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From Stories to Behaviour, the Ebb and Flow of Fears and Panics: Discussion of the Needle-Spiking Epidemic Scares of 2021–2022*

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ABSTRACT: The needle-spiking scares in the UK and France are discussed and contextualized through comparison with former outbreaks linked to social fears. The contradictions of our attitudes towards psychoactive drugs, both coveted and feared, are outlined and lead to an analysis of the scares in a folkloric perspective that centers on the notion of ostensive action.

KEYWORDS: needle attacks, psychoactive drugs, scare stories, urban maniacs, violence towards women

Introduction

This paper presents and interprets recent panics that have surged in Autumn 2021 in the UK and from there spread to Belgium, France, and other countries of Europe in the early 2022. These panics are put in context, through comparisons with former outbreaks linked to societal fears, and analyzed. The focus will be on vernacular narratives, which are often expressed through digital media, but which also inspire specific ostensive behaviour. Ostension, as the term is often used by urban legends analysts, designates “imitation in real life of the script of a legend” (Champion-Vincent, Renard 2002: 12)¹.

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¹ Translated by the author as are all further non-English quotations.

Needle-Spiking Epidemic Scares 2021–2022

In its modern form of concern about “the date rape drugs”, drink spiking has been reported since the 1990s. However, while it is a danger everyone, especially young students accessing universities, knows about, it is a rare – and largely underreported – offence, seldom prosecuted. From 2015 until 2019 the UK police forces indicated 2840 victims of drink spiking, over 72% of them women².

After the lockdowns enforced in the UK because of the Covid-19 pandemic from March 2020, night clubs reopened during the summer of 2021. Complaints were soon discussed in the media and presented to the police. They referred to disturbing new events that mixed drink spiking and needle attacks. Student unions, and feminist personalities – often former victims who had set-up self help groups – talked to the media, organized petitions and demonstrations, linked with calls for a boycott of nightclubs, which met with great success, mainly in the Northern cities of the UK such as Leeds, Manchester and Nottingham, starting on 23rd October 2021.

The demonstrations were major events, and entailed numerous press article and TV news, from their preparation to their occurrences:

Nottinghamshire Police are investigating multiple reports of young women being spiked physically by needle injection. Yesterday the home secretary, Priti Patel, requested an urgent update from police chiefs on spiking by needle injection, and the National Crime Agency has become involved. A petition calling for compulsory searches on entry to nightclubs has been signed by 100 000 people. Universities are holding boycotts of nightclubs next week on Wednesday [27th] in Bristol, Brighton, Nottingham, Bournemouth, Belfast and Southampton, and on Thursday in Edinburgh, Swansea, Stirling, Aberdeen and Newcastle under the banner Girls Night In (Thomson 2021).

Huge crowds of people across the UK took to the streets on Wednesday night, boycotting nightclubs in protests against a sharp rise in spiking cases. There were demonstrations in more than 40 university towns and cities, from St Andrews in Scotland to Brighton on the south coast of England, united by a common fury (Pidd 2021).

Minor events made headlines because they were linked to the subject. “Police in Sheffield are investigating three reports of young women being spiked with needles last weekend, warning those responsible that they are endangering the lives of innocent people and face long jail terms” (Brown 2021). Official police figures of needle-spiking in 2022 as quoted by the BBC reporter Datshiane

2 BBC Radio 5 (2021, November 27). *I collapsed in the street after drink spiking*. BBC News: England & Wales 2650 incidents, women 71,6%; Scotland 137 incidents, women 81,8%; Northern Ireland 53 incidents, women 67,9% (the figures quote UK Police forces).

Navanayagam are, however, impressive: “The National Police Chiefs Council told us that from September to January, 1382 suspected cases of needle-spiking were reported to police in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland” (BBC Radio 4 2022).

The subject was larger than the specific offenses and expanded to all attacks on women, fueled by the conflictual climate that had risen following the Sarah Everard murder. The 3rd March 2021 murder of this 28-years-old professional had raised strong emotions when it was announced that her killer was a serving Metropolitan police officer who kidnapped her through a fake arrest. The widely publicized trial took place in September 2021 and the murderer received the exceptionally severe term of prison for life sentence. This dramatic case reinforced the campaign of feminist organizations for the inclusion of misogyny as a category of hate crimes; however, the campaign received a stern refusal from the conservative government. The advice to women “do not go out alone” or “stay home” given by the police stirred some indignation that was expressed in articles “Staying home lets the sleazy spikers win” (Turner 2021) and “But why should young women be forced to stay tucked up at home, their freedoms curtailed?” (Thomson 2021).

The authorities reacted through setting-up a Parliamentary Enquiry Committee in early December 2021. It set its actions “[a]s part of the Committee’s overreaching work into violence against women and girls” and stated its objectives “the Committee wishes to explore the incidence of spiking at nightclubs and pubs, festivals and private house parties” (Home Affairs Committee 2022a). The Committee launched a call to evidence and published 46 answers received, held three oral evidence sessions whose transcripts are available on-line and published its final report 26th April 2022 (Home Affairs Committee 2022a). The report contained many recommendations to the authorities who were to be more watchful, but it insisted on the problem’s elusiveness:

No-one knows how prevalent spiking is, whether by drink, drug or needle, and no-one knows what causes perpetrators to do it; anecdotal evidence suggests the practice is widespread and dangerous, and that many people, particularly young, particularly women, are affected by it and are afraid they will be spiked on evenings out. An absence of accurate data makes it impossible, however, to judge accurately just how widespread, how dangerous spiking is. Policy initiatives to reduce both spiking and the fear of it cannot be well-founded or well-targeted without reliable evidence (Home Affairs Committee 2022b: 39).

No guilty parties were arrested and the series remained unexplained. The government’s response was due 26th June 2022.

In the numerous documents published by the Committee, as well as in the opinion of experts given to the press, it appears that several doubted, not the occurrence of the needle offenses but their potential motivations and purposes.

We'll come back to this important subject later; here is an example drawn from a fact-checking website:

Experts seem to agree that while it is plausible that spiking by injection could be carried out by an individual or very small group, it's very unlikely that it's being easily replicated on a wider scale. Mr. Slaughter [a senior forensic toxicologist at Analytical Services International, which provides toxicological services], said: "If someone is jabbed with a syringe then their reflex action is going to be to move away within a second or two. The opportunity for someone to actually inject enough drug from that syringe to have the effect, I would think, is fairly low. I'm not saying it's absolutely impossible, I'm just saying, in my opinion, it's unlikely" (Turnidge 2021).

Within this article's limited space we have not tried to list all cases entailing demonstrations and protests through Europe, but have chosen to focus on the cases in the UK, Belgium and France.

In French-speaking Belgium, an Instagram page #Expose your bar #BalancetonBar – the name was chosen in reference to an initiative linked to the #MeToo movement #Expose your pig #BalancetonPorc – was launched in early October 2021. The denouncers were anonymized, but the bars – mainly around Brussels and catering to a student clientele – named:

Tongues are wagging in the nightlife world. Since 10 October, testimonies reporting sexual assaults and rapes in bars and nightclubs have multiplied on social networks under the hashtag #ExposeYourBar, in reference to the free speech movement #ExposeYourPig. The taking of drugs without the victims' knowledge is regularly incriminated (Fillon 2021).

As in the UK the militants speaking to the press denounced the caution advised to, and even imposed on, women:

Many of them point to a paradox: it is always the girls who are asked to be careful when they go out, and not the boys to behave. [...] And that, as Laura says, is not normal. "Since we are little, we are told that we are the problem, that we are a source of desire and that it is up to us to adapt ourselves to fight against it. When in fact the problem has to be taken in the other direction and it's high time to question men about why you rape us, why you assault us and why you consider us to be objects", she points out (Heinderyckx 2021).

A demonstration that boasted 1 300 participants was organized in Brussels on the 14th October. Later, calls to boycott of night-clubs were launched in the middle of November and demonstrations were noted in other Belgian French-

speaking cities, such as Liège. Several French feminists followed closely the Belgian initiative that influenced the neighboring country.

In France the night-clubs, reopened briefly in the summer of 2021, had been closed from early December and reopened on 7th February 2022. Complaints of “spiking by injection” were reported soon and a judicial inquiry was opened in the region of Nantes (West, Population 318 808) with a press conference from the *procureur*, state attorney (Bazylak 2022; Pagneux 2022). The cases concerned 23 victims, under 20 years of age, and the state attorney stressed their numerous uncertainties:

The place of the injection differs according to the victims – twenty women and three men aged between 18 and 20 years: arm, forearm, thigh, buttock, shoulder, hip. “But it is impossible to know what the victims were pricked with, a syringe or any other object” the state attorney said. Neither the medical examinations, nor the testimonies or the study of the video surveillance have made it possible to know. The only certainty is that the tool is strong enough to penetrate clothing sometimes (Pagneux 2022).

Complaints soon appeared in other regions. When, by the end of April, the state attorney of Grenoble (South East, Alps, Population 533 773) gave a press conference, there were more inquiries and the cases in Nantes were more numerous:

There are fifteen investigations in Rennes, others in Hérault, Isère, Haute-Garonne, Dordogne or Loire-Atlantique. The Paris state attorney’s office said that six investigations have opened since last week following complaints. In Nantes, 45 facts have been brought to the police since mid-February (La Croix 2022).

The state attorney of Béziers (South West, Population 82 000) also spoke to the press, explaining that most toxicological analyses were negative (Dorison, Pavan, Soullier 2022). By mid-May, 130 judicial inquiries had been opened, and 250 complaints were processed by police forces:

The case of the notorious nightclub injections has only just begun. In France, 130 investigations are now underway after men and women believe they were injected without their knowledge in nightclubs. Victims have suffered dizziness and nausea afterwards (Moreno 2022).

In total, 250 people reported to the police saying they had been bitten and “only one tested positive for GHB”, according to a national report obtained by AFP from a police source in Paris (Le Point 2022).

While no perpetrators were found, the evidence of the reality of the pricks (*piqûres*) was everywhere, declared the judicial authorities:

The investigators are confronted with a major difficulty because GHB disappears in the body in just a few hours. Nevertheless, the state attorney maintains that it is not a question of a “collective psychosis” because the victims do show traces of injections (Moreno 2022).

The figure of 250 complaints is small compared to the British complaints of more than 1300. Still, it met with an important echo, especially in the regional French press. Thus on 25th May 2022, the Google query “night-club pricking” (*piqûres boîte de nuit*) in actu.fr a network of the regional press, gives some 103 000 results.

We will now turn towards the analyses of components of these narratives of fear – often well-attested in former tradition. We will examine in succession the notion of “urban maniacs” and scare stories of random needle attacks, followed by a discussion of contradictory attitudes towards psychoactive drugs and alcohol in society.

Urban Maniacs, and Scare Stories of Random Needle Attacks

The term “urban maniacs” was coined by Michael Goss in 1990 when he developed his 1987 study *The Halifax Slasher* into an article (Goss 1990). That short-lived panic in a Yorkshire town around a mystery assailant, or assailants, said to slash female victims, 16th November-2nd December 1938, had been ended by Scotland Yard’s conclusion of “mass hysteria” and self-inflicted wounds (the fake victims were prosecuted). Goss’s studies showed that there was more than this dismissive statement to be made of the panic. First he developed the notion of a “flap”, very close to that of moral panic introduced in 1972 by Stanley Cohen (Cohen 1972):

A flap is an unusual, dramatic burst of excitement centered upon some anomalous and possibly threatening report that generates others of the same variety. It is characterized by intense public and media excitement during which a number of separate incidents become collated into a series or cycle, the whole being more impressive (convincing, credible) than any of the parts. [...] A flap is dominated, and in some senses fueled, by an escalation characteristic. [...] Gradually, there is a tendency for later reports to become more violent and more disturbing than the ones that preceded them. [...] The emergence of vigilante groups is a key phase in any flap. [...] Then, just as the flap seems to have reached a point where anarchy, and irreversible lawlessness appear inescapable, the whole thing subsides (Goss 1990: 99–100).

Goss also discussed how the slasher – a collective creation – benefited its creators:

Why should we want to terrify ourselves through these distorted, part-imagined, larger-than-life apparitions? Because the Maniac is a stimulant, suddenly, thanks to him, life becomes unpredictable, more urgent [...]. The Halifax slasher was a mass-promotion. He was a cure for unacknowledged boredom and could be used in a number of ways. For once everyone might become a detective [...] an important, active personality making a vital contribution to the community (Goss 1987: 38–39).

Allowing indirect protest against the neglected state of the town was an important factor that made the collective creation gratifying:

The mystery assailant's multi-purposes included an outlet for protest and unrest. Urban problems regarded as inevitable or completely disregarded – the lack of adequate street lighting, the sprawl and decay of some parts of town – abruptly became critical issues because the Slasher relied on them for his success (Goss 1987: 39–40).

In the 1970s–1990s the Fortean researchers, often amateurs not linked to the academia, played a pioneer role in the growth of relativism through their attacks of the era's academic and institutional certainties.

The adjective Fortean designates people and perceptions of occurrences which claim a link to Charles Fort (1874–1932), an eccentric intellectual who spent his life in the great public libraries of New York and London, collecting in newspapers and memoirs oddities that did not fit in with the approved consensus of these years, i.e. domination of scientific rationality.

Urban maniacs, who act violently and unpredictably without precise reasons are by no means a recent phenomenon. London and Paris have had their “slashers” or rather “prickers” (*piqueurs*) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Both series raised emotions and were concluded by naming and punishing the guilty parties, whose scapegoating ended the flap.

In London, we will follow the retelling of the flap by Michael Goss:

From May 1788 to April 1790 the Monster outraged the city with a series of minor yet insulting attacks upon women which usually took the form of his waylaying them on their doorsteps and stabbing their thighs and buttocks. [...] A reward of £50 (later £70) was offered and the residents of St Pancras formed an association “to nightly patrol the streets from half hour before sunset till seven at night for public safety” [...] In retrospect it seems doubtful that Williams Renwick was the Monster or only one of a large number of men who habitually pestered women on the London streets – for here again the Monster was not so much

a person as a symbol for a particular form of contemporary violence. The case against him was not strong. [...] However he appeared to fit all the requirements of the man the authorities were looking for and after a well-attended trial. [...] Williams was sent to Newgate for six years (Goss 1987: 42).

In Paris, the historian Emmanuel Fureix recently analyzed a well-known occurrence that took place in the early years of the restoration of the monarchy in France:

Between August and December 1819 in Paris, almost four hundred women – and a few men – reported having been subjected to a new form of violence: being pricked while in the public space by a stylus, needle, hole punch, or cane fitted with a spike. Both at night and during the day, men were attacking innocent people – especially girls – to the point of drawing blood by pricking their buttocks and thighs, and sometimes their breasts, hands, or arms (Fureix 2013: 31).

A panic developed by the end of 1819:

From November and over the course of December 1819 such stories proliferated, became public, and turned into rumours that sometimes exaggerated the intensity and sophistication of the violence suffered, to the point that it came to include death and poisoning. The acts themselves became more widespread in the weeks and months that followed, as though by mimetic contagion, reaching various provincial cities (Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseille, Calais, Bayonne, Soissons, Lille, Arras, Amiens, and so forth), and even abroad (Brussels and then Augsburg). A new – non-judicial – criminal category was penned by contemporaries: *piqueurs* (prickers). This pathology became indissolubly real and imaginary, and was given coverage by a press that was rapidly expanding. [...]. This hybrid phenomenon, consisting of human-interest stories that had sexual overtones, rumours, and political discourses that overlaid one another, gradually faded away (Fureix 2013: 31–32).

The Paris epidemic was widely commented upon by the press and these palatable morsels are still available in the 21st century through entries in human interest stories, books and websites that relay popular anthologies of funny, strange or weird happenings of the past (La France pittoresque 2018). Thus, the 2018 entry of the website *La France Pittoresque* on the “Parisian Prickers” indicates its source as the 1897 “Museum of conversation” (*Le Musée de la conversation*).

Emmanuel Fureix remarks that in 1819–1820, it was the press – and the conversations and rumours that the press conveyed – that discussed the sexual

aspects of the act of pricking. It would be much later that von Krafft-Ebing and Paul Garnier developed the notion of sadofetishist practices as a distinct category of the psychopathology of sexuality (von Krafft-Ebing 1892; Garnier 1900). As fear swept Paris in December 1819 and an article of “La Gazette de France” published on 11 December 1819 was titled *Invisible Vampires*, the memory of the Marquis de Sade – his 1814 death in the Charenton asylum was only a few years away – evocated the pre-revolutionary character of the lecherous, wealthy and evil noble:

A man of quality who ended his days at Bicêtre³ revealed by his conduct and his writings the level of atrocity and depravity to which the human heart was susceptible of sinking. Therefore, during the earliest news of the bloody attacks that had victimized some young women, there was no absence of attributing the cause to the excessive immorality of some new Marquis de Sade (Fureix 2013: 40).

Through articles, cartoons and street songs, a construction and commodification of the event rapidly took place. The cartoons, in bawdy modes, played on sexual innuendoes; thus a cartoon entitled *Result of a prick*, showed a very pregnant girl, with her former slim profile targeted by a lurking syringe and needle in the background. The press also made fun of the remedies suggested by pharmacists or metallurgists, whose drawing showed hat-wearing young women trying metal protections.

New episodes of mystery assailants occurred. In his 1987 study Michael Goss lists several perpetrators who had never been caught: “Jack the Cutter”, who stabbed pedestrians with a sharp knife in Chicago around 1906; the “Connecticut Jabber” between 1925 and 1927, 26 attacks that occurred every three months; the “Mad Gasser” of Botetourt County (Virginia, US) from 22nd December 1933 till February 1934; and finally in 1944, the “Mad Gasser” of Mattoon, Illinois (Goss 1987: 42–43). The Mattoon case is the best-known as the dismissive 1945 article of Donald M Johnson (Johnson 1945)⁴ has been often challenged by anomalists and Fortean, from Jerome Clark to Robert Bartholomew (Clark 1993). This author, whom we will encounter in his dismissal of the needle-spiking attacks in nightclubs, our main subject, wrote at length about the incident (Ladendorf, Bartholomew 2002; Bartholomew, Victor 2004; Evans, Bartholomew 2009).

Other Urban phantoms should also be quoted. In his study of the complex history of one of these characters, Spring Man (Janeček 2022) – first noted in 19th century England as the loosely defined phantom Spring Heeled Jack, before he was turned into a Czech hero fighting Nazi invaders by popular culture and

3 The journalist’s indication is erroneous. While Sade had stayed for a limited period in this general asylum, he entered the Charenton asylum for mental cases and died there.

4 The article became a classic text reprinted in *readers*, that is, text books offered to students of social psychology in the 1950s.

propaganda. Petr Janeček mentions several occurrences of attacks with razors, sometimes razor gloves, by the creature. The creation of scary phantoms is still going on: Slenderman, the latest scary collective creation, was born on the internet:

There are of course all sorts of other strange creatures, jinns and bog-garts, or at least the latter's Massachusetts cousins the Pukwudgies, along with their colleagues the Shadow People, the grinning men with their impossibly wide grins, Mad Gassers, our old friend Springheel Jack and the new kid on the block, Slenderman (Rogerson 2016).

Ascribed to deranged characters, accusations of needle-tampering, often linked to HIV have been with us for more than twenty years. Jan Brunvand's *Encyclopedias of Urban Legends* duly quotes them (Brunvand 2012).

For brevity's sake we will follow the offhand retelling of these "needle attacks" on the fact-checking and legend-spotting Snopes website. Snopes' remark in discussing the closely related "AIDS Mary" legend is worth quoting as it touches on an important factor in the surge and proliferation of such stories: "The legend speaks to our fears; as such, it's larger than life, complete with shocking messages of impending death callously delivered" (Mikkelson 2000). In these accusations of random needle attacks, ostensive behaviour is often noted. Thus, in discussing the false claim that "Madmen are injecting HIV-infected blood into unsuspecting moviegoers and random young people dancing in bars or at raves" (Mikkelson et al. 1998), revived in 2018 but also attested long ago, Snopes lists several occurrences of online warnings, often complete with fake authority sources, for example:

A few weeks ago in a movie theater in Melbourne a person sat on something that was poking out of one of the seats. When she got up to see what it was she found a needle sticking out of the seat with a note attached saying... "You have just been infected by HIV". The Disease Control Centre in Melbourne reports many similar incidents have occurred in many other Australian cities recently. All tested needles ARE HIV Positive (Mikkelson et al. 1998).

These stories are firmly dismissed:

In all the time since this rumor's initial appearance time we've turned up no confirmed AIDS-laden needle attacks on moviegoers have been reported in Bombay, Hawaii, Dallas, Paris, or anywhere else in the world (Mikkelson et al. 1998).

Snopes also refers to a 1989 New York City series of incidents, which was designated as ostension by Bill Ellis in its day:

Keep in mind that although there have at various times been random attacks with needles, none have resulted in infection being passed to victims. That part is myth. Now for the truth of it: For a few weeks in the fall of 1989, a group of Black teenagers (mostly girls) scared the pants off the denizens of New York City by running about jabbing pins into the necks of 41 random white females. Media coverage escalated the general public's fears as it was repeatedly stated the pins were tainted with AIDS. Within a week the kids responsible were found and arrested, and it was at that time police discovered there was no basis to the reports of the AIDS virus being part of these attacks. The hooligans responsible admitted it was just a fun game to them, run up to a white woman, stick her with a pin, see her reaction, then run off. Possibly inspired by the 1989 panic in New York City, for three weeks in 1990 a Black man terrorized white and hispanic [sic] women in that city by hitting them in the legs and buttocks with dart-like missiles fired from a homemade blowgun. More than 50 women were hit in this fashion before the man responsible was caught (Mikkelson et al. 1998).

Snopes also notes a variant involving an activity that targeted service stations customers, which was said to come from a local police officer:

My name is Captain Abraham Sands of the Jacksonville, Florida Police Department. I have been asked by state and local authorities to write this email in order to get the word out to car drivers of a very dangerous prank that is occurring in numerous states. Some person or persons have been affixing hypodermic needles to the underside of gas pump handles. These needles appear to be infected with HIV positive blood. In the Jacksonville area alone there have been 17 cases of people being stuck by these needles over the past five months. We have verified reports of at least 12 others in various states around the country (Snopes Staff 2000).

Having inspected the claims published in the press, and that had reappeared 17 years later, Snopes firmly dismisses the hoax:

Although there have been a few isolated reports of copycat pranksters leaving needles in public places (including gas pumps, such as an incident in May 2017) in the wake of this hoax, none of those incidents has involved a needle bearing any traces of HIV. No matter how it is reworded, the "Captain Abraham Sands" message is naught but another hoax dreamed up by someone intent upon enjoying the sight of people thrown into a panic over nothing (Snopes Staff 2000).

From urban maniacs and flaps to vivid examples of (false) needle attacks, we have thus reviewed a major component of the stories and panics of 2021–2022.

Contradictory Attitudes towards Psychoactive Drugs and Alcohol

From the 19th century, the progress of chemistry led to the creation of new powerful synthetic drugs. In her 2016 book on the subject, the sociologist and historian Pamela Donovan focuses on the early uses of chloral hydrate, a sedative discovered in 1832, widely used since 1869 – in asylums and as private medicine, mainly for anxious upper-class women (Donovan 2016: 3). The substance's misuse was denounced and it was nicknamed the knockout drop, a weapon for thieves and seducers (Donovan 2016: 18). Donovan also discusses the uses of anesthetics such as ether and chloroform, focusing on the fear of chloroform that surged in the popular press and among the general public with the explosion of the White Slavery legends in the late 19th century (Campion-Vincent 2005), mainly the supposed abductions of young virgins into enforced prostitution through chloroform that could be effective if only breathed (while chloral hydrate had to be ingested).

This fear of predatory chloroform seemed to be wholly limited to the popular press and its readers—medical men were in fact extremely defensive about even the possibility that this prized breakthrough in medicine could be misused this way. [...] Press and popular fiction saw chloroform as easily administered and effective in producing instant unconsciousness (Donovan 2016: 29).

Unfortunately, it is impossible to fully present Donovan's fine and perceptive book within this article. One of its important points concerns the similarities she underlines in the evolving reputation of the new synthetic psychoactive drugs from the 19th to the 21st centuries, "where techno-wonder is supplanted by fear of misuse" and in consequence tales of "drugging, drink spiking and forced intoxication" surge (Donovan 2016: 18). With the development of individualism in the 1960s and the "newly minted expectation that we should also be ourselves [...] a task considerably more angst-ridden than simply being able or being good", the era of "general-audience psychopharmacology" was born and the new miracle-pills, starting in the 1970s with Methaqualone (Miltown, Equanil) became widely used (Donovan 2016: 91–92). However, after the initial celebration of Miltown, the new miracle drugs were used but not openly discussed:

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 (Donovan 2016: 95).

In the 1990s a new narrative emerged in the United States concerning the dangers of date-rape drugs; it focused on "The Big Three: Flunitrazepam (Rohypnol, »Roofies«), GHB, and Ketamine" (Donovan 2016: 144). This coincided with widespread denunciation of "the seemingly reckless, narcissistic, and

out-of-control behavior of America's youth" (Weiss, Colyer 2010: 358), and the development of *raves*, festive all-night events where the consumption of drugs "known for provoking a rapid and dramatic high" was widespread (Weiss, Colyer 2010: 359).

Sociologists Weiss and Colyer first reviewed the literature in 2010 and pointed out that:

Most forensic researchers agree that a collective (lack of) empirical evidence suggests that the problem of surreptitious drugging is not nearly as common as most people think. [...] In fact, forensic studies tend to conclude that victims' voluntary drinking and drug use is much more likely a factor in facilitating sexual assault than surreptitious drugging (Weiss, Colyer 2010: 352).

They defined the phenomenon as a "protected narrative" that "persists in part because it has been institutionalized as a key component of many anti-rape and safety campaigns" (Weiss, Colyer 2010: 365).

Later, in 2018, judging that "drink-spiking is broadly perceived in the contemporary culture to be a problem even as it is much less commonly experienced", Colyer and Weiss (2018: 11) reviewed important academic literature on the subject. The opposing sides consist in the risk mitigation school which accepts that "predatory drugging is a concrete threat to public safety and warrants particular empirical attention" and the social constructivists who "argue that outsize concern or fear of drug-facilitated sexual assault at college is little more than an institutionalized or protected narrative embedded in popular culture" (Colyer, Weiss 2018: 13–14). They propose that the narrative's persistence should be understood by considering its context: the ambiguities and uncertainties of the university students' party scene where alcohol and drugs are common. The drink spiking narrative offers an unambiguous frame that shifts the blame from the victim and "is kept alive in drinking contexts as a shared and interpretive frame for making sense" (Colyer, Weiss 2018: 18).

These academic studies are sharp and analytical. However, they appear to the outside observer (i.e. the author), as discussing almost exclusively the situation in three English-speaking countries: the US, the UK and Australia. Three countries and one subgroup: university students who have access to independence and often live their first experience away from home. This parochialism leads to ignoring the drink spiking variations in different social settings, as the date-rape drugs narrative has spread to more European countries, as we shall see when we resume the analysis of the ongoing French scare.

Official agencies unanimously warn about the dangers of psychoactive drugs and fight for more severe legislation against these. However, psychoactive drugs are very present in society. "Prescribed to the anxious and restless middle class" new psychoactive drugs that appear are widely available and "quite easy to get to divert for one's own recreational or self-medicating use, but

also potentially to dose someone else with” (Donovan 2016: 119). They are also widely used for recreational purposes, especially in youth culture. In 2022 the wild raves of the early 1990s have been institutionalized into festivals favorably presented in the media. Authorities are warned and remain watchful: however, it is well-known that being high is a coveted state during these events, and all sorts of means are used to attain this goal. These simultaneous attitudes of rejection and of acceptance, craving, even fascination, towards psychoactive drugs are in contradiction with each other. As Claude Lévi-Strauss famously remarked “The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction” through mediating symbol chains (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 443). Myths do surge around the subject of psychoactive drugs and their misuse.

Analysis of the Needle-Spiking Epidemic Scares in the UK and in France

In the UK the Press has stopped mentioning the incidents after the Spiking Committee’s report from late April 2022, as described earlier. It seems the British Government has not yet responded to the report.

In France, where the incidents started 4 months later, in February 2022, the situation is so evolutive in late June (the time of this writing) that a full description or prediction as to its outcome is impossible. Figures concerning the night club needle-spiking evolve at a dazzling rhythm.

The first widely publicised arrest of a supposed perpetrator occurred on 3rd June 2022. The arrest was during a festive event on the Mediterranean beach Le Mourillon in the city of Toulon: the recording of a song for a TV show that had drawn an audience of 15 000 people. Aged 20, this undocumented Tunisian dismissed the accusations and no syringe was found on him. Two accusing female witnesses said they had seen him with a syringe trying to attack people and the third witness, a female security agent claimed he had pricked her. The charges were fairly weak; however, this 20-years-old had been sentenced in 2020 for violent acts on his partner and was charged and provisionally jailed (Gonzalès 2022). A few days later, some 30 complaints were registered around this beach concert (Bonnin 2022).

The scare had been growing since May and the 250 police complaints noted then swelled. On 9th June the police indicated that 360 additional complaints had been filed, while the victims were said to be 400. On 12th June the Sunday newspaper “Journal du Dimanche” on a whole page titled a dramatic: *Piqûres: la peur de l’été* (Pricks: the fear of the summer). The article’s tone was fairly quiet and factual; it quoted the judicial, health and police authorities who unanimously declared that no “connected facts” had been discovered and that it seemed all this was a “sick fad”. The 3rd June arrest was mentioned. As to figures, “on 9th June, 461 victims had officially been counted by police and *gendarmerie* who have registered 381 complaints”.

Then on 17th June the title *1098 victimes de piqûres ‘sauvages’: ce que révèle le document interne de la police* (1098 victims of “wild” pricks: what an internal police document reveals) appeared on a half-page in the conservative *Figaro*.

This article mentioned “an exponential growth with 808 police complaints”. As to perpetrators, the police declared to have arrested, and released as they were cleared, five suspects, but the arrest of 3rd June was not mentioned. The regional press kept track of these new developments. On 19th June 2022 the same query as on 25th May gave 474 000 results, which is 371 000 more in 25 days, less than a month. We will come back to this disproportionality (103 000 mentions for 250 complaints, 474 000 for 808 complaints), a clear indication of panic, in the analysis of this collective scare.

This summer of 2022, after the long pause due to the Covid-19 epidemic, the media welcome even the most extreme festivals. Thus, in France, the return of Hellfest, a festival specializing in hard rock and dark metal since 2006 in Clisson (a western town close to Nantes), is hailed in very favorable articles. This Hellfest is planned to be huge, 350 bands, 420 000 paying participants, two week-ends plus a whole week. It was the festival’s organizers who reminded the journalists, almost with a chuckle, it seems, of the past controversy of 2010, when right-wing politicians accused the dark metal musicians of authentic satanism – there is no denying that these musicians do use satanic emblems and symbols; however, they generally do not preach satanic beliefs. The contradictions we have outlined earlier in the attitudes towards psychoactive drugs, gateway both to desired high spirits and feared bad trips, are very present in France this summer of 2022.

A comparison of the scares in the UK and France indicates several specific French features. In both countries the authorities are strongly involved. However, there are practically no politicians that give statements or comment in France when they were very present in the UK (but, as has been discussed, in the UK a Parliamentary Committee was put in charge by the Interior Minister). French comments are voiced by the three types of authorities involved in the cases: a) judicial: French state attorneys give press conferences when their English counterparts remained silent; b) police, c) health authorities who speak to the media about equally in the two countries. While female victims are dominant in both countries, the student population seems less concerned in France. Some interviews concern women over 40 frequenting night clubs (Thierry 2022). The fact that universities are less residential in France than in the UK, probably combined with the media’s attitudes and reports, centered on the nightclubs and remaining unspecific about the victims’ social status perhaps accounts for this difference. Indignant statements linking the incidents to the plight of women targeted by masculine lust and violence, very present in the UK, hardly exist in France.

Another example of nation-wide panic, a scare concerning horses’ mutilations swept France all year 2020. A supposed random epidemic, generally concerning animals in open-air dwellings, had started in early 2020, quickly stirred public indignation and perplexed the public. The most extreme hypotheses: evil cults, Satanists, stupid challenges, pure sadism were presented to explain a phenomenon that swelled to almost 500 cases (Campion 2020).

The authorities' response was important: setting up a centralised task-force and analysis of the cases by teams of specialists. The report of the task-force was an adamant dismissal. Only 84 cases out of 500 corresponded to a human intervention, while the others were overinterpretations of "normal" wounds of horses in outside accommodations, and of ignorance of the wounds inflicted by animal predators feeding on dead carcasses (Psychieras 2020). This ended the flap. The author's experience with the dismissive treatment of beasts or mystery cats episodes has shown her that this is a strong tendency of authorities (Campion-Vincent 1990, 1992). When it comes to episodes of said random attacks or of said mysterious sightings, once they have explained the majority of cases as human error the authorities extend the explanation to all cases. It is worth recalling that similar episodes – ended by the same conclusions – had swept the US in the 1970s (Ellis 1991; Goleman 2011).

Fears of the date-rape drugs, i.e. instrumental drink spiking leading to rape through the use of Rohypnol, GHB or Ketamine have been present in society and media for over thirty years, a period of time much longer than that generally characterizing a flap or a moral panic. These widespread fears persist in spite of the discrepancy between the narratives – widely spread and transmitted by concerned speakers who enrich and embroider the tales – and the officially constated facts, which remain rare occurrences. Indeed, Weiss and Colyer's designation as "protected narratives" describes well these tales, strongly validated by the well-meaning and benevolent authorities.

The needle-spiking epidemic scares of 2021–2022 are variants on the drink-spiking theme in which the aggressive component is more salient. Their closeness to a moral panic is shown by their disproportionality, "the gap or disjunction between the threat or harm of a given behavior and the fervor or concern that that behavior generates in the public, the media, and among legislators and social movement activists and members of interest groups" (Goode 2018: 535). The other traits of moral panics – "stereotyping, exaggeration, distortion, and sensitization" (Cohen 1972: 59–65) – are also present.

Robert Bartholomew has analyzed the needle-spiking allegations in the UK as a "social panic that reflects current fears" (Bartholomew 2022). For Bartholomew, a specialist of "social panics" – his preferred expression for collective outbreaks of emotion – whose text about *The Halifax Slasher* has been presented earlier, the claim of injections is "a red flag" of implausibility as the operation is so impractical that it is improbable: "compared to slipping something into a drink, injecting a victim carries a much higher risk of being caught". Bartholomew quotes the experts who pointed out the implausibility of pricks and concludes that "the needle-spiking bubble may be about to burst". He does not hypothesize the existence of pure, i.e. aimless, aggressive behaviour – which is the hypothesis of the author of the present article. This is logical and derives from Bartholomew's interesting 2004 article, co-authored with sociologist Jeffrey Victor, which dismisses the notion of "emotional contagion" as linked to "the psychiatric frame" to which the article opposes "the

social psychological frame” to discuss such episodes as “a rumor panic or mass anxiety attack”⁵ (Bartholomew, Victor 2004). Bartholomew and Victor have overlooked ostension, precisely ostensive action, wherein behaviour is a reaction or response to the scenario of a legend, or of a shared belief.

Folklorists’ reference point for the notion of ostensive action is the seminal 1983 article co-authored by Linda Degh and Andrew Vazsonyi which concludes with the words “we have to accept that fact can become narrative and narrative can become fact” (Dégh, Vázsonyi 1983: 29, see also 5, 12). This article has not been forgotten: Bill Ellis has quoted and analysed it in several publications (for references see Ellis 2019).

Rumor Mills, which the author of the present text co-edited, stressed in its subtitle *The social impact of rumor and legend* (Fine, Campion-Vincent, Heath 2005). The social anthropologist Julien Bonhomme’s recent study of accusations of genital theft in Western Africa states in its introduction: “Rumor is thus a speech act that should always be considered as both an utterance and an action at the same time” (Bonhomme 2016: 15); and Theo Meder reminds us that:

For ethnologists, the *perception* of truth should be more vital than truth itself. The question is why certain legends are believed to be true. [...] We tell, hear, see and read legends, but we believe, experience, re-enact and live legends too. The notion of *ostension* is used to comprehend the mechanism of legends we live (Meder 2004).

To Conclude

Predicting is a dangerous game. However, what is happening around needle-spiking seems closer to a flap combining fear-inducing exaggerated perception (and forgetting insects, as some of the complaints can be linked to misperceived insect bites) with a series of imitative gestures of aggression than to a wave of “DFSA drug facilitated sexual assault” (if we adopt the US law enforcement designation of this serious crime). In the UK, the flap has more or less subsided, or at least it is no longer newsworthy, following the Spiking Committee’s report. In France, while the complaints of malicious pricks have swirled to 2100 by early September (Ouest-France 2022), the authorities keep to their perplexed attitude, and no perpetrators have been caught. So it appears reasonable to predict that the needle-spiking epidemic scare will disappear, or no longer be reported by the end of 2022⁶.

However, it will have shown how close we are to a reawakening of fears, how the historic characters of urban maniacs can easily come back to haunt us. The series is also a reminder that aggressive imitative behaviour can be triggered easily.

5 The quotes are from an unpagged version kindly sent to the author by Jeffrey Victor.

6 The manuscript of this article was completed in October 2022. In early 2023 the subject is dead.

Fear has always been present in expressive folklore and traditional tales abound with shock elements, from cannibal witches to evil spirits from the invisible surrounding us. However, the commodification of fear in popular culture has developed to become supreme. Fear, disguised as fun, is everywhere around us, as horror stories for kids, scary (or spooky) urban legends (or stories) abound on YouTube as well as on mobile phones, which offer by the dozen such apps as Evil Nun, Scary Clown, Troll Face Quest, Creepy Scream Scary Horror, etc.

Drink spiking for criminal purposes has existed and exists, but we should remember the opening remark of Pamela Donovan who explains that law enforcement authorities feel justified by their mission to look for the “malicious” types of drink spiking that are a means to the realisation of violence or crime and to overlook the fact that it is often an expressive rather than instrumental act. As she states, “[a] large part of the time, drink spiking is actually an end in itself” (Donovan 2016: 1), and “Some spiking – like other forms of tampering and poisoning – is often an end in itself” (Donovan 2016: 5).

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