

Review of Pamela Donovan 2016 *Drink Spiking and Predatory Drugging. A Modern History*. Palgrave MacMillan.

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My discovery of Pamela Donovan's book took place in May 2022 during my redaction of an article on the needle-spiking scares (that have flared in the UK and France from November 2021 till July 2022). I shall not try to present her in full, but specify that her first book (2004) was already linked to our field "*No Way of Knowing: Crime, Urban Legends and the Internet*".

We had already been in touch for her great paper in the *Diogenes* n°213, Volume 54, Issue 1 *Rumors and Urban Legends* for which I was guest editor "How Idle is Idle Talk? One Hundred Years of Rumor Research". And of course, I was aware of "Embodying Uncertainty? Understanding Heightened Risk Perception of Drink 'Spiking'", co-authored with Adam Burgess and Sarah E. H. Moore, [*The British Journal of Criminology*, Vol 49, 6, November 2009 : 848–862, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azp049>]. Pamela Donovan now centers on writing books based on original research and that her current project covers self-storage in the U.S. <https://pameladonovan.com> . Now to the book.

Starting in the mid 1800s its subject is the history of drugging, mainly in the U.S., fostered then by the creation of synthetic drugs such as chloral hydrate and chloroform used by the medical profession for anesthesia and psychic disorders but also by the general population and criminals: the famous Mickey Finns and knockout drops After four historical chapters covering almost half of the text, four other discuss the situation created by the birth of the contemporary date rape drug scare, started in the 1990s and still present, endorsed by well-meaning institutions and grass-root movements in spite of the rarity of sanctioned offenses noted almost from the start by social scientists and health professions, less by law-enforcement bodies.

In the early historical chapters Donovan presents a pattern still present two centuries later:

The specific history of chloral hydrate is a concentrated version of the often-seen path from techno-utopianism to techno-terror that accompanies adjustment to new drugs — synthetic ones in particular — from chloral hydrate through lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), through benzodiazepines, and on through synthetics of the 1990s like Ecstasy and GHB. Tales and frameworks of coercion — drugging, drink spiking, and forced intoxication — seem to accompany the point in the path where techno-wonder is supplanted by fear of misuse. (:18)

Chapter 4 delineates the rise of the psychoactive drugs with the advent of tranquilizers in the 1950s, at first hailed as miracle pills that would dispel the anxiety caused by the growth of individualism paired with the consciousness of “the fast pace, ominous threats, and— perhaps a new thing—the vast *scale* of the modern world” :91. When problems appeared with the first generation of psychoactive drugs (meprobamate, designated as Miltown or Equanil) ,they were quickly replaced by new ones (the first benzodiazepines, Librium, Valium) in the 1960s. Two phenomenon co-occurred in the 1970s-1980s:

- * the “rise of general-audience psycho-pharmacology” :92 as patients demanded the miracle pills not to reluctant psychiatrists but to their family doctors who prescribed them,

- * the silence made around the psychoactive pills that had first been hailed with enthusiasm and for example celebrated in jingles or Xanax cocktails:

There is widespread adoption but little open celebration. Simply put, we do not talk about it. Once the medical model of anxiety and acute stress became hegemonic, in the 1980s, it privatized worry about Worry :95

An important notion is discussed in this historical section that of a drug’s *master identity*: while a drug has many uses it is designated and perceived through one of these. In the 19TH century it was the knockout drops maliciously administered by a malevolent third party for chloral, though self ingestion was also widespread. In the 21st the same deformation exists for GHB and Rohypnol where self-ingestion, while widespread, seems not to exist for the media and authorities.

From chapter 5 to 8, the book discusses in great detail the rise of the date rape drug scare and its dominance, still vivid 20 years later. The master identity of date rape use attached to “the big three”, i.e.. Rohypnol (roofies), GHB, ketamine, shapes the tales of the media - and to a lesser degree of the authorities – who seem blind toward the obvious facts social science studies have discovered that contradict the protected narrative and thus do not comment on these facts. These facts are that recreational use and voluntary self ingestion of the drugs are frequent, that many losses of consciousness are caused by voluntary excesses of alcohol, mixed or not with drugs used to get in the mood of parties, and that the date rape drugs are more talked about than used. This summary does not reflect the book’s careful information gathering that support its thesis, shared by many of those who study the date rape drug scare. Thus the actual convictions of criminals using drugs to rape women, less than ten cases, are detailed and analyzed, and there are long discussions of the climate of U.S. universities the main terrain of the “protected narrative” [Karen G. Weiss, Corey Colyer, 2010, “Roofies, Mickies and Cautionary Tales: Examining the Persistence of the “Date-Rape Drug” Crime Narrative” *Deviant Behavior*, 31: 4, 348_379].

One of the important facts highlighted by this detailed study is that drugging and drink spiking can often be perpetrated without further motive than the act itself

A large part of the time, drink spiking is actually an end in itself :1.

Confirmed drink spiking in public places may well be down to where the intention is to see what happens or to have a joke”—that is, of the classic prank-spiking type :201

Non instrumental spiking continues to be ignored [...] The majority of reports of “feeling drugged” are not accompanied by claims of sexual assault or robbery. Thus, even if all such reports were, in fact, drugging, we do not always know what motivation exists :268.

This explanation corresponds fully to what could be observed with needle-spiking scares, the new variant of 2021-2022. The pricks are there, even though several complaints may correspond to over perception linked to collective fears or insect bites, but the link to rape or

robbery is absent. This is noted in the media and by the authorities, however the headlines and protests are focused on the supposed sexual assault aims of the elusive perpetrators, ignoring ostensive action, the “folkloric” notion elaborated in 1983 by Degh & Vazsonyi “We have to accept that fact can become narrative and narrative can become fact”²⁹ [Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi. 1983. “Does the Word ‘Dog’ Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling” *Journal of Folklore Research*, vol 20, no 1 (May) : 5-34]

Readers of this book will enrich their stock of knowledge and discover the careful presentation of an author that has the strength to confront a widespread “protected narrative” with measure and exactitude.

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