

The subculture of Cannabis use in two Brazilian middle class urban settings¹

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The smoking of Cannabis is believed to have been introduced in Brazil by African slaves in Colonial times. This practice became especially widespread in the North and Northeast and 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 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 Gilberto Freyre considered the smoking of this plant as a form of African cultural resistance in that region. Although there were some local ordinances against the sale or use of Cannabis, this only became a serious police and public health concern during the 20th century. 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 20th century that the use of Cannabis by the urban poor began to be perceived as a danger. Doctors concerned with the well being of the “Brazilian race” began to consider it to be a vice, “ passed on by the Blacks”, causing serious harm to both physical and mental health such as: idiocy, violence, unbridled sensuality, madness

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and racial degeneration. They identified its effects to those produced by opium and considered it to be highly addictive. Cannabis smokers were conceived of as both deviant and sick, and the plant was classified as a narcotic whose sale and use should be banned. Influenced 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, since it justified a series of repressive measures directed towards the Black population. During the 50's the subject received ample coverage by the press where the Cannabis smoker was portrayed as immoral rather than as a victim of a mental disease, as the doctors would have it. 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).

In the late 60's and 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 claimed to work towards the overthrow of the regime by undermining the bourgeois values that sustained it. 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 and soft drugs.. However, this did not mean that the ruling military were indifferent to the use of drugs and a series of measures were applied which ended up with the issuing, in 1976, of new draconian drug laws which punished both the sale and the individual use of a large list of drugs, including Cannabis. However, 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 led to all kinds of arrangements between them and 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 .

Although the use of drugs 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. Anti drug campaigns usually adopt a narrow approach ,concentrating on the evils caused by the illicit ones, seldom making a clear distinction among the different substances and never discussing the relative harm of their different manners of usage.

As in the days when it was used against the Blacks, today the war on drugs continues to provide good excuses for surveillance and control of groups that are perceived as a threat to the way society is organised . Young people, with all their questioning and difficulties in social adjustment are a new privileged target. Yet, in spite of all the police repression and the educational campaigns directed at the young, drug usage in Brazil has been growing continually and has come to involve much more dangerous substances such as cocaine which can be either snorted, injected or smoked in the form of crack-cocaine. Nevertheless the drugs that cause by far the most harm are still those predominantly used by adults, the

legal ones, alcohol and tobacco, which are freely sold and advertised, and whose production is generally considered important as a source of jobs and revenue.

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 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, like Howard Becker, who 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 how best to enjoy their benefits with the least risk of unwanted effects (Becker 1976b). 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, been expanded upon or refined, in many more recent pieces of research that have, nevertheless, tended to confirm their basic assumptions.