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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY STEPHEN F. EISENMAN

15.05.2023

## **“The Real Florida”: My Trip to the Marijuana Dispensary**



Ron DeSantis’ Medical Marijuana Card. Photo montage: The author.

### **Florida is no picnic.**

Living in rural Florida can be challenging. The heat and humidity from May to October are oppressive. Mosquitos, chiggers, ticks, and biting flies can make a walk in the woods feel like running the gauntlet. Though hurricanes rarely make it up to north-central Florida, inundations of 6 or 8 inches are regular occurrences during the rainy season, and the ongoing paving of the state guarantees flooding almost anywhere.

And then there’s the politics. The legislature in Tallahassee finished its session last week, passing bills that: 1) shifted money from public to private schools; 2) undermined the ability of unions to collect dues; 3) empowered conservative zealots to ban books in schools (it only takes one); 4) prohibited medical support for trans teens; 5) banned abortion after 6 weeks of pregnancy; 6) prevented counties and municipalities from imposing mask mandates (Ebola anyone?); 7) re-imposed cash bail where it’s use was restricted; 8) enabled Florida residents

to carry a concealed gun without a permit; 9) established a death penalty for rape of a minor (in violation of a 2008 Supreme Court ruling); 10) prevented Florida banks and brokerage firms from considering equity and social governance criteria in investments; 11) barred Chinese nationals from some real estate and other investments (stirring ethnic hatred); and 12) targeted the Disney Corporation. (I'm no fan of the Big Mouse, but a law that punishes a single company without benefit of a trial — a bill of attainder — violates the U.S. Constitution.)

To call that a dirty dozen isn't quite right because it excludes actions taken by Governor DeSantis through executive fiat, for example extending the "Don't Say Gay" bill all the way up to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, undermining academic freedom by establishing faculty revues "at any time," and turning progressive, queer friendly and academically stellar New Collage in Sarasota into a branch of the Holy Office of the Inquisition with Christopher Rufo as Torquemada.

### **My Drug history**

But occasionally, something nice happens that makes Florida feel almost ok. For me, it was getting my medical marijuana card. First, a little background.

I've never been big on dope. At least, not since college. Back then – this would be the mid 1970s – I smoked every day with my dormitory friends at the State University of New York at Albany. The SUNY campus is unique. It consists of a mile long, raised concrete quadrangle surrounding a fountain from which rises a carillon which is also a water tower. At each corner are three-story dormitories and a 23-story residential tower. That's where I lived – on the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor. On a clear day, you could see Massachusetts and Vermont from the windows. When you were high, even further.

My floor mates gathered every Sunday on the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor lounge to empty the contents of two sandwich bags of marijuana (about two ounces) onto a coffee table. Then we'd start rolling. By the time we were done an hour or so later, there were joints to last us the week. We equally divided the cost (about 30 bucks), the labor, and the product. If somebody was short that week, no problem; we'd together cover the difference. It was stoner communism.

I usually only smoked in the evenings after finishing homework. But on the days I attended my favorite art history classes – Modern Art with Robert D. Kinsman and Medieval with Mojmir Frinta – I also smoked. Pot increased my enthusiasm for Paul Klee and the basilica of Sant Mary-Magdalene at Vézelay and didn't affect my grades. Indeed, I went on to get a Ph.D. in art history and taught the field for almost 40 years. But I rarely smoked marijuana after college. No special reason – I'd just had enough. And in the three or four

times I did, I invariably repeated to my partner/friend/wife some version of the following: “It’s much stronger than it used to be. I don’t think it’s very pleasant. I won’t do this again.”

But recently, my resolve began to waiver. The citizens of Florida passed a medical marijuana law by referendum in 2016, against the wishes of its Republican leadership. Not to be thwarted by 62% of voters, state legislators imposed multiple obstacles to implementation, until forced by the courts to follow the law. Now they are opposing the legalization of recreational marijuana and trying to keep it off the ballot in 2024. (If a referendum on abortion rights is also on the ballot, watch out Florida Republicans!)

The basic world view of DeSantis and his acolytes in the Florida House and Senate is anti-utilitarian: they are against anything that increases pleasure, and in favor of anything that increases pain. They oppose pot, recreational sex, drag shows, political protests, porn, and public libraries. They are also against food and good health. The state is among the least generous in the nation when it comes to SNAP (food stamps) and other social welfare benefits; it also failed to expand Medicaid eligibility under the Affordable Care Act at a cost to the state of over \$5 billion and some 900 lives per year.

### **A trip to the marijuana dispensary**

So, since the governor and state legislature are opposed to marijuana – medical or recreational – I felt it my political obligation to get some. And given that I, like almost every 67-year-old is burdened with at least one qualifying medical condition, I made an appointment to see my local marijuana doctor in Gainesville. I’ll call him Dr. Castro because he was Cuban and about as old as the late *presidente* would be if he was still alive.

He greeted me in his small office – not an examination room – without looking up from his phone.

“Ugh” he grunted.

The doctor was gaunt and sallow, with random strands of grey hair sprouting from his bald head. His most distinguishing features, however, were the great bags under his eyes and the dirty blue gown he wore, as if he was a hospital orderly working overtime. I didn’t see a medical license anywhere, but since I wasn’t planning surgery, I was un-concerned.

“Do you have a regular doctor?” he asked as he continued to tap on his phone.

“Well, yes and no. My regular doctor recently moved out of the area, so I’ve made an appointment to see a new one, but that won’t be for six weeks or so, which means...”

He was frantically making the T sign with his hands.

“Stop talking! Patients are always talking! What is it with you? Just answer the questions.”

“Uh, then yes.”

And so it went for another ten minutes, at which time he tapped some more and told me I'd be getting my card in a few weeks, but could buy marijuana once my name was in the system, which would probably be tomorrow. At that, he looked up and addressed me directly: "Next patient!"

The following day, I received email notification from the state of Florida that read: "You have been approved for a Medical Marijuana Use Registry Patient/Caregiver identification card and your card is currently being printed and processed by the Florida Department of Health....If you feel you received this email in error, please contact the Office of Medical Marijuana Registration." I read and re-read the words "Office of ...Marijuana Registration," delighted at the unexpected bureaucratization of intoxication. The next day, I visited the marijuana dispensary in the same building, but catcorner from Dr. Castro's office. The difference, however, was like night and day.

Where the doctor's office was cramped and grim, this place was bright and spacious, with high ceilings and track lights illuminating large, color photographs of different varieties of marijuana plant. The tall counters with glass fronts and tops were like ones you'd see in a fine bakery or chocolate shop. Only instead of croissants or truffles, there was pot and paraphernalia.

Two young women asked if they could help me. The first was slender, olive-skinned, short haired and dressed in black:

"Good afternoon. Can we help you with Sativa or Indica?"

"Um..." I replied.

"Are you looking for THC or CBD dominant strains?" she continued.

Awkward silence from me, followed by: "I haven't really smoked pot in about 45 years, so I'm not really sure what I want. In the 1970s, when I was a student..."

Realizing this might be a long transaction, she told me she had to take her break, but that her colleague would take over.

The second woman now slid over. She was also in her 20s, slender, pale, blue-eyed with a brown and blond streaked mullet, tattoos covering her arms, a downy blond moustache, and wisps of a blond beard. In short, a goddess or god I now realized, of uncertain gender.

"How can I help you? I overheard your conversation with my colleague. I think we have just what you want. It's a combination of several strains and is neither stimulating nor sedating — just in the middle. It happens to be on sale today. In what form would you like it?"

I was saved! The rest of the interchange is blurred in my mind. I only know that I bought twice the amount of whatever she recommended, including flowers, gummies, inhalers, pre-

rolled, tinctures and RSO syringes (I have no idea what the last of these is and have no intention of using them). I handed over my debit card (credit cards not allowed) without looking at the tally and walked out with my stash, head already in the clouds.

### **“The Real Florida”**

The State Park system is perhaps the greatest achievement of Florida government. It dates to the Depression and was significantly expanded by progressive leaders up until the era of Republicans Bob Martinez and Jeb Bush. But it’s still a wonder. On the signs welcoming visitors to many of the parks is found the following catchphrase: “The Real Florida.” That’s what I felt about my pot providers – the sleazy doctor from central casting and the angelic, trans salesperson who rescued me from marijuana delirium. They made me remember that in a state in which fascism has advanced as far as any in the nation, it’s still easy to meet people who have crafted vivid identities of difference and appear to be thriving. And they are not a small minority.

Whether this difference may be called or could ever become resistance is unclear; whether it can survive the onslaught from Tallahassee and beyond is also uncertain. But for now, I’ll self-medicate with a measure of hope.

Stephen F. Eisenman is Professor Emeritus of Art History at Northwestern University and the author of *Gauguin’s Skirt* (Thames and Hudson, 1997), *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (Reaktion, 2007), *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights* (Reaktion, 2015) and other books. He is also co-founder of the environmental justice non-profit, *Anthropocene Alliance*. He and the artist Sue Coe have just published *American Fascism, Still* for Rotland Press. He can be reached at: [s-eisenman@northwestern.edu](mailto:s-eisenman@northwestern.edu)

MAY 12, 2023