



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

## A Momentary Lapse of Reason. Neoliberal Subjectivity and Recreational Drug Use

Luca Mori\*

### **How to cite**

Mori, L. (2014). A Momentary Lapse of Reason. Neoliberal Subjectivity and Recreational Drug Use. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 6(3), 70-103. Retrieved from [http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014\\_3\\_5.pdf](http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014_3_5.pdf)

### **Author information**

\*Department of Time, Space, Image and Society (Te.S.I.S.), University of Verona, Italy.

### **Contact author's email address**

\*luca.mori@univr.it

### **The online version of this article can be found at**

[http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014\\_3\\_5.pdf](http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014_3_5.pdf)

### **Article first published online**

October 2014

Additional information of [Italian Journal of Sociology of Education](http://www.ijse.eu) can be found at:

[About IJSE](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Manuscript submission](#)

## **A Momentary Lapse of Reason. Neoliberal Subjectivity and Recreational Drug Use**

*Luca Mori\**

---

*Abstract:* As suggested by M. Foucault, neoliberal governmental form of power is a very effective pedagogical tool able to produce a specific form of subjectivity. This paper is aimed at empirically investigating this kind of identity from the particular viewpoint of drug consumption. Through an analysis of the empirical material gathered through the qualitative techniques of the in-depth interview, the group interview and participant observation, the article will explore the individual subjectivities of a number of young drug users. The focus of the analysis will be prevalently on the way in which the interviewees handle their own and their peers' consumption, as well as the criteria they adopt to decide where the line lies between recreational drug-taking and drug abuse. The issue of drug use was not chosen at random. As it stands on the crossroads between freedom and addiction, pleasure and pain, autonomous action and neurochemical conditioning, it constitutes (as we shall argue below) probably one of the most controversial elements of the governmental culture, one that can shed light on many of the characteristics of subjectivity that it produces.

*Keywords:* Foucault, governmentality, rationality, drug consumption

---

---

\*Department of Time, Space, Image and Society (Te.S.I.S.), University of Verona, Italy.  
E-mail: luca.mori@univr.it

*Economics are the method; the  
object is to change the heart and soul*  
M. Thatcher

## **Introduction**

Some accuse Michel Foucault of having been an overly restless thinker<sup>1</sup>, *i.e.* of having broached a number of areas of analysis but never following through with them, as he was always moved by an impelling need to constantly turn his thoughts to new directions. This characteristic of his, while on the one hand leading to a certain amount of dissatisfaction in those who seek an organic, comprehensive vision of social realities in the Frenchman's work, at the same time constitutes an extraordinary resource for those who interpret Foucault's written output as a kind of toolbox (a metaphor that has by now become worn, but was held dear by Foucault himself) to be used as an aid to research<sup>2</sup>.

Perhaps one of the areas where this particular characteristic of Foucault's can be most clearly seen is the concept of liberal governmentality. Introduced between 1977 and 1978 during the course he taught at the Collège de France entitled 'Security, Territory, Population' (Foucault, 2005) and taken up again the following year during the course on 'The Birth of Biopolitics' (Foucault, 2006), the idea of governmentality has gradually become a "field of study"<sup>3</sup> in itself, at the centre of which we find the profound transformations that have revolutionized the exercise of power from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day and the effects these changes have had on forms of subjectivization.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, S. Catucci (2000) specifically in reference to the issues discussed in the present article, Read (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it should be at least briefly mentioned that even the toolbox metaphor needs to be precisely defined. As A. Fontana (2008) noted in an article published in a recent collective work dedicated to the importance of Foucault in the contemporary world, it would be naïve to think that one can find an orderly series of analytical tools in his work ready to be used for a systematic interpretation of reality. Rather, Foucauldian thought attempts to stimulate awareness, suggest a certain angle from which to examine an issue, or orient scholars in constructing their subjects for investigation. To further explore these and other aspects of Foucauldian methods, see P. Veyne (1998, pp. 7-65).

<sup>3</sup> On this matter, see the collective publication edited by Burchell, Gordon and Miller (1991) with the emblematic title *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*.

To summarize briefly, for Foucault the governmental form of power can be distinguished from sovereign power thanks to four defining features. Firstly, the wielding of governmental power is in no way a self-referencing exercise. This form identifies a second and more fundamental reality, called society; this becomes the privileged object of this form of power, which has the task of managing and improving society by identifying and exploiting its internal dynamics. Secondly, this form of power is not exercised by a clearly defined central institution. Government of society is managed through a series of strategies and techniques that do not belong to one specific institution or another – whether prison, family, hospital or the State – but are spread around within the whole body of society (Foucault, 2005, pp. 92-95). Thirdly, governmentality is a form of approach to power that is basically frugal, sober and not showy in the least. It mostly conditions its subjects in indirect ways and favours adjustments to the contexts for action rather than to the actions themselves. Fourthly – and lastly – governmentality is distinguished by the fact that it makes the market and economic policy its particular form of self-validation. If it is true that society has its own dynamics, which the powers that be are called on to understand and promote, then we need to identify the place where these dynamics emerge most clearly. Governmentality pinpoints this place as the market and believes that the most fitting discourse to explain these dynamics is economic science (Foucault, 2006, p. 37).

Although Foucault again and again states that the spread of the devices of government has profound effects in terms of subjectivization, the empirical studies inspired by it have but rarely investigated the concrete consequences obtained regarding the sphere of individual identities. At the core of their analyses most scholars have placed the synergies and conflicts that the common points and differences between the various technologies of government have given rise to (Rose, 1999, p. 21). Only sporadically have these technologies been taken into consideration in terms of their educational value and the effects they have had on the people subjected to their actions. This is why, in this paper, we will attempt to take a step in that direction. In other words, we will try to examine governmental devices first and foremost as pedagogical devices designed for two main purposes: creating a precise environment for individual action and socializing individuals towards a specific form of self-representation and self-government (O'Malley, 2008a, p. 454).

The viewpoint chosen from which to study the phenomenon is the issue of psychoactive-substance use. Through an analysis of the empirical material gathered through the qualitative techniques of the in-depth interview, the group interview and participant observation, in the following pages we will explore the individual subjectivities of a number of young drug users. The focus of the analysis will be prevalently on the way in which the interviewees handle their own and their peers' consumption, as well as the criteria they adopt to decide where the line lies between recreational drug-taking and drug abuse. The study, begun in April 2014 and still ongoing, has so far managed to bring to completion twelve in-depth interviews each lasting approximately one-and-a-quarter hours (nine of which with young adults living in Bologna and its province and three with residents of the city and province of Verona), two group interviews (the first carried out with three residents of Verona and the second with a further five young adults living in Verona and province) and three observational sessions<sup>4</sup>. Naturally, the issue of drug use was not chosen at random. As it stands on the crossroads between freedom and addiction, pleasure and pain, autonomous action and neurochemical conditioning, it constitutes (as we shall argue below) probably one of the most controversial elements of the governmental culture, one that can shed light on many of the characteristics of subjectivity that it produces.

The paper is structured as follows: first of all we will discuss the issue of liberal governmentality above all in relation to the birth of what we call the *homo oeconomicus*. The hypothesis behind our analysis is that, when we talk about *homo oeconomicus*, more than dealing with *one* subject we find ourselves faced with a source of subjectivization or, in other words, a subjectivizing matrix or grille: a subjectivity-producing mechanism able to function across the most disparate of human practices, mind-altering substance use included. We will then continue by directly introducing the issue of drug consumption and the meanings this has developed in modern societies. The basic idea is that modernity has categorized drug consumption in mainly hedonistic terms, marginalizing all the other forms

---

<sup>4</sup> In order to corroborate the interview material, we decided to observe modes of drug use 'in the flesh'. The writer went out three times to nightclubs in both Bologna and Verona, each time accompanying the interviewees and their friends. It was not always easy to observe the phenomenon and certain facets of the researcher's identity – first and foremost age, as significantly older than the average age of the people who generally frequent these nightspots – somewhat hindered (but did not completely impede) the use of this technique.

of meaning that were once linked to this experience. This is an essential point. By becoming a luxury good the consumption of which involves some risk (Schivelbusch, 1992), drugs have also become potentially interesting goods for the *homo oeconomicus*, who can fully exercise his maximizing logic on them. In the final part, ample room will be given to an analysis of the empirical material. To give a hint of some of the results, we could say that our reading of the interviews highlighted a subjectivity structure in line with the theoretical coordinates plotted by the governmental frame. The individuals concerned approach mind-altering substances from within a strict cost-benefit mindset. The reasons why they consume these substances essentially lie in the improvement in how they present their individual selves within various interactive settings. Nonetheless, as we will argue below, this practice can lead to a series of side effects of varying severity. Those who do not “stay on top of it”, who fail the difficult test of keeping their drug use under control, are exposed to the sanctions of the group. It is this dual nature – at the same time hedonistic and risky – that makes drugs one of the most emblematic areas of self-government.

### **Markets and subjects: the neo-liberal form of governmentality**

Talking about liberal governmentality, as we are doing, may seem redundant. This is because, for Foucault, liberalism and governmentality coincide – tracing the genealogy of the governmental approach means also tracing the genealogy of liberalism. Nevertheless, when we refer to liberalism from the Foucauldian point of view, we should not conceive it in terms of a moral theory or an ideology but rather as political reasoning (Stangherlin, 2007, p. 133), in other words as a strategy that can be used to provide a solution to the issue of government. We could even say that governmentality constitutes a form of control designed to leave the subjects it exercises control over free. It has two main distinguishing components: the first, which we might call the negative side, is the constant limitation to its own sphere of action. Governmentality arose as a backlash against excessive government and excessive control, which is why it always tries not to intervene too strongly. The second component, on the other hand, is seen in a more positive light and is designed to produce the liberties that governmentality tries to guarantee. Let us take for example freedom of enterprise and commerce, of political beliefs or of expression. In order to

ensure all these freedoms, refraining from taking action is not enough. On the contrary, the conditions need to be created whereby these freedoms can flourish: avoiding the formation of monopolies, educating the masses, allowing the free circulation of information, and so on. This is why the governmental approach is built on a mindset based on a paradox: “as it is a consumer of freedom, liberalism must produce freedom and, at the same time, handle it through means of control: this approach constantly wavers between the production, limitation and destruction of freedom” (Sorrentino, 2008, p. 111).

The interpretative strategy we will adopt below, rather than highlighting the paradoxes and conflicts generated by the push-and-pull between the negative and positive sides of liberalism, will attempt to demonstrate that the clash between the two components is actually harmonized within the particular inflection given to the liberalist point of view that goes by the name of neo-liberalism. This inflection, which can be traced back to the second half of the nineteen-seventies, in Foucault’s analysis is preceded by two other ways of practicing the art of government: we are talking about classical liberalism and welfare liberalism (Rose, O’Malley & Valverde 2006, p. 92; Seddon, 2010, pp. 11-12).

One could argue that classical liberalism is dominated by the aforementioned negative component. The main object of criticism in this regime is the excessive control exercised by the political system on society. Here, we are at the dawn of the industrial revolution and the root metaphor behind this vision is the free market. Conceived essentially as a place for exchanges between autonomous, rational subjects, it constitutes the point beyond which political power cannot go. From a symbolic point of view, Le Gendre’s *laissez nous faire* is the attitude that best captures the spirit of this particular season. In this formula, not only does the wholly negative side of freedom come to the fore, but we can also infer the set-up characterizing relations between government and market: the market is something separate from the government, it exists independently of it and works according to laws of its own that the government must be careful not to obstruct.

The welfare liberalism structure, however, is rather different. It originates with condemnation of the effects produced by market dynamics. Unregulated industrialization leads to devastating repercussions such as extreme poverty, inequality and delinquency. If left to itself, society is destined to face serious forms of degeneration, therefore governments have

to take direct action, measures that can ensure some minimum standards of security for citizens. For this reason, the welfare state season is dominated by the positive component and its key symbol is the Marshall conception of citizenship, *i.e.* the idea that social rights such as the right to healthcare, education and welfare represent the profoundest expression of political affiliation (Zolo, 1994). However, despite the differences that separate classical and welfare liberalism, they still share the same ontological conception of market and government. Indeed, even in a welfare state the market is something distinct and separate from the government and again operates outside of governmental activities.

Against this background, things change radically when we examine the third and last season: neo-liberalism. This phase emerges as a firmly critical stand taken against the consequences of welfare policies. The argument goes that the presence of the state will only lead to rigidity and fiscal crises, that welfare generates a “nanny culture” which makes individuals passive and incapable of looking after themselves and their families. The measure chosen to get around this problem aims to get individuals themselves to autonomously guarantee the same levels of security that were previously provided at government level. The strategy consists of extending the market logic to a number of environments, for example healthcare and education, which were previously considered outside its domain. Privatization and competition thus become the coordinates upon which the whole set of neo-liberal symbols is plotted (Brown, 2006, p. 694). First of all, a regime of competition, unlike a welfare regime, is something that spurs individuals to action, puts their capabilities to the test and forces them to be creative. Secondly, it is thanks to the regime of competition that efficiency and productivity are improved, prices can be lowered and bureaucracy can be seriously cut down to size. The point, however, is that, unlike the practice of commerce (which classical liberalists hold as something natural and spontaneously produced by human activity), competition is here presented as an artificial situation requiring continual intervention to maintain it (Foucault, 2006, pp. 110-112). The fact is that markets, if left wholly to themselves, tend to allow the formation of monopolistic regimes that cannot but alter (if not wipe out completely) normal competition dynamics. Therefore government action is incessantly asked for in order to ‘keep markets alive’ by creating the most perfect



conditions for competition possible<sup>5</sup>. These reflections suggest that, with neo-liberalism, the line that during the previous liberal seasons clearly separated government policy from market dynamics is becoming fainter and fainter. Now we have a situation where on the one hand the market exists only thanks to governments' actions, and on the other the market is the only arena where governments stake their actions. As Foucault puts it, once the neo-liberal perspective has been adopted "we will have to govern for the market instead of governing because of the market" (Foucault, 2006, p. 112). The inconsistency that seems to make neo-liberal governmentality unique, therefore, is only so in appearance and is resolved as soon as one considers the fact that production and consumption of freedoms are practices aimed at constructing the market's reality, a reality which in turn becomes "the general index in which the rule destined to define all government action will have to be placed" (Foucault, 2006, p.112).

The reason why it is deemed possible to govern through what Foucault (Foucault, 2006, p. 195) defines as a systematic practice of inverting "social relationships with economic ones" can be fully understood as soon as we consider the idea of neo-liberal subjectivity. What kind of subject is produced by this approach? What symbolic coordinates has he been provided with in order to sketch his representations? Based on what mindsets does he construct his plans for action? Given that the neo-liberal world is a world of markets, the subject that belongs to it needs to feel comfortable in a competitive environment. For this reason, the neo-liberal individual is without doubt a *homo oeconomicus*, but differently from the way the classical liberal individual had of being the same thing. According to Foucault (2006, pp. 186-187), classical liberalism founded its particular subject on the concepts of need and usefulness. The traditional *homo oeconomicus* was essentially the son of commerce, in other words one who sought fulfillment of his needs through processes of exchange. The neo-liberal subject, on the other hand, is a *homo oeconomicus* from a more entrepreneurial point of view. The whole educational set-up of neo-liberal devices encourages individuals to think of themselves as instruments that

---

<sup>5</sup> As Foucault himself notes (2006, p. 112), a movement towards perfect competition is an absolutely asymptotic one, and it is precisely this characteristic that configures neo-liberal governmentality as a form of continuous action on society: "pure competition must and can only be an objective, an objective thus presupposing an indefinitely active policy".

can be used, improved and invested in. The neo-liberal subject, therefore, is a *homo oeconomicus* in that he becomes the boss of his own company<sup>6</sup>.

It is evident that in neo-liberal discourse the centre of gravity lies in the area of production. The neo-liberal subject is doubtless one who keeps busy, who makes things, who operates incessantly. This aspect is so overwhelming that, according to neo-liberal economists, even when subjects are consuming they are really involved in a process of production, as they produce their own satisfaction and invest a part of their capital in producing this satisfaction. The central node of this anthropological perspective is that it can be applied to all areas of human activity. The subject acts constantly as an entrepreneur, with the result that all spheres of his activities can be analyzed in economic terms. Proof of this is the fact that neo-liberal economics are fast becoming an interpretive framework that can potentially be applied to the totality of human behaviour. All we have to do is skim over the contents page of G. Becker's (1976) renowned work *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* to realize what endless variety there is in the issues that can and must form part of the spectrum of economic analysis: racial discrimination, marriage, law and politics, household management, crime and misbehaviour; all the way to drug addiction (Becker & Murphy, 1988).

At the end of the day, economics becomes an interpretive framework that is applicable to any deliberate action, or in other words to any action that responds systematically to modifications in environmental variables (Foucault, 2006, p. 219). What counts in this reading is its ability to shed light on the reasoning, the calculation that has led the subject to invest his scant resources in one area rather than another. In this fashion, economic analysis "is no longer, therefore, an analysis of processes but has become an analysis of internal reasoning, of the strategic programming of individuals' actions" (Foucault, 2006, p. 184).

From points-based driving licences to children's vaccinations, from health insurance to the prevention of cancer, scholars such as P. O'Malley (2008b) and N. Rose (1996) have demonstrated quite clearly that neo-liberal democracies, by systematically privatizing risks that were previously dealt with in the public sphere (Rockhill, 2001, p. 365), aim to

---

<sup>6</sup> Think, for example, of the pedagogical role which lack of job security occupies in many forms of neo-liberal rhetoric: it "encourages workers to see themselves not as "workers" in a political sense, [...] but as "companies of one" (Read, 2009, p. 30).

teach citizens to maintain a calculating attitude towards their own destinies, which, in turn, are represented as a series of foreseeable risks that need to be acted upon in the present. What seems most interesting in this form of pedagogical sensibility, however, is not so much the constant spur to 'presentify' the future as the way in which it configures the subject's interior life. The subject is always driven to observe himself, to monitor and measure himself, to reflect on his past actions and on those he will perform in future. What appears to be in play here, far from being the old mind-body duality, is rather a kind of serious complexification of the cognitive components designed for managing actions. The subject is no longer represented as the thing that orders its body to act, but as a complex of elements standing in relation to each other – some appointed to action, others appointed to working out mid-/long-term strategies and yet others appointed to assess the validity of those strategies.

We can find a particularly successful operationalization of this vision of subjectivity in the concept of self-efficacy. This concept is the brainchild of the Canadian psychologist A. Bandura<sup>7</sup>, invented – unsurprisingly – in the second half of the 1970s. The theory of self-efficacy is based on a deeply neo-liberal vision of subjectivity; it refers essentially to how effectively individuals believe they will be able to control their own behaviour. The concept of self-efficacy should not be confused with the concept of perseverance, which on the contrary refers to how precisely individuals construct predictions concerning their future perseverance (Ogden, 1995, p. 411). In a certain sense, self-efficacy regards people's ability to understand how far they can trust themselves. How much will I be able to refrain from smoking in the coming months? For how long will I keep up my resolution to go to the gym three times a week? These questions belong to the sphere of self-efficacy and, as can be seen, presuppose a certain amount of complexification of the cognitive area that governs individuals' actions<sup>8</sup>. They are continually spurred to examine and assess themselves, set themselves goals, try to understand what their weak points are and how to

---

<sup>7</sup> See Bandura (1977).

<sup>8</sup> The studies carried out in what J. Elster (2001; 2006; 2009) has defined as weak-willedness or *akrasia* – in other words the phenomenon of failing to fulfill the commitments individuals make to themselves – are indicative of this way of perceiving the subject.

improve them, and draw up tables to help them measure their rate of improvement<sup>9</sup>.

Therefore, given these coordinates for the form of subjectivization imposed by the neo-liberal culture, we propose to examine how it has worked and is still working in the sphere of psychoactive-substance consumption. What are the calculations behind the decision to take drugs? What returns are expected on this ‘investment’? What strategies are followed to overcome the risks inherent in taking these substances? How do subjects manage to monitor their selves within this sphere of action? As stated above, we will attempt to provide answers to these questions based on empirical evidence, by examining the interview material gathered during our research dedicated to young drug users. However, before moving on to a reading and analysis of the material, we should first take a look at the meaning and significance that drugs are developing in modern societies.

### **Useful pleasures: drugs and modern society**

One of the most trite clichés surrounding drugs sees the use of mind-altering substances as a phenomenon that has accompanied humanity throughout its history, one that can be found in every society, every culture and every historical period<sup>10</sup>. As with every cliché, there is doubtless a foundation of truth also in this one: it is in fact true that the use of mind-altering substances is fairly much universal, that it is and has been practiced almost everywhere and in every historical age. Nevertheless, when referring to this evidence, authors often fail to add that, over the course of the centuries, the modes of taking drugs have changed radically and, at the same time, also the objectives and meanings behind these forms of behaviour.

If we follow P. Nencini (2002), steamrolling over the complexities of the issue as we do so, it is possible to trace a distinction between the mind-

---

<sup>9</sup> In this relationship with their own selves, neo-liberal subjects are not left alone. In fact, a whole complex network of knowledge has flourished which supports the subject in his constant search for himself. M. Nicoli (2012, p. 93 onwards), for example, sees one of the most fitting examples of this subjectivization device in the multifarious sphere of action that is Human Resource Management.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Leonzio (1969, p. 12); Inglis (1975, p. 4); Weil (1972, p. 5); Lenson (1995, p. 7)

altering substance consumption of ancient societies and that found in modern-day societies. In the former – again according to P. Nencini (2002) – the consumption of these substances was inserted into a rigid calendar of collective rituals. In other words, drugs were allowed to be used only during special celebrations and exclusively for serious supernatural purposes. Furthermore, in many cultures drugs were not even taken by everyone taking part in the ritual, but only by those qualified to do so, such as shamans or other similar figures occupying priest-like roles. The same thing could be said about the other traditional purpose of these substances: the search for healing. As in the previous case, here it was most often not the sick person to take the drug but their healer who, trained to handle the substance, had the task of altering his consciousness in order to fully exercise his healing powers<sup>11</sup>.

In modern-day societies everything has changed and the meaning that mind-altering substances have developed for those who take them is radically different. Although we cannot say that spiritual and therapeutic ends have been completely done away with (Blackman, 2004, p. 123), it is beyond doubt that the dominant reasons for taking drugs are different. Despite forms of liberal governmentality having long categorized the consumption of drugs in terms of addiction (Valverde & O'Malley, 2004, pp. 26-28), we only need to put ourselves in consumers' shoes for a few moments to discover that behind their choice to consume certain substances lie basically hedonistic aims. To use A. Cohen's words, "people today take drugs for two main reasons: to feel good and to have fun" (Cohen, 1971, p. 145).

The hedonistic turn that contemporary societies have given to drugs has led to the almost simultaneous emergence of the phenomenon of addiction. Almost unheard-of in the societies of the past<sup>12</sup>, the concept of 'addiction' seems to stand as the archetype of the social difficulties of our times. For some (Nencini, 2002), the most immediate explanation concerns the systematic removal of all the protective elements that the shift from religious and healing purposes to pure enjoyment has inevitably produced. If the principal aim of drug use is purely hedonistic, it therefore becomes

---

<sup>11</sup> On this matter, see (as examples, certainly not an exhaustive list): La Luna (1985); Csordas & Lewton (1998); Kirmayer (2004).

<sup>12</sup> On this point, it is worth remembering what the historian R. Porter asserted in the mid-nineties: "If you'd talked about "drug problems" two hundred years ago no one would have known what you meant" (Porter, 1996, p. 3).

possible to make the practice an almost daily habit. It goes without saying that an increase in the frequency with which an individual takes drugs is one of the main – if not *the* main – factor in determining the onset of real addiction. Beyond the intrinsic ambiguities of said condition<sup>13</sup>, the means of representing psychoactive substances that are developing are rather clear. Drugs are a rather risky pleasure, one that, over time, can undermine the very essence of liberal subjectivity. In other terms, they are a pleasure that ends up turning the individuals who over-indulge in them into subjects deprived of their will, people who are unable to work, make decisions or invest in themselves.

As T. Seddon (2010, pp. 36-99) has noted, each of the three seasons of liberal governmentality described above has expressed its vision of pleasure in relation to drug use. If we go a little further, we could argue that it is precisely by observing the way the pleasures and risks associated with drugs are categorized that we can perceive the changes between each of the forms of liberalism. In the classical and welfare views of liberalism, drug use is constantly connected with degenerate lifestyles, almost always involved the working classes. Excessive alcohol and/or opiate consumption distracts the proletariat from their roles as workers, weakens their money-saving capacities and negatively affects their reliability. This is why drug use constitutes a question of government and, for the same reason, the pleasure deriving from it is a matter to be carefully censored. However, the music changes with the arrival of neo-liberalism on the scene. Now we no longer have before us a simple worker, but a one-man company trained in making forecasts, changes, investments and assessments of his own performance. He is well able to evaluate risks and constantly calculate in terms of costs and benefits. He cannot fail to have a pragmatic, rational attitude towards illegal substances: What good are they? How should they be used? What benefits will they bring me? What risks do they involve? Approaching drugs can be read as a kind of rational action that springs from the desires and beliefs of the individual and seems an excellent choice

---

<sup>13</sup> We need to point out that, while publicly made speeches all give the concept of addiction and all the conditions deriving from it (cravings, cold turkey, relapse, etc.) unchallengeable scientific authority, at the same time the ambiguity and the weaknesses these categories are founded on have for some time been known. For an exhaustive round-up of the fallacies that characterize the idea of addiction, we recommend B. Foddy & J. Savulescu (2010); for a detailed reconstruction of the telling historical and historic-political moments that have led to the creation of the science of addiction, please see N. D. Campbell (2010).

in the light of these desires and beliefs (Elster, 1993, pp. 33-55; 2001, pp. 154-161). The crux of the matter obviously lies in attempting to see what these beliefs consist of, and above all what these desires are made of.

To ascertain this point, the empirical material will doubtless come to our aid. Nonetheless, before moving on to our analysis of the material, we need to clarify some issues concerning the way that neo-liberal subjectivity presents the issue of relationships with drugs. First of all, when we underline the rational calculations behind decisions regarding drugs, we do not mean to refer to theories from the world of economics that aim to interpret situations of addiction in terms of a rational form of behaviour<sup>14</sup>. Despite the rather controversial effect these approaches have had<sup>15</sup>, they all – as can be clearly seen – focus on the issue of addiction.

By this we mean that they make an attempt to explain the state of addiction in terms of a choice, and even as a rational one. This vision offers an overly schematic and unilateral reading of the paths that lead to addiction. In reality, we know full well that there are countless variables that can play a role in creating a state of true addiction. Moreover, they involve a rather non-strategic vision of rationality. In real life, no consumer

---

<sup>14</sup> In its incessant drive to analyze everything regarding human behaviour, neo-liberal economic theory has tried to interpret the pathological state of addiction as the outcome of a consumption plan drawn up spontaneously by the subject based on adequate information regarding the effects that the substance will have both concerning their health and their future level of use. In this framework, addiction, far from being a normal condition, is rightly defined as a uniquely structured form of intertemporal consumption. The goods that, when consumed in the present, determine an increase in consumption in the future are defined as addiction-producing. For example, the subject knows perfectly well that by satisfying his need to smoke an extra cigarette today will increase the number of cigarettes he craves in future and that, at the same time, this behaviour will reduce his life expectancy. Nevertheless, the decision to smoke that cigarette is justified as the satisfaction from giving in to the craving far outweighs the negative consequences of the action, even when we consider the increased future costs that an increased daily ration of cigarettes will involve (Chaloupka & Warner, 2000, p. 1542). We recommend reading Becker & Mulligan (1988); Becker & Murphy (1997) on this topic. For a reworking of the mainstream version of this theory, see Orphanides & Zervos (1992). Discussions of the ‘rational addiction approach’ made from a sociological point of view and with varying levels of criticism and appreciation of it can be found in Elster & Skog (1999).

<sup>15</sup> According to some (Rogeberg 2004; Malberg 2008), these theories, far from demonstrating the ability of neo-liberal economic thought to explain the world, really testify to the authority that contemporary societies grant to it and its style of analysis. In particular, Rogeberg (2004, p. 272 onwards) proposes an amusing inventory of the various logical short-circuits that the different versions of the rational addiction approach lead to.

embarks on a relationship with drugs with the goal of becoming addicted, nor do they believe that in future their consumption levels will continue to rise. What really happens is that the consumer starts with the idea that he will be able to calibrate his use each time in order to get the greatest amount of pleasure from the drugs while keeping the risks as low as possible. It is wholly symptomatic that it was precisely at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties that the figure of the so-called recreational user made its appearance in the specialist literature on drugs<sup>16</sup>. This figure represents drug use that takes place above all at the weekend (or at other moments of an individual's free time) and is practiced for pure enjoyment purposes; a vital element of this type of consumption is that it does not lead to negative consequences in the management of the role set the individual is inserted in. The recreational consumer is one who, despite making use of mind-altering substances, manages to keep up with his work, social and relational commitments without altering his performances from either a quantitative or qualitative point of view.

This rough sketch of the figure of the recreational user allows us to shed light on a second aspect that again holds great importance concerning neo-liberal subjectivity. We mentioned above that neo-liberal subjectivity is characterized above all in terms of production and business; therefore we need to be particularly careful when dealing with the subject of pleasure. Indeed, as we know, a businessman identity is not exactly a hedonistic identity; on the contrary, it is built on the foundation of an ability to postpone gratification in view of greater and more general goals. If that is how things stand, then why should a neo-liberal self turn to drugs? What kind of pleasure is he seeking? How can we harmonize the business philosophy with his search for pleasure?

D. Lenson (1995, pp. 69-74) has investigated the relationship between drugs and pleasure demonstrating clearly the gap between the pleasure brought about by drugs and that brought about by other forms of consumption. A point he stresses in particular is linked to what we could define as the transitivity of the pleasure arising from these substances. An ice cream is enjoyable in itself. Its taste is what leads to the pleasure and the pleasure will run out just as soon as the last spoonful has been eaten. With drugs it is a whole different story. The pleasure is not tied so much to

---

<sup>16</sup> For a summary of the literature on recreational consumption, please see Nicholson, Duncan and White (2002).



the act of consumption but to the way their effects transform the subject's way of being alive. Therefore the pleasure lies in the new way of experiencing reality made possible by the drugs. For example, dancing is enjoyable even without drugs, but after taking Ecstasy it is much more so. Drugs' ability to induce pleasure "lies in their power to transfer the pleasure-giving or pleasure-enhancing capability to other objects, or to enhance whatever capacity for giving pleasure was already present in those objects (Lenson, 1995, p. 71).

C. Duff (2007a; 2007b) has tried to adopt these theoretical reflections and insert them into an empirical research project. The main interest in this attempt lies in the idea of empirically studying drug consumption from the point of view of the transitivity of the pleasure they give. According to Duff (2007b, pp. 506-507), N. E. Zinberg's famous discovery concerning the vital role of sets and settings on the effects produced by drugs has always been interpreted in strictly physical terms<sup>17</sup>. The suspicion, however, is that the pleasure derives more than anything from the performance potential implicit in the different substances (Duff, 2007a, p. 386), *i.e.* the hypothesis is that drugs activate a different way of presenting oneself, of perceiving and experiencing spaces and of relating to others. In the stories recounted to Duff, no one ever eulogizes about the pleasure of the drug in itself but about the pleasure obtained when doing things under its effects. Nonetheless, in Duff a markedly communalist interpretation seems to prevail. By this we mean that in his descriptions it seems that pleasure should be considered in connection with a series of practices and settings all linked by the value of communal experiences and strengthening the affective relationships between friends. When Duff talks about performance enhancement it seems that, in one way or another, he is referring to the enhancement drugs provide regarding the subject's capacity to perceive and communicate his sense of belonging to his group of friends. It is no accident that among the authors and texts most frequently quoted by Duff we find *Times of the Tribes* (Maffesoli, 1996).

The cues given by the empirical material to be discussed shortly lead us towards a vision that is rather different from Duff's. That is not to say that

---

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to an empirical study carried out on a number of heroin users in New York City, the American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst N.E. Zinberg managed to highlight the direct influence that the context for taking the drugs (the setting) and the attitudes and expectations the consumers demonstrated regarding the substance (the set) have on the psychoactive effects of the substances themselves (Zinberg, 1986).

there are no so-called communalist elements in the interviews we performed, but in these sessions such elements emerged in a new light, as if the reference to the importance and vitality of friendships had a ritualistic value more than anything. In our material, it is as if issues relating to friendship and belonging were a sort of ‘professed policy’ while the basic coordinates of the actual ‘working policy’ were quite different. The opinion we have been able to form thus far is that, behind the stories recounted to us, one can infer that drugs have value as devices that help improve users’ capacities to be individuals, and, at the same time, that the peer group and the relational context act as a stage where each individual can put his or her self on show. It was S. E. Cahill (1998, p. 132) in his penetrating analysis of the work of E. Durkheim and E. Goffman who stated that “the person is a social fact and a topic for sociological study”. By saying this he meant to simultaneously underline the socially constructed nature of individuality and the coercive pressure that this can exert on the person. This means, then, that being individuals, far from being a natural condition, is on the contrary a praxis that needs to be acquired and worked on, one that society connects a whole variety of positive and negative sanctions to depending on the extent of the success (or failure) achieved in maintaining the practice. The hypothesis, therefore, is that drug use is not, as so many believe, a means for breaking the rules that govern the production of individuality (Maffesoli’s tribes, the orgiastic ethic stressed again and again by the analysts of rave parties) but a strategy for adhering to them all the better. In less cryptic terms, what emerges from the interviews we carried out is a way of taking drugs whose main purpose is to present the self in a better light. With this as our foundation, we can realize that even mind-altering substance use, in line with the theories of neo-liberal governmentality on a broader level, can and does become an investment in oneself. This is not so much because the subjects who take drugs invest in that purchase in order to give themselves pleasure, but because the investment in the substances is characterized as a way to construct and represent a better self, a more effective self, *i.e.* one who is more skilled at handling the whole symbolic structure necessary for the construction of that same self.

### **“As long as you stay on top of it”: drug socialization processes**

When observing the modes of drug consumption, going to the locations where this takes place and talking to the people who indulge in the practice, one has the impression that drugs are elements that are deliberately removed<sup>18</sup>. Everyone is aware of the fact that in these contexts it is much more likely to encounter people who have taken some form of drug than people who are completely sober. As the interviewees have stressed again and again, it is the contexts themselves, the way they are structured and their timetables that almost force one to alter one’s consciousness.

Well, given the time of night, how long it goes on, the kind of rave, it’s obvious that people in those places take drugs. Like, how else do you ... I mean it’s obvious you need something to keep you going and help you have fun. Otherwise you totally flake (Marco, 24 years old, Bologna).

Despite all the evidence, our period of observation allowed us to ascertain that drug use rarely becomes a subject of conversation during the course of the evening. The same could be said about the effects and sensations associated with taking them. In the three field trips we have managed to make so far, drugs have always made their appearance in an extremely restrained, unassuming way. On a couple of occasions, for example, just before going into the nightspot chosen by the young people, one member of the group started passing a bottle of mineral water around their friends. Everyone took some small sips, passing the bottle from person to person without comment and without asking anything about the contents. In reply to the researcher’s query, two of the group said that it was a bit of MDMA dissolved in water<sup>19</sup>. They added that the drug had been obtained that afternoon from a friend of the group and would keep them going all that night. On the third occasion, the substances were obtained at the nightspot itself. One member of the group moved away

---

<sup>18</sup> On the concept of deliberate removal, we recommend the analysis that P. Bourdieu (1995, pp. 181-191) proposes regarding the relationship that the Church entertains with money.

<sup>19</sup> MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine), more commonly known as Ecstasy, is a methylamphetamine with notable stimulatory and empathogenic effects, although it is not a real psychedelic drug. We should point out that in the jargon used by consumers, the label MDMA generally refers to the drug sold in powder form, with few adulterants, and usually dissolved in water or some other beverage. The name Ecstasy, on the other hand, refers only to MDMA in tablet form.

shortly after entering the club, whispering to two friends that he was “going shopping”. He came back after around twenty minutes, dissolved some MDMA (in a glass of beer this time) and, after taking a couple of draughts, left the others to finish the drink. No one asked him anything about the details of his purchase (where he managed to buy it, from whom, how much it cost, how pure it was, etc.); they simply sipped the beer and continued to dance or chat as they had been doing until then. During the same night out, we observed three members of the group as they left the nightclub four or five times for around fifteen minutes each time. Once they returned, these individuals started dancing again with the rest of their friends without anyone asking any questions about where they had been or what they had got up to outside. When questioned by the researcher, they volunteered the information that they had bought a gram of cocaine, which they preferred to take outside and in their own time, rather than taking it hurriedly in the public bathrooms in the nightclub where they could be seen by security.

The same discretion could also be seen regarding the effects of the drugs. Little over half an hour after taking the substances, the signs could be quite clearly seen in the faces of the young people and in their behaviour. Their pupils were visibly dilated, some of them could not help but move their jaw continuously as if they were chewing something tough, their movements were freer and easier, they seemed much more ‘into’ the music on the dance floor and even their style of communication seemed more intense and much enriched as far as non-verbal cues were concerned. Despite the decidedly euphoric atmosphere, on none of the three occasions was it possible to record any comment regarding the quality of the drugs or the feelings and sensations they engendered. Everything went on as if the state that appeared so intense and euphoric to the researcher’s eyes had been reached entirely naturally – that is to say, as if there were no drugs behind it.

These reflections, developed on the field, were later put to the interviewees as starting points for reflection and discussion. One has to admit that it was off-putting to realize that the reaction obtained in both the group interview and in the course of the individual interviews was the same as the reaction P. Bourdieu talks about in relation to his conversations with bishops about the Church and money: in other words, laughter. In response to the question about why they talked so little about the drugs during their

nights out, the young people always burst out laughing. Here are some examples:

*How come when you take drugs, the last thing you talk about is the drugs themselves?*

(laughter) I'd never thought about it ... (laughter) I suppose you're right. But it's normal, you know, you start going on about how this one's better than the last time ... more or less intense (laughter), I hate guys who go on like that. I mean, if you like it, just shut up, dance and enjoy it. What need is there to say 'I'm out of it, I'm totally out of it' ... the ones who go on like that are usually newbies, dickheads... (Flavio, 28 years old, Bologna).

*I noticed that being out of it isn't a topic you talk about very readily when you're out clubbing ...*

What do you mean?

Well, I've seen you take MD and get pretty out of it, but the thing that strikes me is that no one ever talks to the others about how they feel, about the quality of the drug and so on.

Well ... (laughter) what can we say? In the end we know what it's like or not like. It's always the same business<sup>20</sup>, there's no need to say it to each other every time. You know, it's a bit sad to go around saying (laughter) "Oh I'm so high", "Oh I'm totally out of it now"... (Michele, 27 years old, Verona).

Therefore we could say that there is an expert, even professional way to take drugs that for some reason avoids openly displaying the sensations they produce or how high the user feels. From what we have observed and heard, it would appear that, contrary to our intuition, effective self-management actually has a certain value in this context. Indeed, how should we interpret the care that the interviewees take not to let others see what effects they perceive due to the drugs they take if not in terms of a systematic 'interruption of the paths of perception and penetration' (Goffman, 1988, p. 84) the others could use to reach them? Even here we find, at least in this writer's opinion, one of the most fundamental characteristics of neo-liberal subjectivity, *i.e.* an individual's capacity for self-control and self-monitoring. This facet has already been stressed in various different studies on drug use; they all concur in highlighting the controlled nature of the pleasure that modern-day users appear to look for

---

<sup>20</sup> An approximate translation of the term "*tega*", a typical slang expression used in Verona.

in their encounters with mind-altering substances. Among the various studies available on this topic<sup>21</sup>, we should at least mention Saldanha's (2001) on the international raver community found in the state of Goa in India. Saldanha (2001) writes that, beyond all the rhetoric about open-mindedness and feelings of cosmic oneness that members of this sub-culture often pepper their speech with, the greatest prestige among ravers is accorded to those who, despite taking Ecstasy, still manage to keep up a reliable level of interaction without giving any bodily or behavioural signs that their consciousness has been excessively altered.

In order to guarantee appropriate behaviour, drug users cannot count exclusively on their individual capacities for self-control. There is a whole series of what we will call instruments used to avoid showing excessive signs of an altered consciousness. Eye drops, sweets, chewing gum, sunglasses and baseball caps with the peaks deliberately lowered are some of the elements that make up the identikit of the recreational drug-taker.

Well, in the morning when you leave the club ... you know, your face looks pretty bad. I don't like being seen looking like that. It's not just in case you get stopped by the police ... it's in general. I mean ... I don't like, you know, going into a café for breakfast and having people think 'just look at those druggies'.

*So?*

So maybe I use some eye drops, especially if I've been smoking – I've got blue eyes and they just get all red right away if I smoke. But with drops no one can see anything. Or maybe I put on sunglasses if the weather's good ... things like that (Mario, 23 years old, Verona).

*I've noticed that baseball caps are all the rage in the world of drum 'n' bass. Have they got a special meaning?*

They're all the rage in the world of druggies (laughter) ... 'cause when you've got two pupils like headlights 'cause of the MDMA or speed you've taken, if you go round with a baseball cap with the peak pulled down over your face it's not as obvious. Girls do that a lot, like you've seen (Niccolò, 31 years old, Bologna).

A further element worthy of note concerns the control these young people exercise over their bodies and their behaviour, both when dancing

---

<sup>21</sup> See for example Mugford (1991); Green and Moore (2009); Hutton (2010); Järvinen and Fynbo (2011).

and when chatting. It is well known that stimulants, MDMA in particular, among their various effects have the ability to heighten sensations in the body, especially those associated with music and rhythm, and make the self feel naked and exposed. Users often reveal that under the effects of MDMA they can perceive the music and dance incredibly intensely; they also state that they manage to say things to their friends and partners that they probably would never have said without the effects of the drug. All this endangers their ability to keep up dignified forms of behavior, which has to be ensured through continuous and expert self-observation.

I don't like playing the clown. I mean, everything's fine by me, but, you know, really ... some people just let themselves go totally. What are they, children, that as soon as they take half a tab they strip off their shirts and dance on the tables, spare tyres in full view and sweating like animals?! Man, you can't look at someone like that. I don't want to go to those clubs anymore if I'm going to see that kind of thing (Giulio, 27 years old, Verona).

Once one of my friends was high on MD and he bumped into one of his exes ... Talk about a bloodbath! He told her that while they were together he cheated on her, that he slept with one of her friends. He just blurted out a whole load of home truths. She burst out crying and in the end he was the one who came over as a total bastard. But you see, it was her who left him to go off with some other guy. Then of course there was a whole big thing with her friend. Total disaster all round. I was with them that evening and I saw he was talking and talking away. I wanted to say something to him, but by then anyone could see it was too late. You could see he had totally lost the plot. What an idiot (Tommaso, 27 years old, Bologna).

What shines through, then, is a sort of etiquette that, as we have seen, comprises postures, modes of behaviour, rules for conversation and dress codes. Anyone who fails to respect these habits, or who trips up when trying to comply with them, risks losing their status, prestige and reputation within their circle of friends.

Moving on to an examination of the motivations behind drug use, the attitude that emerges from the empirical material is of a markedly proactive kind. It is a strongly instrumental attitude that sees drugs as a kind of flavouring, a selection of different sauces to be added to different situations. Here as in the previous paragraph we must point out the ability

that such pairings seem to require and the effort of planning there is behind them.

**S1** Like, if it's just us, two or three of us I mean, we like music, so if there's a DJ set I want to listen to properly I don't go taking MD but maybe I go for amphetamines instead. Just to have energy, dance properly and enjoy the music properly. I don't even want to be too ... not even able to ... or I suppose I mean when you just start talking to the first person you see and you're out of it all night blathering on about God only knows what! You stay in the zone, cap and hood pulled up and go ... you just do what you want to do and at least you're with it, you're all there [...] Then, of course, I don't know ... you go to Venice to see the Carnival and there, OK, you take a quarter, maybe half a wrap. Just to really make the day ours! That's how we are, yeah ... but in the end, if we don't do these things now... Even just going around looking at the costumes, if you drink and drink you end up being sick and get a headache. But if you do it like that, a bit at a time, you have more fun, you keep a grip on the whole day. But you have to plan, of course. You already know how ...

**S2** I saw a film once where they said that drugs are keys that open doors. You can't take a drug without knowing what it does, and what you have to do with it, because otherwise it'd be like having a key in your hand but not knowing what door it opens. (Verona, int. group no. 2)

**S4** You mustn't ever lose touch with reality. That's important. Because you take the stuff to get away from reality, but not totally. Because it's you that transforms reality, you make your own cinema, do it one way or another ... but you can't ever forget it's you who transforms it. I mean, what I've learned is that drugs are for being used and you have to know how, when and what situations are right for one use or another (Verona int. group no. 1).

In this writer's opinion, this last extract constitutes an element that is rather indicative of the subjectivity we are attempting to describe. To try to leave reality without losing contact with it, that is the game. It should be noted how, for a practice of this kind, it becomes necessary to differentiate one's inner life as described above. In order to 'let yourself go, but not totally', to rationally cloud your rational judgment, you always need to be able to count on a split in your self: on one side is the part that lets itself go,



while on the other there is the part charged with watching, controlling and setting limits.

From what we have seen thus far, it could seem that the transitivity of the pleasure connected with drugs is concretized above all in the environments the subject moves in. People take drugs to better enjoy the music, to dance better, to have more fun while admiring the carnival costumes in Venice. This is certainly true. Nevertheless, behind their drug use we can make out a second – perhaps a more crucial – motivational component. This component has to do with what we could define as the performance side of the self, understood both in terms of verbal communication and physical movement. For example, during the observation sessions we noted a tendency in the young people: once the first effects of the drugs began to make themselves felt, they sought out interaction with strangers rather than their own friends. In one case, indeed, we were able to note that the group totally broke up for practically the whole night and got together again just a few minutes before the club closed. This interaction with strangers seemed to have two fundamental causes: the first concerns sexual conquest<sup>22</sup>. Interestingly, among the groups studied, even sexual conquest turns out to be a kind of deliberate omission in conversation.

**S3** Well, sure, if a girl starts coming up to me while I'm dancing, starts looking at me and all, well of course I try to get to know her, I check her out too, but it's not like I spend my whole time bouncing all over the dance floor like some – I dunno, strutting cocks ... checking out girl after girl – will she have me, will she not? I mean, that's what you do when you're drunk. You go to \*\*\*\* [disco near Lake Garda] and you see guys with their shirt open and hair all sticking out, totally legless, pestering all the girls, touching them, pulling them around ... and they just want to dance ...

**S1** ... and then the fight breaks out! (laughter) (Verona, int. group no. 2).

---

<sup>22</sup> The groups followed on these field trips were composed almost exclusively of young men. On one occasion, one young woman was present; she was the girlfriend of one member of the group and friend of the others. There is evidently a long and complex discussion to embark on regarding gender and the way in which it is enacted and represented in the world of recreational drug users and, more in general, within the neo-liberal form of governmentality. The data available on this topic are as yet rather scarce, therefore we have decided to postpone this kind of analysis until another occasion.

Despite what we can read in the interview material, during the observation sessions in the nightclubs the search for sexual conquest always appeared rather intense. But what *is* in line with the young men's statements is that there was a certain sobriety in their approaches to potential partners. From what we have seen on the field, the first approach is always made on the 'sound'<sup>23</sup> and, as the interviewees aver, the contact is almost always mediated by the dancing and other forms of non-verbal communication. It is precisely in this moment that the investment in drugs appears particularly profitable:

If you've smoked a thousand joints and drunk a load of beer, obviously you can't hope for anything. I mean, you're finished, dead, a zombie lurching around the club. No one's going to look at you. And I mean, you don't even fancy it any more yourself. On the other hand, if you're on a high ... a bit of MD, a bit of Speed<sup>24</sup>, you're a different person. There's no comparison. You're more into the music, you want to dance, have some fun, and if you're interested in meeting a girl you realize straight away ... I mean, you see if she's checking you out or not ...

*Do you mean to say you're more aware?*

Yeah, that's it! When you're dancing, if some signals come your way you pick them up right away and you know how to pick them up, too. If you're in the mood, of course ... But if you're single, you're there with your male friends, I mean, you know ... music's all very well and good but if you meet a girl, all the better, right? (Raimondo, 33 years old, Bologna).

Consistently with what we have already seen, any reference to drugs and one's state of mind due to them is strictly taboo in the encounter with a potential partner. Also – perhaps even above all – in this case, everything has to happen as if the ease and immediacy of non-verbal communication were the fruit of one's natural self, one's own personality, one's normal spontaneity and immediacy and not, as is really the case, the result of careful management of the psychostimulant effects of the drugs.

The second reason for interacting with strangers lies in the desire to widen social circles. In the economics of the world we are trying to describe, it would seem that the prestige of the individual is constructed in

---

<sup>23</sup> Term indicating the dance floor in the more underground clubs or at raves.

<sup>24</sup> The street name used for amphetamines.

part on the basis of the number of his acquaintances, on the degree of ‘in-ness’ he can display in certain environments.

In the end, you know, you go to the same places, in Bologna pretty much everyone knows everyone else by sight. If you’re even slightly in, you know that one guy’s going to go out with one group and another guy with another. Then if you go to raves, you like a certain kind of fun, the faces you see at \*\*\*\* and \*\*\*\* [*well-known underground dance music clubs*] are always the same. When I go out I like chatting to different people. You know, it’s a way to get to know people. I mean ... if you go to a party and you’re the only one who doesn’t say hello to anyone it’s not ... everyone else goes off to talk to someone or other and you just stand there? (Lorenzo, 26 years old, Bologna).

Again in this case, the particular drug taken is important:

If you go to a party stoned, it’s likely you’re going to start chatting, getting to know people. The other night I was queuing for the bathroom – I’d just smoked a massive joint – I saw a guy I knew by sight, one I’d seen around, but I didn’t know what to say ... Hi, how are you? Fine, fine, and you? Fine, fine ... How’re you doing? Fine, fine ... I mean, I must’ve seemed a total idiot (laughter). When you’re on a high, on the other hand, it’s totally different – actually, the danger there is that you go around all evening talking to people and you don’t even know who the hell they are (Alessandro, 26 years old, Bologna).

At the end of the day, we could almost say that, on the basis of the evidence we have seen so far, drugs provide the material energy that allows users to make the best possible show of themselves. That is to say, they constitute devices to help deal with the rules governing the production of individuality. The point we now need to face is: in this game of representations, are there any criteria for establishing the line between recreational and pathological use? Are there lines that must not be crossed? How are these lines made tangible? How are they decided on? Despite the fact that this is a rather complex issue and that the evidence currently available to us will allow us only to partially explore it, we believe there is a criterion which could be defined as external to the contexts for drug-taking, used to assess the general effect of individuals’ drug consumption habits on their lifestyle, as well as a criterion within the context for drug-

taking, used, on the contrary, to assess subjects' ability to manage their consumption levels. As far as the external level is concerned, it meets the requirements of the classic description in the relevant literature of the relationship between drug use and role performance. Drug-taking becomes problematic when it influences people's capacity to keep up the commitments made in the various environments that make up their social life. From this point of view, episodes such as repeated failure to pass exams, problems with work, financial difficulties, run-ins with the law, and abandonment of hobbies or other activities are all indicators that our subjects use to diagnose the problematic nature of their own consumption or their friends':

Well, I had this friend who was taking too much coke. Anyone could see it. He was always running around looking everywhere for more coke. He blew a whole heap of savings, he went out night after night, then he was wrecked when he went to work: maybe he would, like, stay out till five a.m. on a Wednesday morning. In the end he was so addicted that the only way for him to keep up his habit was to start dealing, and dealing big time. A year later they caught him in a taxi with three hundred grams. Prison, then social services, he was totally screwed (Luigi, 29 years old, Verona).

I tell myself that this life of going out at night, going clubbing, taking MD is OK now because I'm only 23, but I know that in a few years it'll stop. I know that already. I'll change, the people around me will change, I'll have other interests, other stuff to do. For now I enjoy myself this way and I'm careful not to let it get on top of me.

*What do you mean when you say you're careful not to let it get on top of you? How can you tell if you're not on top of it anymore?*

I think you have to make sure that drugs are just one part of your life – and a small one at that – not your whole life. It's like if I have a big exam in a fortnight's time, I'm hardly going to go out on the town all night because I know that if I do my head's not with it for two or three days afterwards. And besides, I don't want to give up my hobbies. If, like, someone asks me to go climbing early on Sunday morning, on Saturday night I make sure I behave myself, I force myself to be good because giving up a climb for the sake of a night out is stupid (Francesco, 28 years old, Bologna).

In some cases, it seems that individuals deliberately seek to broaden their role set in order to limit the frequency with which they turn to drugs. The following testimony is representative of this strategy:

I reckon a good way to stay on top of it is to find some interests, some hobbies outside of the world of drugs and raves ... for example, what I've done is I've started going mountain biking. I kind of started because of a friend – he's not part of the party crew and he loves biking. It was a way to see a bit more of him. It's good because otherwise I'm always surrounded by druggies ... (laughter). It's been a way, like, of finding new commitments and new interests. I mean, otherwise you just study or work and then the only other thing in your head besides study or work is parties, getting hold of MD or grass or whatever, and that's not good (Christian, 24 years old, Verona).

Moving on to the internal criterion, much has already been said regarding it. We could say that anyone who fails to succeed in the difficult task of bending the effects of the drugs they have taken to their will in order to present themselves in a better light is by definition a problematic user. On this note, the empirical material we collected is full of slang terms used to indicate individuals whose drug use is out of control: *gagge*<sup>25</sup>, monsters and zombies are some of the epithets dedicated to those who lose control and display excessive signs of their altered state of consciousness. More in general, the internal criterion is defined in relational terms. The problematic consumer is one who moves and acts awkwardly, who breaks all the unwritten rules we have discussed in this paper. This is why these individuals are described as not 'staying on top of it':

How much to tear it up, how often, like, two or three times a month ... it's something you know. Only you know that. Some people can just take, like, one tab one evening and end up zombified, unable to move. Another keeps swilling down the MD and he's totally fine. That's how subjective drugs are. As far as I'm concerned, as long as you're on top of it, you're fine.

*What do you mean by on top of it?*

I mean you can still hang out with people, interact with them, act normal, like! If you see other people are avoiding you, then something's not right (Cesare, 33 years old, Bologna).

In the end, the internal criterion identifies the problematic consumer as one who creates a problem for his own individual identity and the identities of those he entertains relationships with. At the heart of the matter is the fact

---

<sup>25</sup> A typically Bolognese expression meaning 'large chin', one that is disproportionate to the rest of the face. It is used to refer to stimulant users who fail to control their jaw movements.

that what is stigmatized in problematic consumers is not drug-taking in itself (understood as a practice that endangers the health), nor is it the supposed weakness of character of the person over-indulging. What is stigmatized is simply the subject's technical inability to exploit the effects of the drugs in a way that benefits his or her individuality. What is stigmatized is a paradoxical and (according to the dictates of neo-liberal subjectivity) unacceptable heterogeneity of purpose: taken in order to further enhance the sacredness of individuality, in the hands of inept consumers drugs turn into instruments for a veritable profanation of the self.

**Conclusions: for neo-liberal subjectivities, neo-liberal policies.**

Given all the above, we can now pose the question of which approach in terms of social policy is best suited to intercept this kind of subjectivity. As has been stressed already in many different places, prohibitionist measures never appear to have had great success – to the extent that today it appears that there is a deep rethinking of the base coordinates of the so-called war on drugs taking place on a global level. In any case, beyond the most strictly ideological and controlling standpoint, we would like to stress that repressive and prohibitionist attitudes are in open contrast to the way the neo-liberal mindset has of representing the world and the subjects that inhabit it. The various versions of prohibitionism all share a background view that depicts consumers of mind-altering substances as pathological cases. In this mental landscape, drugs constitute a threat to the free will of the subject, and whoever uses them is destined to see their pleasure quickly turn into pain and desperation. Addicts are sick people who need to be treated and, by definition, until they have been rehabilitated they will find themselves cast out of society<sup>26</sup>. However, a discourse structured thusly is destined to fall flat when it comes to neo-liberal subjectivity. This viewpoint depicts a world that does not exist, one in which today's drug

---

<sup>26</sup> On this issue, we call to mind the fact that, according to R.K. Merton, drug addicts and alcoholics make absolutely perfect examples of individual retreatists: "people who [...] are *in* society but not *part of* society. [...] As they do not share the common framework of values, they can be included among the members of *society* (as distinct from the *population*) only on a fictitious level" (Merton, 1959, p. 247).

users have no chance of finding their niche. As we have seen, drugs are not conceived and used as means of exclusion, but of inclusion; not as threats to rationality but as ways of exercising it.

An approach that seems to be decidedly more in line with the neo-liberal vision is undoubtedly that of harm reduction policies. Indeed, one could say that harm reduction is perhaps the most radically neo-liberal form of drug policy. First and foremost, the term harm reduction breaks definitively with the pathologizing concept of drug addicts who are unable to think or act for themselves and constructs an image of drug users as individuals who are responsible for the damage they may cause to themselves and to others. From this we can infer that, contrary to what hurried and superficial readings of this policy tend to reveal, a serious harm reduction approach certainly does not attempt to minimize the negative impact that substance use and abuse can have on the mental and physical health of users, nor does it deny the enormity of the effort necessary to claw one's way out of a state of addiction. An effort which, to be successful, certainly needs in the majority of cases a professional help such as the one provided by many different kinds of psychosocial intervention<sup>27</sup>. Having said this, it is important to stress however that at the heart of the concept of harm reduction is a rational concept of the subject. Whatever level of addiction the individual is dealing with, he or she is always seen as being able to make choices: use sterile syringes rather than recycle those already used by others, test Ecstasy before taking it, avoid driving under the influence of drugs, and so on and so forth. As a secondary feature, in conformity with their concept of the rational individual, harm reduction approaches hold that this process of making users responsible for their actions should be supported by campaigns to raise awareness about all the information available and the organizations that can help them make and put into practice their consumption choices. Informative materials, free sterile syringes, pill tests outside nightclubs and injection rooms are all examples of actions that fully comply with this type of policy<sup>28</sup>. The third

---

<sup>27</sup> In line with this, we should remember that harm reduction does not exclude any kind of prevention policy. As we will see later on, harm reduction, generally speaking, frames drug policy in a new cultural context. A context in which drug users are no more viewed as sick persons with weakened cognitive abilities, but as individuals able to make choices.

<sup>28</sup> Emblematic of this matter are the totally divergent assessments which supporters of the harm reduction approach and those of prohibition make regarding the awareness-raising campaigns carried out in schools and youth centres about the effects of drugs. For the

and final aspect is that the harm reduction approach is particularly in line with neo-liberal sensibilities in that it translates the moral categories into which prohibitionist approaches have placed drugs into the economic categories of risks and benefits<sup>29</sup>. On this note, we would like to point out the inclusive effect behind harm reduction policies. In this particular way of representing reality, there is no longer the figure of the hopeless addict, the drop-out, the bad guy cloaked in a conspicuous aura of deviance; on the contrary, everyone is united by being first and foremost rational players who make their choices based on their desires and their beliefs. (O'Malley, 2008, p. 459).

Some time ago, reflecting on neo-liberal culture, F. Jameson (1991, p. 263) wrote the expression, "the market is in human nature ... [it] cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged; it is the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time". While waiting to begin (and win) this crucial struggle, adopting a serious harm reduction policy would appear to be the only path we can embark on in order to have any chance of successfully dealing with the phenomenon of drug use.

## References

- Bandura, A. (1977). Self efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behaviour change. *Psychological Review*, 84 (2), 191-215.
- Becker, G. (1976). *The economic approach to human behavior*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Becker, G., & Murphy, K. M. (1988). A theory of rational addiction. *Journal of Political Economy*, 96 (4), 675-700.
- Becker, G., & Mulligan, B. (1997). The endogenous determination of time preference. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 112 (3), 729-758.
- Blackman, S. (2011). *Chilling out. The cultural politics of substance consumption, youth and drug policy*. London: Open University Press.

---

former it is a way to make young people aware of the risks associated with taking drugs and help them make more sensible choices. For the latter, these campaigns only make the young people curious and encourage them to try illegal substances. For an overview of harm reduction policies in Europe, see Lombi (2012).

<sup>29</sup> For a critical examination of the place pleasure occupies in the harm reduction philosophy, see Valverde & O'Malley (2004, pp. 36-39).



- Bourdieu, P. (1995). L'economia dei beni simbolici. In P. Bourdieu, *Ragioni pratiche* (pp. 157-195). Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Brown, W. (2006). American nightmare: neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and democratization. *Political Theory*, 34 (6), 690-714.
- Burchell, G., Gordon, C., & Miller, P. (Eds.). (1991). *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Cahill, S. E. (1998). Toward a sociology of the person. *Sociological Theory*, 16 (2), 131-148.
- Campbell, N. D. (2010). *Discovering addiction. The science and politics of substance abuse research*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Catucci, S. (2000). *Introduzione a Foucault*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Chaloupka, F. J., & Warner, K. E. (2000). The economics of smoking. In J. Newhouse & A. Culyer (Eds.), *Handbook of health economics* (pp. 1539-1627). Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Csordas, T. J., & Lewton, E. (1998). Practice, Performance, and Experience in Ritual Healing. *Journal of Transcultural Psychiatry*, 35, 435-512.
- Duff, C. (2007a). Pleasure in context. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 19, 384-392.
- Duff, C. (2007b). Towards a theory of drug use contexts: space, embodiment and practice. *Addiction Research and Theory*, 15 (5), 503-519.
- Elster, J. (1993). *Come si studia la società*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Elster, J. (2001). *Emozioni forti*. Il Mulino: Bologna.
- Elster, J. (2006). Weakness of will and preference reversals. In J. Elster, O. Gjelvik, A. Hylland & K. Moene (Eds.), *Understanding choice, explaining behaviour. Essays in honour of Ole-Jørgen Skog* (pp. 57-74). Oslo: Oslo Academic Press.
- Elster, J. (2009). *La volontà debole*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Elster, J., & Skog, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Getting hooked. Rationality and addiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foddy, B., & Savulescu, J. (2010). A liberal account of addiction. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 17 (1), 1-22.
- Fontana, A. (2008). Leggere Foucault oggi. In M. Galzigna (Ed.), *Foucault, oggi* (pp. 29-44). Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Foucault, M. (1998). *Bisogna difendere la società*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Foucault, M. (2005). *Sicurezza, territorio, popolazione. Corso al Collège de France (1977-1978)*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Foucault, M. (2006). *Nascita della biopolitica. Corso al Collège de France (1978-1979)*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Funderburg, A. J. (2014). Bootleggers and Beer Barons of the Prohibition Era. Jefferson: McFarland.
- Green, R., & Moore, D. (2009). 'Kiddie drugs' and controlled pleasure: recreational use of dexamphetamine in a social network of young Australians. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 20, 402-408.
- Hutton, F. (2010). Kiwis, clubs and drugs: club cultures in wellington, new zealand. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 43 (1), 1-24.
- Inglis, B. (1975). *The forbidden game. A social history of drugs*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism. or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Järvinen, M., & Fynbo, L. (2011). Self-governance, control and loss of control amongst drink-drivers. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 22, 437-444.
- Kirmayer, L. J. (2004). The cultural diversity of healing: meaning, metaphor and mechanisms. *British Medical Bulletin*, 9, 33-48.
- La Luna, E. (1985). The healing practices of a Peruvian shaman. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 11 (2), 123-133.
- Lombi, L. (2012). *Le politiche della droga in Europa. Prevenzione, gestione, recupero*. Milano: Angeli.
- Lensons, D. (1995). *On drugs*. Minneapolis: The University Of Minnesota Press.
- Leonzio, U. (1969). *Il volo magico. Storia generale delle droghe*. Milano: Guanda.
- Maffesoli, M. (1996). *The time of the tribes: The decline of individualism in mass society*. London: Sage Publications.
- Melberg, H. O. (2008). *Rational addiction theory. A survey of opinions*. University of Oslo, Health economics research programme, working paper n. 7. Retrieved from: [http://www.med.uio.no/helsam/forskning/nettverk/hero/publikasjoner/skriftserie/2008/2008\\_7.pdf](http://www.med.uio.no/helsam/forskning/nettverk/hero/publikasjoner/skriftserie/2008/2008_7.pdf)
- Merton, R. K. (1959). *Teoria e struttura sociale*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Mugford, S. (1991). Controlled drug use among recreational users: sociological perspectives. In N. Heather, W. R. Miller, & J. Greeley (Eds.), *Self control and the addictive behaviours* (pp. 243-261). Sydney: Maxwell Macmillan.
- Nencini, P. (2002). The shaman and the rave party: social pharmacology of ecstasy. *Substance Use and Misuse*, 37(8-10), 923-39.
- Nicholson, T., Duncan, D. F., & White, J. B. (2002). Is recreational drug use normal? *Journal of Substance Use*, 7, 116-123.
- Nicoli, M. (2012). "Io sono un'impresa." Biopolitica e capitale umano. *Aut-Aut*, 356, 85-99.
- Ogden, J. (1995). Psychosocial theory and the creation of the risky self. *Social Science and Medicine*, 40 (3), 409-415.
- O'Malley, P. (2008a). Experiments in risk and criminal justice. *Theoretical Criminology*, 12 (4), 451-469.
- O'Malley, P. (2008b). Governmentality and risk. In J. Zinn (Ed.), *Social theories of risk and uncertainty. An introduction* (pp. 52-75). Oxford: Balckwell.
- Orphanides, A., & Zervos, D. (1995). Rational addiction with learning and regret. *Journal of Political Economy*, 103 (4), 739-758.
- Porter, R. (1996). The history of the 'drugs problem'. *Criminal Justice Matters*, 24, 3-5.
- Read, J. (2009). A genealogy of homo-economicus: neoliberalism and the production of subjectivity. *Foucault Studies*, 6, 25-36.
- Rogeberg, O. (2004). Taking absurd theories seriously: economics and the case of rational addiction theories. *Philosophy of Science*, 71 (3), 263-285.
- Rockhill, B. (2001). The privatization of risk. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91 (3), 365-368.
- Rose, N. (1996). *Inventing our selves: psychology, power and personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, N. (1999). *The powers of freedom: reframing political thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, N., O'Malley, P., & Valverde, M. (2006). Governmentality. *Annual Review of Law and Social Sciences*, 2, 83-104.

- Saldanha, A. (2001). *Goa trance and trance in goa. Smooth striations*. In S. J. Graham (Ed.), *Rave, culture and religion*. London: Routledge.
- Seddon, T. (2010). *A history of drugs. Drugs and freedom in liberal age*. Abingdon-New York: Routledge.
- Schivelbusch, W. (1992). *Tastes of paradise. A social history of spices, stimulants and intoxicants*. New York: Random House.
- Stangherlin, M. (2007). Economia di potere e potere dell'economia. In A. Vinale (Ed.), *Biopolitica e democrazia*. Milano: Mimesis.
- Sorrentino, V. (2008). *Il pensiero politico di Foucault*. Roma: Meltemi.
- Valverde, M., & O'Malley, P. (2004). Pleasure, freedom and drugs. The uses of 'pleasure' in liberal governance of drug and alcohol consumption. *Sociology*, 38 (1), 25-42.
- Veyne, P. (1998). *Michel Foucault. La storia, il nichilismo, la morale*. Verona: Ombre Corte.
- Weil, A. (1972). *The natural mind*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Zinberg, N. E. (1986). *Drugs, set and setting. The basis for controlled intoxicant use*. New Heaven: Yale University Press.
- Zolo, D. (1994). La strategia della cittadinanza. In D. Zolo (Ed.), *La cittadinanza. Appartenenza, identità, diritti* (pp. 25-26). Roma-Bari: Laterza.