

**“DRUGGED SOCIOLOGY” ON THE SEMI-PERIPHERY:
PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES, GOVERNANCE, AND RESISTANCE
IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

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Editorial

The adjective “drugged” is rarely employed in the sociology of psychoactive substances. In sociology and in the social sciences more broadly, thinking about illegal substances has been limited by the influence of rational-choice framing or concerns about the public health risks of psychoactive substances (Stevens 2011). However, there have been constant calls within drug studies to apply a critical sociological lens to drug-related phenomena in order to acknowledge not only the agency and intersectionality of people who use drugs, but also the agency of drugs themselves (Dennis & Farrugia 2017; Dertadian 2024; Wheeldon & Heidt 2025). This approach would move outside normative framings and recognize the complexity of drug entanglements beyond their allegedly destructive effects; it would look, for instance, at self-enhancement, pleasure, and togetherness (Askew & Williams 2021; Struzik 2021; Tutenges 2023). It is sobering—pun intended—that more than sixty years after Howard Becker’s *Outsiders* (1963) and four decades after Norman Zinberg’s *Drug, Set, and Setting* (1984) we still need to call for such an approach.

Our use of the word “drugged,” however, does more than reiterate these postulates. It reverses the diagnostic gaze: If anyone is drugged here, it is society itself—intoxicated by its own regimes of power, coercive care, punitive law, and obsessive productivity, which generate the very categories (addiction, sobriety, *narkomania*) they claim merely to describe (Frank 2018). “Drugged sociology” is thus a double gesture. It is a critique of a sociology stricken by moral panic—a sociology blind to the agency of people who use drugs and to the power structures behind coercive drug policies. It is, at the same time, a call for a sociology that is attentive to the excess and inconsistency of the regimes determining the landscape of psychoactive substance use and its societal reception.

This double gesture unfolds, in what follows, along three dimensions. “Drugged sociology” names, first, an epistemological reorientation—from sobriety as the tacit norm of inquiry toward intoxication as a legitimate object of analysis. Second, it names a positional reorientation—theory reworked from the semi-periphery, where global drug regimes meet local histories and ontologies that do not easily fit the conceptualizations of the Global North. Third, it names an analytical reorientation—substances as entry points into the excess and absurdity of the systems that govern them. These dimensions do

not add up to a finished framework. They are three ways of staying with a deliberately wobbly category that evoke the dynamics and agency rather than passive instability.

The first dimension entails unsettling the sober, disembodied subject of knowledge and treating intoxication as an analytically productive condition. In studying psychoactive substances as a problem, social sciences and public health often operate from the position of a sober observer and treat a life of abstinence as the horizon towards which everyone ought to strive. We, by contrast, are interested in how psychoactive substances materialize in bodies, how they are experienced and thought through the body (Sadowska, this Special Issue). We do not seek a way out of intoxication, because it is intoxication itself, in its multiple ontological mediations, that constitutes our object of inquiry.

The second dimension interprets “drugged sociology” through the category of the semi-periphery. It is precisely here that global drug regimes meet local policies and ontologies, and this encounter is itself a productive site of theory. The semi-peripheral position is not, for us, a deficit to be remedied by a theoretical catch-up, nor a reason to reject Western concepts in the name of local authenticity. What interests us, rather, is what happens in the very act of interpreting: how concepts from the Global North (e.g., addiction, recovery, harm reduction) shift in meaning when evaluated alongside Eastern *narkomania*, the post-socialist trajectory of drug policy, and the local practices of users and activists (Carroll 2019). “Drugged,” in this dimension, means that theory itself is reworked through this passage. We do not apply Western frameworks to local cases, but rather reconstruct our conceptual apparatus from a position in which the global and the local cannot be disentangled. Harm reduction, for instance, can be understood as a non-event (Povinelli 2011) in the Polish context. On the one hand, it is happening; it is inscribed in the national health program. On the other, it is not happening: its limited scope and the chronic deficit of funding and staff mean that harm reduction scarcely seems to exist. It is present in policy, but absent in practice (Klingemann 2017; Jeziorska et al. 2025). A breaching experiment, in the form of forced migrants from Ukraine, who were accustomed to an extensive network of donor-driven harm-reduction outlets (Wanke et al., this Special Issue), illustrates the semi-peripheral setting very well.

The third dimension treats substances as entry points to the study of broader political and epistemic configurations. It examines what becomes visible about society through its relations with psychoactive substances. In this sense, substances function as sites where legal, medical, and moral logics intersect, making them particularly revealing of how societies regulate bodies, produce categories such as “addiction,” and distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of care and control. The term “drugged” points to a certain excess and absurdity in these systems, which is visible in the inconsistencies of their legal classifications, the selectivity of their enforcement, and the tensions between care and punishment that structure drug governance. “Drugged sociology” is, ultimately, for us a wobbly, unfinished project, full of “inconveniences” (Berlant 2022), but it allows us to perceive the arbitrariness of worlds that take sobriety and narcophobia as the norm, and it simultaneously prompts critical reflection on categories such as health, addiction, the state, and citizenship.

Who Asks, and What We Ask

This Special Issue stems from the work of the Critical Drug Studies Group, an independent network of Polish sociologists and anthropologists of varying academic seniority. Their thematic interests range from the agency of people who use opioids (Struzik 2026) to the boundary work of cannabis users (Wanke et al. 2022), the relationality of psychedelics (Sadowska 2022), opioid agonist treatment, and the formation of patient subjectivities in Poland. They are connected by a shared discomfort with how drugs are studied, governed, and talked about in this part of Europe. Like drugged sociology itself, the Group is an unfinished formation; it is held together less by any institutional structure than by recurring questions. This Special Issue grew out of the seminar “Drugged Sociology on the Semi-Periphery,” where these questions were first collectively articulated (Institute of Sociology, Jagiellonian University, co-organized by the University of Opole in October 2025).

We have organized our inquiry into three clusters of questions. The first concerns lived experience: How do people who use drugs encounter and navigate stigma, criminalization, and social exclusion in Central and Eastern Europe? How do CEE-specific contexts—post-socialist healthcare systems, conservative politics, the afterlives of *narkomania* as a diagnostic and moral category—shape these experiences, and how do users reclaim agency under prohibition? The second cluster concerns policy and discourse: To what extent do CEE drug policies reflect global regulatory trends, local moral panics, or do they reflect both? Whose voices count in these debates, and whose are silenced? The third cluster concerns global contradictions that have become condensed in the region: Is CEE a “policy desert,” lagging behind reform elsewhere, or a site of quiet resistance and improvised care? How do global trends—punitive and reformist alike—amplify local inequalities when they touch ground here?

Behind these three clusters lies a fourth, more speculative set of questions that gives the project its name. What is revealed about society when psychoactive substances are approached as analytical entry points rather than objects of regulation? To what extent can contemporary societies themselves be understood as drugged—shaped, or even intoxicated, by regimes of power and productivity? How does the semi-peripheral condition produce and intensify contradictions in drug governance, as competing regulatory logics coexist within the same space? And what forms of knowledge, subjectivity, and agency emerge under these conditions, and which are rendered illegible, or impossible?

Scope: Poland as an Entry Point and Its Limitations

Shaped by its semi-peripheral status, the region is caught between global antidrug policies and its own historically situated experiences with drugs: the social denial and marginalization of drug-related issues under state socialism, the HIV epidemic linked to injection drug use in the 1990s, and the neoliberal restructuring of public health and social policy after the post-communist transition (Malinowska-Sempruch 2013, 2016; Struzik 2021; Allaste & Lagerspetz 2005; Alexandrescu 2017; Carroll 2019). In recent years, policies, cultures, and markets have shifted significantly, driven by efforts to move beyond

the war on drugs and prohibitionist frameworks, both globally and within Central and Eastern Europe. The introduction, for instance, of regulated cannabis markets has signaled yet another complex chapter in the evolution of drug policy, while also reflecting region-specific dynamics (Mravčík et al. 2024; Decorte et al. 2020).

Our initial ambition was to problematize the landscapes of drug policies across this region as a whole. We only partly succeeded, and we want to state this openly rather than smooth it over. The contributions do reach beyond a single national frame: Kowalczyk examines gendered experiences of drug use in Central Asia; Wanke and colleagues follow how Ukrainian refugees navigate access to health care; and Bujalski and Klingemann trace regional imaginaries of addiction. Yet the Polish context dominates this Special Issue, reflecting less an editorial choice than the actual geography of our network and, perhaps, of critical drug studies in the region. At the same time, this geography is shifting. A growing body of critical scholarship on drugs, drug policy, and harm reduction is emerging across Central and Eastern Europe and its wider post-socialist neighborhood. This Special Issue seeks to contribute to rather than speak for such work (Mravčík et al. 2026; Dmitrieva & Stepanov 2026; Bebre 2025; Čufar & Kapun 2024). We ask, therefore, that Poland not be read here as an illustration of CEE, as standing in for the whole. We treat it instead as one entry point among possible others—a site whose contradictions, we suspect, resonate with what may be unfolding elsewhere in the region, though whether and how they do so remain empirical questions, and an invitation. If drugged sociology is a wobbly, unfinished project, this Special Issue is unsettled and open-ended in the same way: partial in its coverage, and hopeful that the gaps it leaves visible will be filled by others—ideally in collaboration with researchers working in and on the parts of the region we have not reached.

Borrowed, Reworked in Transit

Rather than summarizing the contributions one by one, we will approach them in terms of the three concepts that circulate across this Special Issue: ontopolitics, lateral agency, and epistemic peripheries. None of these are confined to a single article; they migrate between texts. Sometimes they are named explicitly and sometimes they operate quietly in the background. Together they form something like the conceptual vocabulary of a drugged sociology on the semi-periphery—provisional, borrowed, and reworked in transit. Most of the contributions appear under more than one heading, and this is not a flaw of our classification but its point: The concepts are entangled, as are the phenomena they help us grasp.

Ontopolitics

Not only are drugs differently made and unmade by states and their legislation, law enforcement, health care, and education systems, and mediascapes, but they are also discursively produced across groups of scholars, field practitioners, and people who use drugs. Indeed, our own proposal is another enactment of a particular way of framing drugs. It is performative and radically critical of the power structure. Therefore, we call for

thinking ontopolitically about psychoactive substances and acknowledge different types of agency in the making of drugs (Fraser 2020; Søgaaard & Lerkkanen 2021).

It is—we argue—especially important to recognize the competing realities of drugs in Poland, a country characterized by stark discrepancies between its moralizing frames and its burgeoning drug cultures, as demonstrated by the introduction and appropriation of medical cannabis (Los 2024; Wagner et al. 2021; Wanke et al. 2025). Bujalski and Klingemann illuminate the legitimizing of the concept of addiction. They analyze a certain local ontology of medical knowledge, which becomes subject to negotiation and constant translation even as it creates the appearance of universality.

Lateral Agency

Lauren Berlant’s (2007) notion of lateral agency describes forms of action that unfold under conditions of “slow death”—the gradual wearing out of populations by the very conditions of their existence (cf. Bartoszko 2018; López 2020). Against models of agency premised on sovereign self-transformation or heroic rupture, lateral agency moves sideways, to the small acts of self-interruption, relief, and maintenance by which people hold their lives together in environments they cannot simply escape. For drug research, the concept cuts against the dominant scripts of use as compulsion and use as resistance, and the ordinary, unheroic work of getting by is consequently made visible. In semi-peripheral contexts, where the institutions that might sustain such lives are scarce, underfunded, or punitive, lateral agency becomes a form of resistance with no institution to hold on to.

Critical drug studies gains its critical edge through sustained attention to power and inequality, and here gender remains undertheorized. Campbell and Herzberg (2017) argue that drug policy worlds and the lived experiences they shape must be examined through gender, race, and class. Although the war on drugs has often been defined as a war on Black, poor, and marginalized communities (Zigon 2019), its consequences for specific subpopulations and subregions remain insufficiently explored (Measham 2002). Feminist and narcofeminist scholarship intervene, showing how the war on drugs shapes the experiences of women and gender-diverse people, and what tactics of survival and navigation emerge within its institutional violence (Dennis et al. 2023; Chang 2023; Knight 2015). A gender-sensitive perspective acquires particular weight on the semi-periphery, where local iterations of the war on drugs meet distinct understandings of gender and the expectations placed upon women. As Judith Butler (2024) observes, in contemporary anti-gender ideologies, gender operates as a phantasm, condensing social anxieties and mobilizing actors who do not share a single agenda. The phantasmatic image of “being a woman” presupposes motherhood, devotion, modesty, and sobriety; transgressing any of these provokes anxiety and, above all, exposes one to violence.

Three contributions to this Special Issue view drug use through this lens, moving from state to body. Struzik traces how people who use opioids in semi-peripheral Poland reframe their use as a means of holding life together, of articulating an “ephemeral pride”—fleeting moments of dignity and agency within environments of “slow death.” Kowalczyk follows women who use drugs in Central Asia as they navigate the double violence of prohibition and gendered expectation, where a woman who uses drugs embodies the

phantasmatic transgression *par excellence*: neither sober, nor devoted, nor modest enough. Natalia Martini, in turn, in her ethnography of people experiencing homelessness, examines how procuring the means to purchase alcohol, and then consuming it, becomes a form of “labor of maintenance” and a way of finding relief in everydayness. This is a particularly interesting case: Although alcohol as a psychoactive substance is not in itself criminalized, its consumption in a public space (on the streets) is. This—ultimately—compels unhoused people to constantly navigate these spaces in order to protect themselves.

Epistemic Peripheries

Epistemic peripheries refer to forms of knowledge that become devalued or institutionally silenced within dominant regimes of knowledge production. The notion has no single genealogy; it emerges across critical social theory, decolonial thought, and debates on epistemic justice (Spivak 1988; Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2000; Santos 2007; Hilton & Pesarini 2026) as a way of naming the asymmetries through which some epistemologies become authoritative and universal while others are rendered secondary, local, experiential, or insufficiently “scientific.” Epistemic peripheries are thus geographically inflected but not geographically determined. They often overlap with colonial, post-socialist, and center–periphery geographies, yet they cannot be reduced to fixed locations on a map (Boatcă 2021).

In this Special Issue, the concept of epistemic peripheries complements the framework of semi-peripherality. If the latter names a structural position within global systems of drug governance and knowledge production, epistemic peripheries trace the process through which knowledge produced from such positions becomes devalued or treated as merely local: whose expertise counts, who gets to produce concepts and models, and whose role is reduced to supplying empirical “cases” and regional data (as demonstrated in this Special Issue by an interview with Marta Rychert, whose experience in drug policy spans Poland, the EU, and New Zealand).

The notion of epistemic peripheries appears most explicitly in Zuzanna Sadowska’s contribution, which develops the concept of “prohibited methodologies”: research practices that become legally and epistemologically problematic, especially the kinds of participant observation that involve direct, embodied engagement with psychoactive substances. Prohibition, Sadowska shows, functions not only as a legal regime but as an epistemic one. In the field, embodied familiarity with a substance may be a condition of access and trust; in academia, the same involvement is stigmatized or dismissed as insufficiently objective, and researchers learn to “distill” traces of their participation from their writing. In this Special Issue, Michał Bujalski and Justyna Klingemann examine “epistemic governance,” through which the globally dominant classificatory systems (the DSM-5, the ICD-11) are adapted in semi-peripheral contexts, marginalizing alternative understandings of suffering, addiction, and care. Michał Wanke and colleagues examine how mobility—or, more precisely, forced migration—between semi-peripheral Ukraine and Poland shapes the experiences of migrants enrolled in opioid agonist treatment. Disparities in harm-reduction provision between the two countries expose migrants to a double dislocation: “un-being” as recipients of care, and “un-belonging” as they anticipate stigma and moral judgement. These findings

are key to understanding how locally specific arrangements of care fracture the continuity of transnational social fields, disrupting individual lifeworlds. Katarzyna Kowalczyk argues that treating regions such as Central Asia as analytically peripheral erases their role in shaping global debates on drugs and governance. Finally, several contributions foreground resistance to epistemic peripheralization. Justyna Struzik argues for granting epistemic priority to the lived experiences of people who use drugs, allowing “ephemeral pride” to become visible where institutions perceive only pathology.

Still Under the Influence

This Special Issue responds to a persistent gap: The phenomena of psychoactive substance use in semi-peripheral contexts have rarely been subjects of sustained sociological analysis on their own terms, as opposed to appearing as regional “cases” within frameworks produced elsewhere. Applying the concept of peripherality to drugs, the contributions trace its methodological and epistemic consequences: how societies govern states of consciousness and bodily experience; and what escapes, exceeds, or quietly resists that governance.

In doing so, this Special Issue proposes the semi-periphery not merely as an understudied location, but as an analytical model. The contradictions of drug governance—between care and punishment, reform and prohibition, medicalization and moralization—are global and exist everywhere. On the semi-periphery, however, they condense and intensify, becoming visible with particular clarity. What can be glimpsed only in outline at the center appears here in sharp relief. Viewing the phenomenon of drugs from the semi-periphery is thus not a matter of adding a missing region to the map, but of finding a vantage point from which the map itself looks different.

The contributions move across scales. At the macro level, they examine the assemblage of discourses, laws, and institutions through which drug governance operates; at the micro level, they attend to bodies and lived experience—to how people who use drugs navigate, inhabit, and sometimes rework oppressive structures, articulating practices that can be read as forms of resistance or citizenship, or simply of holding life together. Between these scales, the three concepts we have proposed—ontopolitics, lateral agency, and epistemic peripheries—offer a provisional vocabulary for a “drugged sociology.” This vocabulary is useful precisely because it remains unfinished. If society itself is drugged—intoxicated by its own regimes of power, care, law, and productivity—then the sociology it requires cannot pretend to sobriety. It can only embrace the intoxication and think from within it.

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