

The Challenges of Psychology at Work in Mental Health: Issues about Drugs¹

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Abstract

This article aims to show that the challenges of psychology in working with mental health in the field of drugs is traversed by both the conceptions molded by biopolitical forces (FOUCAULT) as the decadence of modern democracy (AGAMBEN), and visible features in the current treatment given in Brazil to issue of smoking (SILVA), as well as urbanistic projects such as the case of Luz district in São Paulo (LEITE & CASTRO). In this sense, it leads us to question about what is prohibited, about who actually suffers the punishment, in short, about what do we really take care when we take into account the Unheimlich (FREUD) and other social interdicts (BATAILLE).

Key Words: Mental health, Public politics on drugs, Biopolitics, Psychology and Psychoanalysis.

Introduction

No discussion, which at least explores ethics, about psychoactive substances happens without usually arousing *power passions*. From the outset, such discussions exceed the flaunted official motto: *Drugs, don't even think about it!*, which could be found on billboards everywhere and represented, in effect, the hegemonic attitude to the phenomenon of drugs. This is one example from the recent past of the current obscurantism which the defenders of a position mainly derived from the presuppositions of the politics of social hygiene, of social asepsis, of social control by the State, want to impose. It is built upon either a bio-absolutist definition of quality of life, or certain notions of public security, as put forward by the adherents to doctrines of compulsory detention, of institutionalization in therapeutic communities, of abstinent and unblemished lives, and of war against a supposedly external enemy, justifying every weapon, every battle and any combatant. In contemporary urban culture, these attitudes are throwing a strangling iron-arm around those more attuned with the meaningful parcel of measures proposed by the National Health Policy: the Harm Reduction Strategy, the Street Clinics as intervention mechanisms, and the Temporary Accommodation Centers (TAC), etc. Ultimately, they act against any position which aims to permit or make possible living with the many and various human sufferings, in other words, those that can affect anybody.

Those sufferings affect us all because, as revealed by Deleuze and Guattari, when we take the unconscious as a (social) *real-producing factory*, as a *battlefield*, we will conceive the drug phenomenon as a (social) *symptom*. This is because it is crossed by innumerable threads – historical, sociological, artistic, legal, mercantile, religious, sanitation, welfare, political, pharmacological, urban, media, etc.² which taken together weave the tissue which today configures the culture engendering human life.

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² Just as illustrations, we cite: the Opium Wars (China - Great Britain, first 1839-42), shamanic rituals, the hippie movement and psychedelic art, Prohibition in the United States, lacing of cigarettes with amphetamines (U.S. and England), use of Ayahuasca by Amazon tribes, spread of HIV by intravenous drug users, drug trafficking as a parallel government in major centers, prescribing of lawful dependency-producing drugs, occupation of urban areas, marketing of products as objects – that can lift you up – rather than by technical advantage, and extreme sports that require increasingly more adrenaline.

We may perceive this life as *naturalized*, thanks to the strategies of biopolitics, as deciphered by Foucault (2004/1994), or as *bare life*, in the terminology of Agamben (2002). We examine some threads to delineate better the challenges that the drugs issue brings to us.

New Robes of an Old Form of Power

Since 1977, Michel Foucault has been exploring the demarcation between the importance of biological life and the health of the nation as issues for a sovereign power, causing a progressive transformation of the power into a *government of men*. The author has already summarized the process through which, at the threshold of the modern age, natural life has started to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of state power, and politics is transforming itself into *biopolitics*.

The process results in a kind of animalization of humankind, put into practice through the highly sophisticated political techniques of effective disciplinary control exercised by the new *biopower*. A new power without which the very development of capitalism would not have been possible, and that created for itself, through a series of appropriate technologies, the *docile bodies*, which it needed.

Foucault then goes on to analyze the concrete ways in which the *biopower* penetrates into the bodies of its subjects and their ways of living. The *biopower* seems to orient itself according to two distinct guidelines. On the one hand, there is the study of political techniques, such as the science of law enforcement, whereby the State assumes and integrates within its sphere of activities the care of the natural life of the individual. On the other is the study of the *technologies of the self*, through which the process of subjectivation is achieved. This leads each person to commit his or her own identity and awareness, both individually and collectively, to an external controlling power, indicating the decline of discipline within the society and the emergence of a society of control. The *biopower* brings together techniques for the subjugation of the individual and procedures for the aggregation of objectives.

According to Agamben (2002: 16), the key factor is, above all,

(...) the fact that, alongside the progress by which the exception becomes everywhere the rule, the space of bare life, originally located outside the order, comes progressively to coincide with the political space, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* [politics] and *zoé* [biological life or bare life], law and fact enter into a zone of irreducible blurring.

All this results in what the author considers to be the specific aporia of modern democracies that, according to him, "consists in wanting to put at stake the very freedom and happiness of men – the 'bare life' – that indicates its submission" (AGAMBEN, 2002: 17). He further writes:

The decadence of modern democracy and its progressive convergence with the totalitarian states in post-democratic spectacular societies (which was already becoming evident with Tocqueville and found in the analyses of Debord its ultimate sanction) is perhaps rooted in this aporia that marks its beginning and wraps it in secret complicity with its most aggressive enemy. Our policy today knows no other value (and hence no other lack of value) than life, and while the contradictions that this implies are not resolved, Nazism and Fascism, which had made the decision on bare life the supreme political criteria, will remain unfortunately current (AGAMBEN, 2002: 17 & 18).

We find in Silva (2011, basic text to the development of this one), for example, an analysis of the ways by which the *biopower* manifests itself within contemporary democratic urban cultures. How it imposes itself above the wills of individuals, concerning the choices of subjects about the condition of their own biological bodies: the criminalization of drugs and the policies of exclusion applied to those who practice the smoking of tobacco while socializing in public places. The author says that these manifestations

(...) bring dramatic and profound policy implications with regard to social life and the use of urban public spaces. They put in evidence an increasing area of blurring between what could qualify as democratic organization of civil life and the manifestation of a form of fascism, emerging from the most intimate subjectivity of those who share our lives in the spaces provided for citizens. (SILVA, 2011: 03)

Let us begin with the second view. Since the author is an architect and urban planner, his analysis of smoker *apartheid* will serve as an introduction to a discussion about the so-called *cracklands* – a more blatant (and enlarged) example than we wish to approach at this stage.

We have all watched in minute detail, whether we are against, in favor of or indifferent to, which amounts to the same thing, the creation of recent legislation that forbids nightclubs, for example, to have within them, even in open areas like balconies and terraces, a space reserved for smokers. We have seen the reaction: certain areas of public space, around the points of access, have become places where people can remain while they are smoking. Let us be clear: the area is outside the establishment, therefore, the club's owner cannot be responsible for the smoking of tobacco practiced in the area. Nevertheless, it is a fenced area (physically or virtually), in the sense that control over who is there is maintained by the owner, because even though outside, the user remains within – because they have not paid the bill, for example. In that small and ephemeral ghetto, usually with sparse furnishings, most people show themselves visibly embarrassed by their smoking:

(...) In that place, the subject's situation is similar to that of someone in a restroom, dealing with something that, although his or hers biologically, is dirty, filthy and capable of offending others through public coexistence. (...) This is a little corral (...), a space where one cannot discern indoors from outdoors, public from private, rule from exception, clean from unclean, pure from impure (SILVA, 2011: 13)

This ideal of purity, whose logic is shared by nazis, eugenists, as much as by those who embody the notion of 100% Jesus, or those who look for 100% Pure White, occupies, according to Bauman, a privileged position and can hardly ever be embraced “without the teeth being bared and the daggers sharpened” (BAUMAN, 1998: 13). It is not innocent, then, the progressive elimination of the awareness of the presence of smokers in public places where social life happens, first by internal area segregation, then by banning the activity from open areas. We are already seeing discussions aimed at the prohibition of smoking in the streets, also under the argument that it makes the other a passive smoker, which would cause as much harm as ...³.

We, psychologists, already know that solution: Foucault has shown us how the “ship of fools” was the attempt to get rid of:

(...) a dark disorder, a moving chaos (...) which opposes the adult and luminous stability of the mind, and the sea represents the water, which carries off from this world, but it does more: it purifies (FOUCAULT, 1961; apud: BAUMAN 1998: 13 & 14).

And Bauman also brings before us the analysis made by the American anthropologist Cynthia Ozick about the purification prescribed by the German “Final Solution”:

(...) [It] was an aesthetic solution; it was a job of editing, of the artist's finger removing a smudge, it simply annihilated what was considered not harmonious (...), out of place, (...), which spoiled the picture and offended the aesthetically gratifying and morally reassuring sense of harmony (OZICK, 1983; apud: BAUMAN 1998: 13).

The aesthetic issue gives us the chance of discussing the second question: the actions undertaken in the Luz district, in São Paulo, stigmatized as “crackland”. These started on January 3, 2012. Under the justification of a supposed “crack epidemic”, some arms of government mobilized themselves to present to the population a proposal for the restoration of public order.

³ Claims that do not hide their convenience, such as for example: “the gases released by vehicles are worse than cocaine”, and the WHO affirmation that air pollution causes nearly two million premature deaths each year in the world (report on *Jornal do Brasil*, March 4, 2011), or that “loneliness can cause more harm to health than obesity and smoking,” according to the American researcher Cacioppo (story on *O Globo*, March 27, 2011). The fact is that neoplastic diseases have been used to justify the “control” (not of health, but of risk) of almost everything, despite their presently unknown etiology and also it is known that hereditary factors carry as much weight as environmental and even psychological factors, according to Silva (2011: 14-17). But the key thing to realize is how statistical surveys operate, methodologically. If it is evident that there are many causes of cancer, data on subjects belonging to different and concurrent risk groups should be cross-checked. However, given the number of possible causes, this task seems virtually impractical and, meanwhile, the disease is used as a biopolitical instrument to constrain and control life.

Two months later the Public Security Department of the State of São Paulo presented the results of their operation, which had lasted forty days: the dispersion of the entire population of undesirables into neighboring districts, together with 232 arrests and the internment of 234 people in hospitals. The case of the Luz district is emblematic, because, although the militarized actions are becoming more frequent, we apparently have accepted the drug problem as an issue of public health. At the time when the central region of the city of São Paulo is the target of an intense dispute between property speculators and the interests of various local groups, the first step taken by the municipal council in the implementation of the Nova Luz project has been to grant commercial exploitation of the region (a 45 block perimeter around the Luz and Santa Ifigênia districts) to private enterprise. A consequence of this expansion of the real estate market boundaries is the expulsion, either directly, by the action of the military police, or indirectly, by real estate appreciation, of the existing population of poor people. In the same way, forced evictions and repossessions of empty properties, occupied by workers competing for the jobs and infrastructure of the downtown area, are carried out.⁴

Nevertheless, local inhabitants, traders, homeowners and housing movements have themselves stepped forward to resist or soften the effects of the implementation of the Nova Luz project, which treats urban lands as *commodities*, that is as merchandise⁵. In the Luz region, the supposed struggle against drug dealing resulted in the imprisonment of the sellers, one third of those arrested were homeless, and were dealing in drugs as a survival strategy. Of course, all this had no effect on the illegal drug market; indeed, it opens new questions: from where would those excluded from the formal economy, who had derived their subsistence from drug dealing, now find their survival? The innocent, bare life young who, when they are not working for drug traffickers, are terrorizing city intersections, killing and dying in ways that are equally violent and brutal way?

When that discussion emerges, when a certain consensus that “while a political solution is not forthcoming, the police are the solution which comes into being⁶” forms, the facts impose an understanding that while the excluded are not included, somehow, subsistence will reach them. If that subsistence does not come from the consumer of illegal drugs, it will be extracted through the violence of the thief, of the mugger, and of the brutalized murderer who awaits the next killing and knows he has nothing to lose.

When that comprehension takes hold, a certain silence seems to descend on the discussions; and a certain consensus that faced with this style of politics and of biopolitics, which define contemporary urban life, that perhaps it may be safer to leave everything as it has come to be. Precisely because this is the most convenient way for all those who make up the complex network of interests, from which some profit by illegality, tax exemption and the ready availability of disposable labor. Convenient too for others who maintain a certain detachment from the violence that, thus, focuses more on the surroundings of the drug-dealing spots (slums?) than on the streets of the elite residential districts. And for yet others who take advantage of political influence resulting from isolation and the extreme lack of public services in the slums, and others who sell every type of protection, supply weapons and legal assistance to criminal organizations.

Drugs continue, somehow, to be amply and widely available in an ambivalent situation, ambiguous of responsibilities, in which drug consumption is not a crime, but drug dealing is. It is worth asking: is there really any intention to prohibit the operation of this machine, or is prohibition just a necessary and indispensable link to its total and complete articulation, in all the levels of its complex structure?

⁴ See Leite & Castro, 2012.

⁵ Far away, on the outskirts of the city (and in 72 municipalities across the country) a curfew on young people is imposed. This has been justified as a means of protecting children and adolescents, and aims to combat the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. Local officials and members of the military police work together to disperse and gather up young people after 11 p.m. See Brito, 2011.

⁶ Such “acceptance” seems, in my opinion, to occur due to the visibility that the facts related to crack are gaining, so that they are reported and shaped as a serious social problem in the country, especially by the sensationalist sectors of the media. These sectors operate tied to the economic and political interests of property speculation, of an industry of crime, of racist attitudes and segregation, of philanthropic gains in a neoliberal state, of a regression in the quest for civil rights, and represent a return to conservative rationalities, bordering upon a picture of terror. See Lemos, 2011.

In the varied faces of the war against drugs, which attacks certain substances and remains silent about others⁷, the militarization of the control and management of territories is linked to the control of behaviors and habits, striking at individuals by way of public health, morals, and incarceration.

Drugs: What is prohibited? What is punished? What do they treat?⁸

Although the word “drugs” used to carry a wider meaning, it seems that today the meaning is limited, initially signifying a relief and pleasure object, subsequently, in situations of dependence, drugs become an urgent necessity object, and therefore, a satisfaction object⁹.

When we speak of relief, we are referring to an escape from reality, which, once in awhile, everybody needs to make. Freud (1930) indicated that every society creates for itself ways to escape, because there are times when we cannot bear the full force of reality. Relief, then, from the pains of being alive: our mortality, our limited potency, our physical limitations, in short, the inherent anguishes of life, to which have been added the characteristics of contemporary culture (narcissism, consumerism, hedonism, individualism, ostentation), whose unachievable ideals (eternal youth, infinite pleasure, unceasing success, latest fashions) always impose upon us more possibilities for frustration than fulfillment. Relief can be obtained through legal drugs (alcohol, psychoactive medicines), illicit drugs (marijuana, ecstasy) fantasies (the little day dreams we all have, not grand psychosis), gaming, the internet, etc.¹⁰.

Drugs are pleasure objects not only because they act neurochemically, but also, among other reasons, for the socialization linked to their consumption (happy hour, marijuana round) and even by transgression – any prohibition indicates a desire, which should not be satisfied!

We have seen, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the criminalization of drugs, and, through them, of pleasure, as well as of gambling and other habits, is the economic foundation upon which the omnipresence of the trafficking of narcotics is structured and territorialized. The prevailing locus is the so-called *favelas* or slums, now officially named as *subnormal* clusters (IBGE), within which are crowded the people reduced to be the waste of our society (taking the name used to its ultimate conclusion).

On the other hand, neurobiology considers that the distinction between legal and illegal drugs does not lie within the realm of science. Actually, every pharmacopoeia suffers this paradox: the dose variation is what distinguishes a medicine from a poison. Thus, I have stated¹¹ that *abuse does not preclude use*, a principle that applies to every object produced by human society: cars are not prohibited, but ways of driving, speed, etc. are regulated, even though car accidents kill more people than do overdoses.

Legal drugs are generally classified as anxiolytics, hypnotics, and antidepressants¹². The perceptions enjoyed by these medicines are varied, correctly or incorrectly, arising through a conflict between the meanings assigned to care, comfort, and dependence. We know that anxiety and depressive disorders are alleviated, but this is achieved without curing the true underlying pathologies. Proof of this is that these medicines are often prescribed as if they were for “life”, under the argument that, for whatever reason, the brain has started to malfunction, in terms of neurochemical production. However, medicines are the drugs that are socially accepted.

⁷ I wrote an article in the *Jornal da Cidade* (Bauru, May 14, 2012) discussing drug consumption in Brazil in 2011: four tons of amphetamines (which in other countries are banned) and 15 million boxes of Clonazepam, legal drugs, were prescribed and sold improperly. Part of the consequences of the medicalization of life to which we are submitted thanks to biopolitics.

⁸ Subheading based on Ehremberg's article (1997, apud SILVA, 2011), to which I will refer throughout this section.

⁹ Roughly, the difference here is that, according to psychoanalysis, a pleasure object, because it is associated with an unconscious desire, is always a kind of nomadic figure, which is changing places all the time, while an object of satisfaction is one that, once experienced, does not satisfy unless it is present here and now.

¹⁰ According to Kehl, 2005.

¹¹ This manner of expression comes specifically from my participation on the UNIMEP Committee for the Prevention of Chemical Dependency - CPDQ, which lasted for several years. The committee was charged with the task of developing an institutional policy, which would shape the debate over the issue within the university as a whole.

¹² The currently most widely used classification is in terms of the actions on the Central Nervous System (CNS), others are: depressants (psycholeptics), stimulants (psychoanaleptics), and hallucinogenics (psychotomimetics) – CEBRID.

The problems related to medicines (and the pharmaceutical industry, too) are so linked to those of illegal drugs that present psychiatric practice considers that depression induces “addictive” behaviors (consumption of psychoactive substances). According to psychiatry, alcoholism, cocaine addiction, the compulsive use of tranquilizers and even bulimia are attempts to auto-medicate depression. But in what way is the use of a medicine to overcome a bad time (conceived as a limited period) anything bad? Will this not be better than consuming alcohol, Goethe’s dimmer of worries, and even better than snorting cocaine?

Here we reach a central question, according to Ehremberg:

Is it ever possible to make a distinction between unhappiness caused by life and pathological suffering? Further, should it be done? How and by whom will it be decided whether a suffering is normal and must be endured by the subject, or pathological, so that it must be treated by medicines? The object of the therapeutic care becomes uncertain and, for most, the notion of cure is in crisis. (EHREMBERG, 1997, *apud* SILVA, 2011).

This leads, in my opinion, to other lines of thought that challenge us. One of these is that the problem of diagnosis and prescription, in general restricted to medicine and to psychiatry in particular, has converted itself into a moral problem. Moral problems are the foundations of the fear which drugs inspire in us. Another issue, deriving from the biopolitical view which regards life as a medical condition, is what can be said of a subject who will spend the rest of his or her life beneath the effect of some legal, prescribed drug? Will his or her happiness be rated as artificial? Will such a person be considered a problem worthy of receiving care, or only if the citizen becomes a deviant from the established order?

The Interdicts and the Strange

The smoker and the addict, when they allow themselves a pleasure whereby they put out their tongues to death or madness, put us in front of that which Freud (1919: 331) defined as *Das Unheimliche*, the disturbing, the strange or the distressing, “*that kind of a scary thing that goes back to what has long been known, the very familiar.*” When we fear the madness in the other, we dread that which, according to Freud, Schelling defines as the essential meaning of that German word: “*everything which should be kept secret, hidden, but appears*” (idem). The disturbing feeling produced by madness comes out of the suspicion that the automatic (mechanical) processes may be hiding behind the customary image which we have of ourselves (FREUD, 1919: 340). It is not surprising that behaviors which associate pleasure with the risk of madness cause anguish, because “*the distressing element is something repressed which comes back*” (1919: 360).

This *Unheimliche* is not really anything new or strange, “*but it is something very familiar to the psyche, which just through the process of repression was distanced from it*” (idem). The fear of madness comes from the layman’s realisation that it is a manifestation “*of forces that he did not suspect existed around him, but felt moving darkly in the remote corners of his own personality*” (1919: 363). To better understand the intensity of such uneasiness, we must learn its origins and, in these, we will find the prohibited, the interdict.

As we enquire into the interdict, we are also exploring the question of the nature of man himself, as a being who is distinct from other animals. Georges Bataille’s essay, named *The Eroticism* (1957) makes some thought-provoking and acute points about this split:

During this transition, all events taking place are stolen from us; (...). Summarizing, they [the men] distinguished themselves from the other animals by *work*. In parallel, they imposed restrictions upon themselves known as interdicts. Those interdicts essentially, and certainly, reflected upon the attitudes [of men] to the dead. It is likely they have touched at the same time, or in the same period, on sexual activity (BATAILLE, 1987: 28).

Work, death and sex: these are the three facts, phenomena which lie at the origin of the interdict. How does work relate to the interdict? Consider those born into a community organized to do the work necessary to produce a surplus, who have not gone hungry nor lived through tragedies, the realities which, over generations, have taught and imposed the priority of work over pleasure. These people will only have been able to suppress the appeal of pleasure by something which had the same strength as hunger and death, an even greater strength: the fear of the unknown, of nothingness, of absolute and pure anguish. The appeal of drugs, which modifies the awareness, is the appeal to pleasure ruled by madness. An appeal that takes the person away from work and approaches sex.

This desire for pleasure awakes, automatically, the shadow of fear, through which, from our earliest origins, the access to pleasure has been regulated. This is the mechanics of the interdict, what drives the machine is fear and dread. According to Bataille:

Once work, it would seem, has logically created the reaction that determines attitudes toward death, it is legitimate to think that the interdict regulating and limiting sexuality was also its counterblow, and that the set of fundamental human behaviors, work, awareness of death, and restrained sexuality, goes back to the same distant period (BATAILLE, 1987: 28).

You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. Those are, according to Bataille, the two fundamental biblical commandments. The first is a consequence of human attitudes towards the dead:

The *interdict* that overwhelms others before a corpse is a way to *reject the violence*, to *separate from the violence*. The depiction of violence, which we should attribute especially to primordial men, is understood necessarily as something in opposition to the work movement, which is ruled by rational operation (...) the work of humans, different from that of the animals, is never foreign to reason (BATAILLE, 1987: 28).

Reason is the logic of awareness. Thereby, what we fear to find in our unconscious, and that particularly threatens us when it emerges as madness, is the violence that lies within us, that constitutes the nature of us as biological beings, who are the initial and final objects of any biopolitics. When we return to the issue of the relation between the prohibition of drugs which modify awareness and the crime organized by the trafficking of narcotics, and all the violence and all the horror resulting from, or rather justified by that prohibition, we should be scared. It is exactly this fear of violence revealing itself at the root that both justifies the violence and contributes to generate it. This is actually quite obvious. What is rather less obvious, though, is precisely the obviousness of this conclusion. Through this one can assess the extent of the difficulty in discerning the boundaries between *bios* and *zoé*, residing precisely in this “*desired state of emergency*” (AGAMBEN, 2002: 175) that reveals itself “*when the state of emergency becomes the rule*” (ibid.). This is happening here, when violence becomes the necessary product of its own negation, when health or freedom become justifications of political dementia and ghettoization.

The violence is not in the slums, and neither is it in the drugs, just as there is no violence in smoking. It is not even in the organized crime or terrorism. Violence, as well as death, is inside ourselves, and depends only on the here and now of each person, on his or her situation, on the possibility of him or her having a place in this world, on speaking and being heard. When there is no speaking, there is the act, and beyond this, there is only violence.

For Ehremberg, the drug problem can be perfectly separated from its ideologization. According to him, it is an issue of political method: reducing the passions and dreads evoked by drugs, converting them into a *normal political object* (1997, apud SILVA, 2011). The same is valid in regard to the smoking issue. When we are able to deal with these matters through politics, and not through the police, maybe then we will have reached that degree of cultural development which will enable us to no longer live to work, nor even work to live, but live simply for the pleasure of doing. This is the goal of political life, as Aristotle has told us, opposing the simple fact of living, (*tò zên*) to politically qualified life (*tò eû zên*): “Born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to living well” (apud AGAMBEN, 2002: 10). This means enjoying the pleasure of living and living the pleasure of enjoying, of dying in our own way, of having sovereignty over our own bodies.

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