Crack Talk: Using Rhetoric to Understand the Conceptualization of the Crack Cocaine Epidemic of the 1980s

This thesis explores the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and the manner in which it was conceptualized at the federal and local levels. Using rhetoric as a tool to understand these two perspectives, this analysis will expose problematic differences between how the drug was perceived by those in power and experienced by those in poverty. At the federal level, President Reagan and his wife Nancy dominated the discourse. The speeches, advertisements, and other initiatives that came out of the White House affirmed that drug use was amoral and un-American. Their suggested control tactics were to isolate and ostracized people who used, and to crack down with military-level severity on the communities plagued with addiction. In this manner, the Reagans exerted influence over public perception and police tactics across the nation. Their narrative overpowered the more nuanced discussion on Capital Hill that sought out more permanent solutions for this persistent problem.

This narrative, however, failed to take into account the experience of those most intimately connected to the epidemic, the crack cocaine dealers themselves. This thesis will lean on sources from South Central Los Angeles, a community known for its large crack cocaine market, to consider the epidemic at this particular level. To these dealers, crack was a profitable commodity that afforded successful dealers wealth and power. The discrepancies between these two viewpoints underscore a fundamental issue in the way America approached drug use in the 1980s. The creation of a singular national narrative that excludes particular perspectives prohibited a creation of long-term, effective solutions.

Sources Include:


