

A worker's survival kit: dope!

At the dawn of capitalism on the American continent, the Spanish crown adopted laws with an ambivalent attitude towards coca, a drug in use for thousands of years among the native population. All use associated with religious cults was banned and severely persecuted by the Inquisition, while the consumption of coca – also used as a means of payment – was made mandatory for the Potosi silver miners, as it was thought this would get them to work faster through reducing the feeling of fatigue.

Capitalism in its present form – free of the religious considerations of King Philip II – has nonetheless maintained a profound ambivalence towards the use of psychoactive substances. This edited volume coordinated by Renaud Crespon (sociologist), Dominique Lhuillier (professor emeritus from the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers) and Gladys Lutz (ergonomist) explores different facets of the use of psychoactive drugs at work, looking at an array of both legal and illegal substances: alcohol, tobacco, amphetamines, cannabis, cocaine, heroin, caffeine, medicines and painkillers.

Coming from various disciplines, the contributions provide a critical overview questioning current prevention policies. Indeed, many acts of law, collective agreements and prevention programmes are meant to combat this usage on the basis of a biomedical model linked to stigmatising the practices of deviant individuals. Screening practices are increasing, often in a legal hiatus where privacy protection is quickly sacrificed. Their usefulness is questionable.

This managerial approach¹ is focused on addiction or dependency as such, seeking to list the vulnerability factors in terms of a person's psychosocial profile. Sometimes, the approach will be paternalistic, focusing on

support and accompaniment. At other times, it may be authoritarian, using warnings and sanctions.

In her contribution, Quebec sociologist Marie-France Maranda shows that we need to refocus the debate, looking at the situation from another angle. First and foremost, we need to question the way work is organised, analysing individual defensive strategies in the face of management pressure to increase productivity. In her view, parallels exist between doping in sports and doping at work, mirroring "this culture of the high-performance individual in a production-driven society".

Several researchers and a unionist, Éric Beynel, are proposing alternatives centred on transforming collective working conditions. Éric Beynel highlights the importance of psychosocial risks, treating addiction as a work risk stemming from many different factors, as may be the case with cancer or a burn-out. In doing so, he stresses the difficulties the workers concerned have in speaking about their problem with union teams.

Sociologist Fabien Brugière presents a concrete case study on cannabis consumption among airport service workers. Analysing many different facets, this study shows that cannabis is sometimes used as an individual way of protecting oneself against hardship at work, linked for instance to fear of accidents or the boredom of monotonous work.

In the book's conclusions, Dominique Lhuillier puts it succinctly, stating that: "What we are seeing is a radicalisation of ignorance – to be understood as a lack of knowledge coupled with a head-in-the-sand attitude towards health and work issues, based on the growing invisibility of real work. And on an individualisation of health issues, masking the pathogenic nature of certain work

situations and favouring causal explanations by individual causalities. This in turn leads to a tendency to reduce the question of the usage of psychoactive substances to one of vulnerable workers / workers with a certain predisposition who have become 'hooked' on one or many substances and need treatment to protect both their health and the safety of human and technical systems."

While undeniably of great interest, this book also has one shortcoming: the historical dimension (apart from a few succinct paragraphs at the beginning) is missing. It would have been useful to show how the issue of alcoholism was at the centre of debates and forms of worker organisation in the 19th and first half of the 20th century, in particular in Northern European countries. Similarly, the spread of assembly-line work was accompanied in a number of countries by a sometimes massive use by company medical departments of painkillers or psychoactive drugs to "adapt" workers to their working conditions. For example, workers in the watch-making industry in the Jura were given Saridon, a medicine extremely toxic for the kidneys.

– Laurent Vogel

Se doper pour travailler

Renaud Crespon, Dominique Lhuillier, Gladys Lutz, Toulouse, éditions ERES, 2017

¹ Fabienne Scandella's article on page 6 shows that these individual approaches are not limited to the field of addiction.