

## **PROHIBITIONIST DRUG POLICIES AND THE SUBCULTURE OF CANNABIS USE IN TWO BRAZILIAN MIDDLE CLASS URBAN SETTINGS**

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Our experience as members of the academic community and with middle class youth in general, has made us acutely aware of the gaps in the existing literature on drug use, and especially its silence about the widespread use of cannabis, a drug which, in spite of being illicit, is widely used in these milieux with what seem to be relatively few ill effects. Yet users are subject to social stigmatisation, police harassment, threats of violence, imprisonment and all the attending horrors of Brazilian prisons. In the hope of providing a more balanced view and contributing to the growing debate around drug policy, we decided to carry out some research to help us put on record and organise in a more structured manner, all we have informally observed, in the course of the last twenty five years, of the cannabis use made by socially well integrated adults who move in social circles close to ours. In this we believed we were taking on the anthropologist's traditional role as mediator or a translator between cultures and, so, give the public a chance to hear the opinions and understand the social representations of the cannabis users. The present article seeks to provide a brief summary of our research, whose methodology and results are more fully described in the book "Rodas de Fumo- o uso da maconha entre camadas médias urbanas" jointly edited by CETAD and the Federal University of Bahia Press (MacRae and Simões 2000).

### Cannabis Use in Brazil

The smoking of Cannabis is believed to have been introduced into Colonial Brazil by African slaves. This practice became especially widespread in the North and Northeast where it was common among the poor Black population, both urban and rural, and some

Indian groups (Doria, 1986 [1915], Iglésias, 1986 [1918], Moreno, 1986[1946], Mott, 1986, Henman, 1982 and 1986). There the Black population, and the Indians with whom they were in contact, used Cannabis as a medicinal herb, as a stimulant for physical labour, as a pastime for fishermen out at sea, and as a promoter of socialisation in semi-ritualized smoking circles that gathered at the day's end (Henman, 1982:7). There are a few references to the use of Cannabis in Afro-Brazilian religious rituals and the anthropologist Gilberto Freyre considered the smoking of this plant as a form of African cultural resistance in that region (Freyre, 1981:396,650 and 1985:31).

Although there were some local ordinances against the sale or use of Cannabis as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this only became a serious police and public health concern in relatively recent times. The first republican Brazilian penal code, issued in 1890, although it banned “poisonous substances”, made no mention of Cannabis (Toron, 1986:141).

It was during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the use of Cannabis by the urban poor began to be perceived as a threat. An important group of Brazilian doctors who claimed to be concerned with the well being of the “Brazilian race” began to consider its use to be a vice, introduced by the Blacks, a kind of “revenge of the defeated”. They considered it to cause serious harm both to the physical and to the mental health of smokers and blamed it for multiple problems such as: idiocy, violence, unbridled sensuality, madness and racial degeneration. In fact, they had relatively little direct knowledge of the subject and, likening its effects to those produced by opium (they called it the “poor man`s opium”), considered it to be highly addictive. Cannabis smokers were conceived of as being both deviant and sick, and in 1936 the plant was finally classified as a narcotic whose sale and use ought to be banned. Fuelled by the spate of nationalism that affected Brazil during the Second World War, the campaign against Cannabis became a patriotic nation-wide crusade with a strong racist slant. It was used as an excuse to put in operation a series of repressive measures, directed mainly towards the Blacks, who, at the time, were considered by the white elite to be a “dangerous population” (Adiala, 1986). During the 50's the use of Cannabis was frequently discussed in the press, where the marihuana smoker was portrayed as a social parasite and a troublemaker, while the doctors insisted he was a victim of mental

disease. These representations had a lasting effect on the way the use of Cannabis came to be seen by the population at large (Cavalcanti, 1998:119 132). Today the general public is usually led to associate it to dangerous criminals, hopelessly addicted youths or neurotic decadent celebrities.

In the early 70's, while Brazil endured the rigours of a brutal military dictatorship, the impossibility of any kind of organised political opposition led many young members of the middle class to engage in what became known as "cultural dissent". This was a strongly individualistic movement, much influenced by the American and European "underground" of the late 60's, which aimed to undermine the bourgeois values that sustained the regime. More concerned with their war against left wing guerrillas, the military initially paid relatively little attention to these long-haired youths and their life style of free sex, music, mysticism, soft drugs and hallucinogens (cocaine was still rare).

However, this did not mean that they were indifferent to drug use. The highly repressive social climate and the lack of public debate on important social issues provided an ideal environment for waves of moral panic, fuelled by an anticommunist hysteria that tended to liken any form of dissent to political subversion. Students and other sectors of the better-educated youth had come to be perceived as the new "dangerous classes", since it was among them that the effects of the momentous social and cultural changes occurring in the country were most readily perceptible. They were the ones who raised most questions over matters pertaining to politics, education, employment and sexual mores.

So, in 1976, the present drug legislation was passed. These laws, which punished both the sale and the possession for individual use of a large list of substances, including Cannabis, have been criticised on many accounts, such as their difficulty in making a realistic distinction between users and dealers. But most problematic is their undemocratic nature, inherited from the National Security Legislation which was at the basis of the dictatorial regime and on which they were modelled. Although a new democratic constitution was drawn up after the military were ousted, these laws went untouched and since then matters have become even tougher once drug trafficking has now been placed in a new category of,

so called, “hideous crimes” subject to extraordinary repressive treatment, even stricter than those applying to homicide. So, at present, even those who are still unconvicted but awaiting judgement on dealing charges are not eligible for bail or for a series of other rights normally available to defendants.

The growth in the demand for these substances and the lack of effective control over many of the military and police groups concerned with political repression favoured corruption and it became quite common for members of these official bodies to come to accept bribes from large and small scale drug dealers and users. By then, the old traditional African-influenced ways of using Cannabis had been forgotten and this became the preferred drug for middle class youth, endowed with a mystique of dissent and modernity. Paradoxically, in spite of the official censorship applied to the press and the arts, this was a very creative period which laid the basis for the present Brazilian culture, especially with regard to the life styles of the young, and the use of drugs (mainly cannabis) became a lasting part of youth culture.

Although drug use has since lost the political meaning the cultural dissenters attributed to it in the 70’s, it has continued to be seen as a hallmark of youthful rebellion, and a source of endless worry for concerned parents and teachers. But, until recently, anti drug campaigns continued to adopt a narrow approach, only focusing on the problems caused by the outlawed substances, seldom making a clear distinction among them and never discussing the relative harm of their different manners of usage. Concurrently, alcoholic drinks and cigarettes are the subject of massive advertising campaigns and are easily available to the public of all ages, at a relatively low cost. Their production is generally considered important as a source of jobs and revenue and receives much official support.

As in the days when it was used against the Black population, today the war on drugs continues to provide good excuses for surveillance and control of groups that are perceived to be a threat to the way society is organised. Young people, with all their questioning and difficulties in social adjustment are the new privileged target. Yet, in spite of all the police repression and the educational campaigns directed at them, drug usage in Brazil has been

growing continually, reaching an ever younger public, and has come to involve much more dangerous substances such as cocaine, which is used in many ways: snorted, injected or smoked in the form of crack-cocaine. Nevertheless the drugs that cause by far the most harm are still the legal ones, predominantly used by adults, alcohol and tobacco. Remembering that drugs are harmless in themselves and that a war on drugs is really fought against people involved with their production, distribution and use, it seems more sensible to tackle the question from a wider bio-psycho-social perspective that takes into account drug, set and setting. Here one should pay heed to those who, like Howard Becker, have called attention to the importance of the culture that develops around the use of these substances and which allows the transmission among users of their empirical know how on the best ways of enjoying their benefits with the least risk of unwanted effects (Becker 1966<sup>a</sup>, 1966b, 1976). Norman Zinberg also pointed out the importance of cultural factors that he calls “social sanctions” (values and rules of conduct) and “social rituals” (stylised, prescribed behaviour patterns surrounding the use of a drug) in establishing the controlled use of these substances (Zinberg 1984:5). These were pioneering approaches that have, since then, been expanded upon or refined, in more recent pieces of research that have, nevertheless, tended to confirm their basic assumptions.

During the 80’s the recreational use of cannabis in private became more accepted among large sectors of the middle class. The academic milieu was no exception and, today, a sizeable minority of Brazilian University lecturers, students and researchers smoke marihuana. Yet, most research and official discussion on the subject continues to be centred on “problem users” or adolescents, invariably adopting either a medical or a penal approach.

### The Research

In this context we felt led to put on record another picture closer to our everyday experience choosing as our subjects people who could, on all accounts, be considered to be quite well integrated socially and psychologically in the modern Brazilian urban environment and who we considered to be good examples of “unproblematic use”. As our

intention was primarily to discuss the nature and consequences of the present Brazilian official drug policy we chose to adopt an essentially qualitative approach considering that one cannot understand drug use if we do not take into account questions of meaning and intent and that the anthropological method is particularly suited for such purposes. Thus, rather than providing a “profile” of a certain type of cannabis user, we aimed more at producing an ethnography of cannabis use among well functioning members of the urban middle classes.

We chose to focus on two different cities, located in different regions of Brazil, noted for their cultural differences, and where we had contacts and previous experience among cannabis users. These were São Paulo and Salvador. São Paulo, in southeastern Brazil, is a large metropolis with over 16 million inhabitants and is considered to be the most modern and industrialised part of the country. Although Salvador, with a population of 2,5 million, shares many of the same modern industrial features, it has a strong cultural identity of its own. Both racially and culturally it bears a very marked African influence, since it was, up to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the heart of the slave trade. To this day its social and cultural structures maintain much of the old patriarchal, plantation-centred relations. It was also of interest to us because of its location in the part of Brazil where the old traditional forms of cannabis use, developed by the Black population, had been most entrenched.

As trained urban anthropologists, we considered our previous experience, over several years, with large networks of cannabis users to be a kind of “participant observation” which had allowed us to witness many episodes of acquisition, preparation and use of the substance. We had also established close personal contact with many users and had been able to follow and evaluate different aspects of their social networks, including their family life, employment and leisure activities. Our concern that our close involvement with these users might weaken the methodological basis of our research was assuaged by the example of other scholars who had studied drug use in their own personal social networks. Two examples that immediately come to mind are the classic articles by Howard Becker, who developed his theories on the importance of the subculture arising around drug use while inquiring into the marihuana smoking careers of dance musician friends of his, and the

PhD. thesis written by one of Brazil's foremost anthropologists, Gilberto Velho, who also studied cannabis and other drug use among members of his own middle-class social networks (Velho 1998).

We complemented our observations with semi-structured in depth interviews with five selected middle class users from each city. These hour long interviews followed a schedule that was drawn up taking as reference Norman Zinberg's study of controlled drug use as well as many points also raised by Becker. In addition, we introduced other topics, which were especially relevant to the Brazilian context. One of our intentions, in writing the book, was to let the cannabis users speak for themselves but, unfortunately, owing to the need to keep our article brief, we have been forced to exclude from this account some of the very lively and provocative quotes that we transcribed in the book and which help bring to life our subjects, allowing us to perceive them in their individual idiosyncrasies.

Our concern was to study what we called "socially integrated regular users" giving less emphasis to their daily cannabis intake (which we found to vary according to a series of circumstances) and paying more heed to the length of time of usage and to their concern in maintaining regular access to the substance. But the subjects interviewed could all be considered to be habitual users, with the majority smoking at least one joint a day.

As for the criteria we adopted to consider all these subjects as "socially integrated", we took our main indicator to be their employment in activities that provided them with a big enough income to fulfil the usual expectations for their class and age bracket. We also took into account judgements made by their peers.

We tried to bring to light the practices and representations of those cannabis users that we considered to be informal ways of ordering individual experiences and regulating usage. We believe that when someone takes a psychoactive substance, for whatever reason, his immediate and subsequent experiences are influenced by his feelings, ideas and beliefs

about it, During use they develop notions based on their own experiences and on suggestions coming from what they consider to be reliable sources. These notions lead to the formation of what Zinberg calls “informal controls”. In the case of cannabis, the familiarity resulting from widespread use has led to the internalisation of the “social sanction” and this, alongside the low potency of the varieties normally found in Brazil, has led to a loosening of the “social rituals”, without any apparent diminishment of control over its effects. So we were able to detect the formation of a definite cannabis subculture, in spite of the heterogeneity of the larger Brazilian culture and the different individual effects produced by the drug.

### Some Findings

All our subjects, regardless of whether they lived in São Paulo or Salvador, used their cannabis in a remarkably similar manner adopting the same consumption techniques and terminology. This is especially remarkable due to the strong cultural differences between the two cities, and to the fact that the Brazilian mass media are usually quite silent on the details of drug use in general. It has been suggested that this may be due to the fact that the cannabis plantations are usually quite distant from the main urban centres and that the “drug trail” may act a source of cultural diffusion. On the other hand, it must be remembered that young middle class Brazilians, like the ones we observed and interviewed are very cosmopolitan, travel frequently around the country and are in tune with a, relatively homogenous, nation-wide “youth culture”.

By far the predominant way of using cannabis was smoking it pure in handmade cigarettes. The use of the traditional rudimentary water pipe, which seems to have been the old African way of smoking, is very rare and the name that used to be given it has now been transferred to the improvised holders that are sometimes used when smoking one of these cigarettes to its end. Hashish is very rare in Brazil and the vast majority of smoker’s dislike mixing cannabis and tobacco. Oral consumption is also very unusual, although a few referred to it, mentioning its use in cake mixtures.



Among users there is a generalised agreement about the relative physical and psychological harmlessness of cannabis. When tolerance develops, they say, it is quickly dispelled after a brief period of abstinence or even with the simple switching over to a new batch of the herb.

Although these cannabis users are often keen to try other psychoactive substances, they are quite clear about their different natures, not only in pharmacological terms but also with regard to the psychosocial expectations surrounding them. Most also make regular use of alcoholic drinks (beer and wines, mainly) and some smoke tobacco. A few expressed restrictions to cocaine and all were quite adamant about their rejection of injecting drugs.

Among them there is a frequent suspicion of “chemical” drugs, in general, and many are even reluctant to engage in the common Brazilian practice of self-medication with antibiotics. These drug users tend to choose a substance that is most appropriate to their inclinations, wishes and interests, and keep to it. Thus, it makes little sense to postulate a natural linear progression or escalation from one drug to another.

Contrary to popular belief, none of our interviewees was initiated into the use of cannabis by evil Machiavellian dealers, who in the desire to increase their clientele, had taken advantage of their supposed naiveté, lack of self assurance or mental confusion. In fact they were usually initiated by friends or relatives and throughout their smoking careers continued to rely on this social network to acquire the drug. In the cases we studied, the onset of cannabis use was usually a manifestation of rebellion and self-affirmation, characteristic of curious and creative personalities, and not the blind submission to a “drug cult”. It seems to us that an important motivation for young people to start using cannabis is the need to indicate that they have broken with their family values and have begun to cultivate their own personal ones. Their contact with their peers in the cannabis-using circle helps them acquire new ways of conceiving of themselves and the world. In all the cases we studied, this experience is perceived as having represented a watershed in the subjects lives, even though they may later have ceased to attribute any special significance to the smoking of cannabis in itself.

It was in the midst of this social network that they came to develop their strategies for controlled, “unproblematic” use. Sharing their experiences, they learned to make the distinction between activities where cannabis acted as a facilitator, a source of inspiration or simply pleasurable recreation and those in which it could be a hindrance. During their cannabis smoking career these users gradually came to develop control over the effects and sensations produced by the drug, until they finally were able to fully integrate its use in their daily routine. The circle of smokers then lost its importance as a ritual of control, to be substituted by internalised sanctions. Solitary use then became quite common.

These considerations, however, should not allow one to leave aside the pleasurable and recreational aspects of communal smoking. As shown by Cavalcanti, hedonism is the predominant factor in collective cannabis use, as graffiti on walls and public conveniences leave quite clear and as can be easily witnessed during carnival and pop concerts. (Cavalcanti 1998). As if to confirm this view, our interviews were all held in a light, joking mood and all our subjects were adamant about their satisfaction with their cannabis use.

The users network also plays an important part in the acquisition of the substance. The members of this group engage in what some might call “small scale dealing” among them, on a basis of mutual trust and sense of co-operation. Whatever financial profits may be involved are usually small, and the great advantage is that this system provides a relative safety for users, keeping them away from the dangerous world of large scale dealers.

Unlike the poorer members of Brazilian society, whose daily life is constantly threatened by new and extreme forms of violence, most of our subjects have relatively tranquil lives. But the illicit nature of their cannabis use occasionally leads them to have tense dealings with the criminal underworld and exposes them to blackmail and violence at the hands of corrupt police agents. After we had ended our research, one of our interviewees was subjected to police harassment when, on being called by a neighbour who heard him being attacked by a thief, a few police officers found a small amount of cannabis in his possession

and took him to their headquarters where they kept him caught alongside his attacker. Many hours later, he was finally released, but only after his captors had been duly bribed.

Thus, quite understandably, all our interviewees, and other users we observed, were in favour of the decriminalisation of cannabis use. They also considered the present legislation to be authoritarian and hypocritical for allowing the free sale and advertising of alcohol and tobacco while threatening with severe penalties those who indulge in what they felt to be a harmless pleasure. This, on the other hand, did not imply in a generalised defence of the liberation of all drugs. Many made a strong distinction between “hard” and “soft” drugs and considered that they should be treated in different ways.

During our interviews, we asked a few questions about the association of cannabis use with other activities such as driving, having sex, engaging in creative activities or sleeping. Our interviewees usually reported pleasurable effects, especially with regard to auditory, tactile and sexual experiences. Some claimed that their creativity and intuition were stimulated. Those who drove claimed not to find this a hindrance to their driving abilities (This, highly questionable perception, however, is probably best understood in the context of a generalised Brazilian disregard for the dangers of drunken driving, a cultural trait that receives relatively little attention from the authorities engaged in traffic education and control).

On being inquired about what they considered to be the most reliable sources of information on drugs, most respondents indicated close friends who had personal experience of the matter and a few papers and magazines. On the other hand, they considered that most of the existing drug prevention campaigns were unreliable since they were based on misinformation and lies. The real reason attributed to the outlawing of cannabis was thought to be the profitability of the present system (both for the dealers and for corrupt law enforcers) and the establishment’s desire to keep control over any type of experience that might lead to a questioning of the existing socio-cultural regime. Some respondents, however, believed that certain types of drug use ought to be avoided and that

there was an important role to be played by prevention campaigns based on truthful and useful information.

### Final Considerations

Our findings seem to confirm our ideas that, in Brazil, one ought to stop talking about “drugs” in a general, one-dimensional manner. The drug question must be approached in all its biological, psychological and cultural complexity, taking into account pharmacological differences, the varying psychological conditions of the users, the different patterns of use and the socio-cultural setting. We suggest that prevention campaigns should consider their targeted public to be capable of adopting sensible attitudes on the basis of reliable and convincing information. An interesting example this approach with regard to the use of cannabis is the booklet produced in Australia by Bleeker and Malcolm. There, adopting a harm reduction approach, they provide smokers with information on how best to use the substance safely (Bleeker and Malcolm, 1998).

People doing prevention work among drug users often note that their public is not ignorant on the subject of drugs, and may even be much more knowledgeable than they are about details involving different forms of use and their immediate effects. These users also tend to avoid chaotic approaches to drug use and adhere to a series of values, rules of conduct and social rituals, as detected by Zinberg among his “controlled users” in the USA. Thus, honest information and a serene, non-authoritarian attitude seem to be the best ways of gaining a much-needed credibility. And if drug prevention campaigns are to be credible, they must never be based on the mere desire for social control of a problematic sector of the population.

Of course, we do not mean to argue that users already have all the necessary information on the subject and that there is no need for any drug prevention work among them. There is, obviously, still much that needs doing in this sense, as can be seen by the harmful results of the careless use of even the legal drugs, about which there is plenty of easily available information.

Some may find our results to be relatively unsurprising, producing few hitherto unknown facts. This may be so, since what we are reporting is part of the daily routine of large numbers of young and not so young people to be met constantly in Brazilian middle class surroundings. The point is that these fairly mundane experiences and life-styles are seldom described in the scientific literature on drug use, all emphasis being given to the much rarer problematic cases. So it has been our aim not only to set the record straight for the sake of scientific accuracy, but, also, in order to help those concerned with drug prevention campaigns to formulate more credible strategies and messages that may effectively contribute to reduce drug related harm.

Since the bulk of this research was carried out a new focus for unease among the establishment has been attracting increasing attention and police repression. It is the growing legion of young inhabitants of the shantytowns or poor suburbs in large cities like São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro or Salvador. These areas, in which there is a complete lack of social welfare services and where unemployment is rampant, are portrayed by the mass media as being totally under the control of brutal gangs of juvenile drug dealers.

This is used to justify the frequent police invasions of these areas where the local inhabitants are subjected to humiliation, physical violence and arbitrary arrests. Ironically, members of this same police force have frequently been found to be active partners in the drug dealing they are officially supposed to be fighting. Once again, the prohibitionist policies of the war on drugs are being used for other unconfessed purposes: either the control of potentially troublesome “outsider” social groups or the use of the official police force to favour certain drug dealing gangs at the expense of others. The effects of this on Brazilian patterns of drug use are those that might be expected: an increase in dangerous behaviour and a consequent rise in social and health problems. Even some of our cannabis smoking socially integrated subjects have now become more frequent in their use of cocaine, potentially a much more harmful substance.

Thus it seems that, in Brazil, prohibitionist policies are leading to an escalation of drug related harm, but this is still a minor problem in a country marked by social injustice and exclusion, whose maintenance seems to be their real effect and, perhaps, objective.

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