

Somewhat like Dorothy
Public opinion, heroin and the 90s
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«Somewhat like Dorothy realizing that she was not in Kansas anymore, Americans began to realize that they weren't in the Fifties anymore» (Musto 2002, 2). This is how the historian David Musto describes the abrupt awareness of US citizens when faced with the social transformations of the 1960s, including the fact «that people they knew, or people who seemed just like people they knew, were using illegal drugs» (Musto 2002, 2). I borrow Musto's perfect metaphor to describe the surprise of political observers, the press, public opinion, as well as scholars, in front of the new wave of heroin consumption investing the West, Italy included, in the last twenty years. Since the end of the last decade of the 20th century the idea that heroin had disappeared and was no longer a problem, and that it only concerned marginal groups of desperate people had become commonplace among almost every kind of audience. However, this was not true. My research aims to investigate, through a historiographic perspective, the origin of this fake news, and their consequences in the Italian public sphere.

The problem of intuitive knowledge (or “common sense”). In Italy as elsewhere, the range of opinions on the issue of drugs is largely dominated by what might be called “intuitive knowledge”: that set of judgements based on common sense, which everyone considers well thought through, regarding a series of multilayered questions «such as the reasons that drive young people to drug addiction, the dimensions of the economy and clandestine profits, the responsibilities of organized crime, the actions to be taken to solve, reorganize, or simply live with the problem» (Arlacchi-Lewis 1990, 11).

This is how the sociologist Pino Arlacchi introduced his study on drug addiction in Verona in 1990. As he wrote in his presentation, the case of Verona was particularly significant, since it was obvious even to a hasty observer that in this province of northeastern Italy people lived well, the standard of consumption was high and the quality of life had significantly increased over the years. And yet, despite this, the city counted 3500 drug addicts in that period.

This reality challenged what at the time seemed the most widespread ideas about drug and heroin addiction: namely that drug addicts were people living on the margins of society. The authors of the book wrote that the entire body of studies acquired on the subject highlights the role «played by the existence of areas of hardship, poverty and social polarization» problem (Arlacchi-Lewis 1990, 13). This was not the case in Verona, however: heroin use was crosscutting, it concerned everyone. The strength of supply was unrelated to the typical factors that shaped the size and quality of demand, and vice versa. Demand had not grown because marginal areas had expanded. On the contrary, in Verona, the rise of the heroin market had determined a decrease in other crimes, due to the need for a workforce that had converted to dealing, thus determining a sort of “unwritten pact” between the majority of the “legal” population and the actors of the drug universe. The result of this process was the rise of a non-violent and “assisted” market, a sort of virtuous circle that defied common sense.

But common sense in the social sciences often leads not only normal people but scholars themselves astray, and therefore, despite the evidence, heroin use has continued to be associated with “degradation” and “social marginality” up to the present, making any deviation from this “norm” incomprehensible (Forgacs 2014; Quinones 2015; Hart 2021).

Back to Pino Arlacchi, his reflection today seems almost prophetic, given what happened later, in the 1990s, when the consumption of illicit drugs, as well as the positioning of heroin within the hierarchy of illicit drugs, morphed into new patterns. With this transformation and despite all evidence, “common sense” established that heroin, considered the inevitable corollary of marginal or degraded environments, was no longer a topic worthy of interest, so much so that even journalists stopped covering it. A few years ago, Aldo Cazzullo, a columnist for the «Corriere della sera», wrote: «I well remember the day when, as an intern at Cronache italiane della Stampa (thirty years ago), I received the order to stop covering the "briefs" on overdose deaths: there were too many of them, and they no longer made the news» (Cazzullo 2018, 3). The recollection is from 2018, so the decline in attention goes

back to the early 1990s, around the time when Arlacchi was conducting his investigation. From a historical perspective, the transition to the 1990s therefore appears as a fundamental one that marks a shift between historical periods.

My research hypothesis is based on the idea that heroin disappeared from the radar of the news due to a paradigm shift that had nothing to do with the real reach of the substance, but with cultural and, we could say, marketing factors. I would like to mention two main ones: the impact the spread of AIDS had on consumption of substances and the way consumption is viewed, (as well as on the cultural construction of the drug addict), and the spread of new psychotropic substances, not always catalogued as illegal (Cippitelli 1997).

La peste dei drogati. There is a “before and after” in the history of heroin, its consumption, its story. And these temporal boundaries are marked by the first heroin addict who died of AIDS in Italy. Today it is difficult to imagine a world in which the accidental prick of a syringe is not associated to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. And yet, up until the mid-eighties, syringes on the ground caused disgust, bewilderment, anger, the shadow of hepatitis, but not the abyss of “certain death”. A reportage of the Italian public television (RAI) entitled *Eroina SPA* and written by Giuseppe Marrazzo in 1980 tells this story very well. Once again, it is set in Verona. In 1980 Verona had 300,000 inhabitants and 15,000 drug addicts. Streets strewn with syringes that the journalist crossed easily, just as did passers-by. Getting high in a street downtown, a highly trafficked street, was no problem at all. “Why do you guys do drugs here?” the reporter asks. “We're all friends,” a boy replies. As if to say: we want to be together, share everything, even syringes (Marrazzo 1980). Aids “did not exist” in 1980. Then, on October 2, 1982, «La Stampa» published a small article below the fold: *The plague of drug addicts is claiming victims in the USA*. The article reported the alarm of the Center for the Control of Infectious Diseases in Georgia for a progressive increase of cases of this disease, the causes of which were unknown, infecting above all homosexuals and drug addicts. «A first step forward seems to be related to the discovery that the disease is transmitted through semen» wrote the newspaper (Roghi 2019).

On November 10 of the same year another headline reads: «Mysterious disease makes a killing: the plague of drug addicts». There are articles that circumscribe the epidemic to the United States. The gay community of New York in May 1983 asks for attention, help, research, to understand what is happening. In Italy, in the daily newspaper «il manifesto», the psychologist Franca Romè points her finger at what is

turning out to be a proper witch hunt, which we may have presently forgotten about, and is however worth retracing. There are people dead from AIDS abandoned in mortuaries, with policemen in rubber gloves replacing undertakers who do not want to touch them, and there are cases of tenants and relatives driven out of apartments by others who fear contagion. «There are those who speak of nature being 'raped' by rebelling and punishing». An American professor asks one of his recent graduates, «Do you think God is trying to punish homosexuals? If so you would be wrong because AIDS is still not enough». (Roghi 2019).

In 1984 Fernando Aiuti, director of the third medical clinic of La Sapienza University in Rome, is the major Italian expert on the subject. He has conducted research in the American clinic of Professor Gallo, who is trying to isolate the agent (it is still not clear at this point that the cause is a virus) that provokes the lowering of immune defenses. In agreement with the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (Higher Institute of Health), Aiuti has set up a registry of those affected by AIDS. He claims that the observed cases are 10, the dead two, as opposed to the frightening figures coming from overseas. However, a psychosis regarding infected blood breaks out: news from Holland and Australia of patients with hemophilia who have contracted the syndrome after a transfusion scare the public opinion to the point that the first case of refusal of homosexual donors arises in Italy too, and in Veneto to be exact.

The first addict who died from AIDS of which I found trace appears on January 12 1985 in Ferrara, a young heroin addict who contracted the syndrome of acquired immunodeficiency along with his sister, «due to the promiscuous use of a syringe». From this moment on, every death of a junkie which is not caused by an overdose becomes suspect. Name, family name and address of the dead are published, in line with the best tradition of Italian journalism, so that the families of the deceased too are suspected of being contagious.

Everyone thinks they are at risk of catching AIDS. Moreover, the news about the contagion is confused and contradictory. Is it transmitted through saliva? If so, are kisses, glasses, joints dangerous? It is transmitted through abandoned syringes. Once again it is «La Stampa» that publishes a panicked article: «Are we certain that children will not get infected in parks? Parks and playgrounds of big cities are polluted and dangerous for our children. Perhaps the greatest insidiousness of all nowadays is constituted by the increasing number of syringes abandoned all over by drug addicts. Being pricked with a potentially infected syringe risks transmitting the virus of hepatitis and also, though this is a rarer risk, triggering the terrible

pathogenetic mechanism of AIDS. It is therefore essential that every child is properly educated in this regard, as well as constantly supervised» (La Stampa 1985).

A disease that spreads by sharing syringes contributes to the crisis of the shot as a practice for getting high, and to the circulation of other substances that do not require the use of a needle. It is interesting to note how this factor in some ways comes to close a cycle that began in the nineteenth century, when one of the reasons of morphine's and then heroin's great success was, among other things, the use of the syringe, a recent invention at the time. The morphine-syringe combination was an expression of modernity, and if heroin in 1898 was marketed as an analgesic by Bayer, who advertised it as "the most powerful analgesic ever invented", the syringe, on the other hand, could be considered a therapeutic tool of the new era (Nencini 2017, 96). And even when heroin as a drug had been declared illegal, syringes continued to be associated with the consumption of legal and illegal substances (morphine and amphetamines (Blumir 1976, 94)). Incidentally, according to psychiatrist Luigi Cancrini, Italy's leading expert on drug addiction in the 1970s, this was one of the reasons why it was very easy for habitual amphetamine users to switch to heroin after some of these drugs were taken off the market in the early 1970s.

Indeed in the late 1980s, with the spread of AIDS, the needle and the syringe became a metonym for death. And this is what made substances to be smoked or ingested, and crack cocaine foremost among them, popular (Holden 1989). Heroin, however, did not lose ground: the highest number of overdose deaths in our national history dates back to 1996 rather than to sometime in the 1980s. Moreover, as pharmacologist Paolo Nencini points out, one glance at the historical series of heroin seizures is enough to grasp the incredible growth in consumption of this substance in Italy over the last half century, including the 1990s. One kilogram of heroin was seized in 1971, 197 kg in 1981, in 1991 it was more than one and a half tons (1,541 kg) and in 2001 two tons (2,058 kg), only to drop to 810 kg ten years later, when more than six tons of cocaine (6,352 kg) were seized (Nencini 2017, 323).

The pill. For the incoming millennium's "common sense", the "pill" became the drug of concern in Italy. Between 1992 and 1995 seizures of "pills" come under the spotlight of the press: in 1992, 75,298 pills are seized, of which 20,904 of M.D.M.A. and 1,295 of M.D.A., while in 1995, seizures amount to 134,000 tablets of amphetamines (Presidenza del consiglio dei ministri, 1993). Police operations meanwhile go from 74 in 1990 to 1,052 in 1995.

The sociologist Claudio Cippitelli writes that what was taking place here was an actual revolution: «“New drugs” represented a real turning point in the consumption of illegal psychotropic substances. Up to their appearance, the Italian picture of illegal drug consumption was substantially split in two: on the one hand, opiates, particularly heroin, evoking scenarios of marginality, deviance, exclusion, illness and death; on the other hand, consumption of substances defined as “light”, such as cannabis derivatives, whose illegality was already questioned at the time, both in political debates and through what was starting to look like mass consumption among some youth groups. The large number of cannabinoid users did not seem characterized by particular problems in terms of marginality, deviance and exclusion, not to mention by disease or death. Moreover, these two different population groups seemed to have few points of contact, even though heroin addicts were often also cannabis users». The appearance of methamphetamines and other *party drugs* subverted the order around which national drug policies and services had been structured, and completely redefined the image of the “drug addict”, no longer recognizable in the two macro-categories described by Cippitelli. The poly-consumption of substances became the main characteristic of the “new era”.

Giovani anni Novanta (Youth in the Nineties), the third IARD report on the condition of young people in Italy published in 1993, states that, overall, «young people seem to be the bearers of a morality that is progressively distancing itself from traditional values, specifically in attitudes and behaviors towards the use of psychotropic substances that new cultural models are spreading» (Cavalli- De Lillo 1993). The data report that: «almost one in every five young people does not exclude the experience of soft drug use while almost one in every thirty does not exclude the use of hard drugs». It is estimated that around two and a half million young people do not consider themselves completely removed from drug culture. The propensity to use drugs is considerably more pronounced among males, among the upper classes, in metropolitan areas and in the central and northern regions of the country. These indications show that drug culture is not directly linked to phenomena of marginalization and underdevelopment; on the contrary, the most exposed seem to be those social groups characterized by traits that could be defined as privileged. The analogy between drugs and deviance is questioned both quantitatively (users are too many to be "deviant") and qualitatively (their social profile is indistinct). The occasional use of drugs appears to be completely unrelated to conditions of disadvantage and marginalization, becoming a normal experience for many boys and girls.

The press' stigmatization of club culture and raves, and the consequent buildup of great alarm within media and social imagery, didn't take into account the results of research like the one quoted above, obscuring one of the most interesting emerging facts: "pills", which were identical to a medicinal preparation in shape, revolutionized the relationship with psychotropic substances, "normalizing" them. This meant that, going from a painkiller to an MDMA and back to heroin, had no subversive value for the new generation of users. Heroin itself, not having disappeared at all, underwent a new signification, becoming one among many possible substances, with quite a different function from the previous one it had for the generation of pioneers.

Here is what W. Burroughs wrote in his 1953 *Junky*: «Drugs are a cellular equation that teaches the addict truths of general validity. I have learned much by resorting to drugs: I have seen life measured in dropper pumps of morphine in solution. I have experienced the excruciating deprivation that is drug craving and the joy of relief when drug-thirsty cells drink it from the needle. Perhaps all pleasure is relief. I learned the cellular stoicism that the drug teaches the addict. (...) Drugs are not, like alcohol or marijuana, a means to intensify enjoyment of life. Drugs are not euphoria. It is a way of life» (Burroughs 1953). And here is an excerpt from the 1967 *Heroin* by the Velvet Underground: «I don't know just where I'm going. But I'm gonna try for the kingdom, if I can. 'Cause it makes me feel like I'm a man. When I put a spike into my vein. And I'll tell ya, things aren't quite the same. When I'm rushing on my run. And I feel just like Jesus' son». The following, on the other hand, is a reflection by Christiane F., whose story indelibly marks the imagery of the Eighties: «Heroin made us brothers. All three of us were the same» (Christiane F. 1979).

Despite the fact that these characters are so different and distant in time, we perceive in each of these testimonies a precise choice of the substance: it is clear that the relationship with heroin has long been almost monogamous.

This kind of relationship no longer exists for boys and girls of the New Millennium, as evidenced by the 2005 research project entitled *I ragazzi di Bianca* (Bianca's boys). Bianca is a small town in the province of Frosinone where David Donfrancesco, a young sociologist, carried out a study on a homogenous group of young people, university students and friends coming from families who were not socio-culturally disadvantaged, and who were transitioning from the use to abuse of heroin (Donfrancesco 2005). The author observed an actual return to heroin, overall, after five years of relative stagnation among young people between 20 and 25 years of age. But the weight and meaning the substance had in their biographies is quite

different from what it used to have, in fact, until the turn of the nineties. Very often heroin is used as a relaxant, even as a remedy against the effects of cocaine, to mitigate the excitatory effects, in some ways recovering the function of “perfect” analgesic that it had at the dawn of its diffusion, as described by Bayer in the advertising leaflet sent to doctors: “against all pains, sedative of cough, for the treatment of drug addicts (sic)”. After all, the name "heroin" comes from the drug patented by the German pharmaceutical company: *Heroisch*, an exceptional drug.

This tendency to medicalization of abuse becomes increasingly visible: the solo song of the Italian trap group Dark Polo Gang leader’, *Medicine*, is a kind of manifesto, of the new generation of substance users and addicts. «I've been taking my meds but I don't feel the effect. I'm sitting or standing on the edge of the bed (not sleeping). As a kid standing on the edge of the roof. Dropping things to feel the effect (down). Suicide I don't contemplate but I think about it often. I admit, I've been going through it lately. Depression is a condition, you think it lasts forever. It's all in the head, it's a battle with the brain».

Again, there are no epics, no street culture, what we perceive is an explicit hospital ambiance. Like many trappers, in interviews Side Baby speaks of his addiction as a kind of side effect of a lifestyle that is accustomed to addiction; after all, “I'm addicted to” and “I'm in detox” are two expressions borrowed from the world of substances that in the last twenty years have shaped the fruition and consumption of food, imagery, intangible goods (Raimo 2018).

This way of consuming drugs, which became popular at the beginning of the 2000s, does not establish any ideal hierarchy among substances and is, in some way, the corollary of a legislative measure worth referring to.

In 1990, the Italian Law on Drug Addiction was revised, with the introduction of a very interesting (and harmful) novelty: rather than according to its harmful effects on health, the illegality of a substance was established by whether or not it was listed in a table of illegal substances periodically updated by the Ministry of Health. If heroin and cannabinoids remained illegal, many chemical substances escaped the strict definition of the table. And were therefore perfectly legal, though certainly no less harmful. They are certainly no less harmful than cannabis, if taken together with other drugs and with no awareness whatsoever (Nutt 2012).

It's worth reporting what the politician Ethan A. Nadelmann says about how the criminalization of a substance works, since only by criminalizing a substance can we

call someone a junkie. At first, Nadelmann writes, the use of a psychoactive substance is legitimized by society under certain circumstances. At some point, however, numerous scholars and moralizing organizations redefine its use as a problem. The third step sees the mobilization of growing activism for use to be suppressed and criminalized through international conventions. Finally, this aspiration is realized through national legislation, which, being internationally coordinated, contributes to the establishment of a global prohibitionist regime (Nadelmann 1990).

This model is perfect to consider the similarities between past and present and what I have called the medicalization of addiction that takes us back to the late nineteenth century, when heroin was invented. The origins of the spread of opium in Europe lie, in fact, in the absolutely legal market of cough syrups (laudanum, opium pills and patent medicines), which spread mainly within the English working class in the second half of the 19th century. The relationship between drug addiction and the pharmaceutical industry is an original one, rooted in the history of opium-based medicines and the continuous declarations of non-toxicity by doctors who claim to be unaware but are, very often, conniving. Friedrich Engels talks about this in his investigation on London workers. And history repeats itself in the course of the 20th century: from the methadone-based Ticarda drops produced by Hoechst and outlawed in 1973, to the Oxycontin case, the history of medicine is full of drugs considered “the perfect analgesic” that end up being addictive and very often, once outlawed, lead patients, who have become dependent, to the direct consumption of drugs obtained through the illegal market. At this point the figure of the junkie is perfectly outlined. Everyone understands what we are talking about when we talk about a junkie. Can we really be sure of this, however?

Furthermore, the substance-consumer relationship is insufficient to sketch the picture of the drug addict. In fact, what specialists define as “the setting” is missing. Set and setting, as recently highlighted by Carl Hart, neuropsychiatrist at Columbia University, are historically determined and dependent variables in defining the picture of the drug addict (Hart, 2013, 2021). The context in which the substance is consumed often defines the addict as much as the substance itself: a university professor who occasionally smokes cannabis will be socially much more accepted than a kid who does so on the street, playing hooky from school.

In the eighties the drug addict par excellence was the heroin addict; living on the margins of society, in no way leading a normal life, destroying their family if they

had one, losing their job if they were employed. If they managed to work because their job was creative, however, they died, leaving a romantic and cursed halo behind, as was the case with the cartoonist Andrea Pazienza, who died in 1988. This icon of the junkie became so normative that it totally dominates imagination up to the present day. However, what has emerged since the nineties is a much more fluid reality which, by not identifying with the classic icon of the drug addict, has not been recognized or taken into account for a long time. Which is why it was possible, as Sam Quinones wrote in *Dreamland*, for years to go by before understanding that heroin had, once again, become a serious problem (Quinones, 2015).

Methodology. This long-term perspective allows me to highlight one of the objectives of my research: to contribute to the foundation of an Italian historiography on narcotics. In fact, since there is no reference bibliography in Italy (the most important and recent book on the subject was written by a pharmacologist, Paolo Nencini), one might think there is no space for this type of study. Rather, the aim of my project at the Italian Academy is precisely to contribute to the construction of a method - an attempt I have already made in my previous book, *Piccola città. Una storia comune di eroina*, Laterza 2019 - by looking at Anglo-Saxon historiography. With rare exceptions (the French is a case in point) this historiography, is unique in having definitely tried to frame the problem of the diffusion of substances in historical and cultural terms and not only sociological ones. From studies on the diffusion of opium in the second half of the nineteenth century, to the most recent research on what has been called the new “epidemic” of opiates that, not incidentally, marked the United States since the mid-nineties (the years in which, let me stress once more, according to Italian common sense heroin had disappeared), historians outside the Italian borders have been working for decades on this issue.

Talking about psychotropic substances and their consumption in historiographic terms means putting the tools of the historian's trade into play, questioning the long-term and focusing on certain periodizing events, interpreted as epicenters of long-term phenomena, according to Carlo Ginzburg's definition.

My aim is to retrace a history of substances, not just to fill an empty box, that of the heroin studies in Italy, but above all because I believe in the need for historical awareness regarding phenomena which are so relevant to our present. As David F. Musto and Pamela Korsmeyer have written: «We the authors believe that policy analysts, elected officials, and the public at large will be better prepared to judge current drug policy and to choose more wisely among alternatives for the future if

they understand the judgments and choices of the past and the circumstances under which these were made» (Musto 2002, XI).

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