



Ministério  
da Cultura



## **A Foreword to the book *Drugs and Culture: New Perspectives***

### **Culture, the State, and the Different Uses of “Drugs”**

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Over the last few years, we have witnessed a healthy maturation of academic research and study of the use of “drugs” in Brazil. Anthropologists, sociologists, historians, physicians, lawyers, economists, and many others are revealing novel facets of this everyday phenomenon that frequently makes its way into the headlines. The book *Drugs and Culture: New Perspectives* represents a synthesis of this broad intellectual movement, which offers a biopsychosocial approach to the study of “drugs” – a movement engaged with a polemical topic and its inherent paradoxes; a movement that aims to stimulate a public debate more conducive to the ideals of pluralism, diversity and democracy that define our country. We feel obliged, therefore, to highlight some of the policy implications of the conclusions set forth in this book.

To begin, it is necessary to piece together some observations of how the Brazilian State previously dealt with and has been dealing with this phenomenon. The State intervenes and determines a “drug” policy by making use of two fundamental and inalienable powers: regulation, which is sanctioned by legislative mechanisms, and accountability, which follows previously determined penal norms. We acknowledge that the juridical actions of the State have been guided by the principles of the *International Narcotics Control Board*, fruit of the 1971 UN Convention. Due to the historical context in which they were formulated, these principles disregarded certain cultural idiosyncrasies of the Latin American nations. For example, they do not recognize the cultural traditions of the Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples, above all the ritualistic and cultural uses of certain psychoactive substances (such as ayahuasca and the coca leaf). By disregarding such singularities and ignoring diverse cultural contexts, one ends up treating distinct cultural understandings in a stale and undifferentiated way; one also becomes incapable of distinguishing the implications of different types of drug use. The Ministry of Culture, therefore, can and should grant more visibility to the cultural dimension and affirm the right of the Brazilian peoples to engage in the shamanic rituals and in the Indigenous and Afro-descendent expressions that require psychoactive substances for their manifestation, and the religious fests that spring up out of our vast cultural diversity. The uses of psychoactive substances in religious rituals still suffer difficulties, in Brazil and many other countries, in obtaining legal recognition.

The law n. 11.343/06, which regulates Brazil’s policies concerned with “drugs,” and which was directly influenced by the aforementioned UN Convention, still does not recognize the cultural uses of certain psychoactive substances tied to rituals, nor does it contain provisions for differential classifications and penalties for the traditional uses of

“drugs.” In a word, today’s legislation does not take into account certain cultural singularities.

Exactly how we should differentiate between consumption – whether individual or collective – and trafficking has yet to be completely established. The absence of such a distinction results in the uniform treatment of all users of psychoactive substances, independent of their use habits and cultural contexts, with moral and legal distrust. We need to demarcate in a more attentive manner the relationships between use, consumption, trafficking and the individual rights of Brazilian citizens. Maybe we should rethink and reconsider the relationship between the State, drugs, and individual rights. This may well be an indispensable step towards the maturation of public policies regarding “drugs.”

Despite the growing recognition of the relevance of studies and research that emphasize these cultural aspects of the use of “drugs,” there still persists a tendency to attribute more legitimacy to studies on the topic that are developed in the realm of the health sciences such as medicine, pharmacology and psychology. The social sciences tend to be taken into consideration only when they are applied to the study of crime, drug-trafficking, urban violence or poverty, and they are devalued when they deal directly with the question of “drugs” and their cultural uses. The incapacity to deal with the complexity of the “drug” phenomenon and this choice of a unilateral treatment influences the political arena, where the impoverishment of the analyses and the absence of socio-cultural considerations in the conception of public policies directed by them are obvious.

The Ministry of Culture (MinC) supports the incorporation of “anthropological” understandings of psychoactive substances, an approach centered more on attention to the behaviors and the symbolic goods awakened by the diverse cultural uses of drugs. Since 2004, the MinC has recognized the crucial role played by culture and its contexts in the

construction of the effects produced by “drug” use, on both the individual and the social levels. We choose to play a proactive role in the elaboration of current national policies on the matter, demanding, for example, a place on the National Anti-drugs Council (CONAD) and participating actively in its deliberations while always pushing for an emphasis on harm reduction.

The book *Drugs and Culture: New Perspectives* expresses a valorization of the role played by the social sciences in reflections on the topic of drugs and, in parallel, seeks to relate these analyses to an extensive collection of discussions. In this way, the articles that comprise the present book approach the use of this type of substance in diverse cultural and historic contexts. They indicate that, far from being a mere link in the chain of violence and crime, the consumption of “drugs” has forever been a part of various spheres of human life, being tied to religious phenomena, movements to construct (or reconstruct) the identities of social, ethnic, generational and gender minorities, and even to esthetic production. In the book, scholars coming from different disciplines and research trajectories focus on the socio-cultural scenarios that surround the use of drugs. In this way they show how moral and cultural factors play a decisive role in the constitution of patterns of consumption that regulate or structure the use of every kind of “drug.” The book avoids a simplistic view and instead shows that the topic of “drugs” should preferentially be approached from a multidisciplinary perspective since its comprehension involves the consideration of various aspects, including the pharmacological, the psychological and the socio-cultural. This is done, however, without claiming the title of ‘most relevant’ for the social science perspective and without dismissing the risks and the biochemical complexities of the use of these substances; rather, the book creates more room for multidisciplinary reflections in today’s discussions about drugs.

We stand in the court of cultures – all of which stem from the enormous diversity of practices, representations, symbols and arts that inhabit Brazil. For better or worse, “drugs” comprise part of our culture, or better yet, our cultures, and hence cannot be understood apart from them.

This book serves as a call for more attentive reflection on the various uses of drugs by different peoples. This diversity of the use and consumption of drugs is a mirror of our own cultural diversity. Our researchers and our legislature should, in some manner, take into consideration the cultural dimension in order to craft public policies that are more efficacious and more adequate for our country today.