping other citizens. We end up calling it things like “class war” or want to place the blame on capitalism. Instead, isn't it our policies that divide – and not us? I will not waste another generation in this war. No more failing. The CS is fundamental to one's health: arresting someone for supplementing their CS – that's criminal.

Cannabinoids seem to be the least discriminating substance shared by humans. An *ism* blinds one to another's reality. We are the ones who allow others to wage war on our own citizens. The plant offers healing. Maybe we should do the same.

The denial of *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness* is not an American tradition worth supporting. Less needless helplessness and more compassion – that would be a better tradition.

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### ***Search terms***

Cordelia Stevenson; potent ligands of cannabinoid receptors; therapeutic potential of cannabinoids; Jim Crow laws; Harlem Hamfats; Medgar Evers; Crucial Conflict.

### ***Research and selected readings***

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