

Level 9 MA in Addiction Studies

Module

Social Policies & Social Context of Addiction

Title

Book Review

Ceremonial Chemistry: The Ritual Persecution of Drugs, Addicts, and Pushers

Michael

Student ID:

Word Count: 1300

WriteCheck Similarity Report: 4%

Lecturers'

Andrew Honeyman & Dr Siobain O'Donnell

Due Date: 23rd of March 2016

Submission Date: 2nd of March 2016

Ceremonial Chemistry: The Ritual Persecution of Drugs, Addicts, and Pushers

Book Review

Dr. Thomas Szasz has gained a reputation over the past few decades as a controversial and prolific author. His strength as an author has always enabled him to challenge well-founded myths and sacro-sanct root presuppositions, and this is no different with his book, “Ceremonial Chemistry. The Ritual Persecution of Drugs, Addicts, and Pushers” In this book, Szasz examines the notion of drug addiction and makes the broad conclusion that the idea of “drug addiction” does not exist. He acknowledges that some individuals take drugs that have been prohibited by authorities, while others become habituated to certain substances. Nonetheless, the difference between being “addicted” and “using a drug” boils down the political strategy towards the individual in question and one's moral attitude. The book basically evaluates the social process involved in the identification of deviant elements in society, as well as “scapegoating “them.

Szasz opines that religious values were used to identify deviants in society but over the years, these have been replaced by religious values. Szasz, nonetheless, is critical of the use of scientific myths to identify deviant behaviour in society, while both the legal and medical professions have also not escaped his wrath. In this case, Szasz is of the view that the legal profession have legitimised deviants and failed to protect them from the ensuing government intrusion. On the other hand, Szasz intimates that the medical profession has been among the key promoters of this occurrence.

Szasz is of the view that the law's unquestioning acknowledgement of positivism, along with its medical offspring, is best demonstrated by regulatory plans that are in the long run based on the “mental competency” and/or “illness” as popularised by medical models. He further identified the defining aspects of this form of legislation as non-consensual treatment and involuntary civil commitment.

Even as the aim of such paternalistic legislation is to assist individuals who are affected by their application, Szasz nonetheless maintains that their destined impact is of individual autonomy, as well as a non-humanistic, albeit mechanical, ideation of mankind. While there is a tendency for the causal reader to categorise Szasz as more of a traditional civil libertarian, this is far from the case. A traditional civil libertarian argues that different individuals use pharmacologically addictive drugs for various reasons. Over time, such individuals become addicted to their drug of use and at this point, the individual is not responsible for what she or he does. Consequently, the authorities intervene into the lives of drug addicts, and of those responsible for their supply. Government intervention has also caused a reduction in the supply of illegal drugs, albeit artificially. As a result, black markets have emerged in order to supply the illegal drugs. Since this is a high-risk undertaking, prices are increased to exorbitant prices. Consequently, drug addicts resort to crime as a means of acquiring the money needed to purchase the highly inflated illegal drugs.

Since the manufacture and supply of illegal drugs do not conform to similar quality control standards as those of prescription drugs, the ensuring product is of varying strength and all too often, is adulterated. This acts as a major conduit for drug-related health problems. However, this conventional civil liberties perspective fails to explore the pivotal presuppositions crucial in drug problems namely, addiction, and disease. The legislature recommended that the addicts undergo voluntary treatment, as opposed to punishing them. On the other hand, the pushers are given lighter prison sentences. Szasz, nonetheless, treats these themes in a somewhat less compromising manner.

In his earlier works, Szasz has endeavoured to repudiate the idea of “disease” in explaining human problems. In addition, he also rejects *parens patriae* theory of government that is thought to hold the cure to such a “disease”. In this publication, Szasz has delved deeper into the oftentimes-embraced presupposition that addiction is largely pharmacological

and physiological. He further notes “our ideas about and interventions in drug taking behaviour have only the most tenuous connection with the actual pharmacological properties of 'dangerous drugs'.” (Szasz, 2003, p. 180).

In the past, different drugs have been scapegoated (prohibited and promoted) for moral and social reasons, as opposed to health reasons, according to Szasz. When we view the prohibition and promotion process via the positivism value structure upon which medical science is based on, individuals who consume illegal drugs are not only viewed as “addicts”, but also scapegoated. This is an individual who lacks free will in regarding the drug, and is under the influence of captivating impulses. Nonetheless, when this prohibition/promotion series is examined from a non-positivist point of view where the primary presuppositions are human responsibility and freewill, the result is totally different.

Szasz is of the view that addiction are habits, and that they allow us to undertake certain things while at the same time also disabling us from undertaking in other activities. As such, we ought to judge addictions as either bad or good based on the value that we attach on what they disable or enable us to do. Szasz has used the biographies of such diverse persons as Malcolm X and Sigmund Freud, not only to support his arguments, but also to demystify drugs. The two persons used narcotics for long as they regarded their habits as allowing them to function in the light manner. They both stopped using drugs after viewing their habits as being dysfunctional.

Based on Szasz's assessment of drug use and the associated dynamics, he concludes that tolerance of deviation along with capitalistic individualism affords us the most realistic solution to dealing with the problem of drugs. Substantially, this means, “control not of the drug user but of those who would control how he ought to use drugs” (Szasz, 2003, p. 20). This would involve not just the dissolution of drug control legislation but also the sale of such pharmacological agents in the free market. Such a libertarian remedy enhances individual

freedom and responsibility. It should not be seen as an argument in favour of drug use but rather, as a clarion call to individuals to assume responsibility for their actions. It is also a call to the government to let the person be, save for when she or he causes actual, as opposed to metaphorical harm to others. These, according to Szasz, constitute the “inalienable rights and irrepudiable duties” of a citizen. At its most basic level, the exact goal of Szasz's attack is too much government interference into the lives of individuals; the key polemic in this case, is authority contrast with autonomy.

A key weakness of Szasz's work is the tendency to occasionally dramatize his case in a bid to achieve rhetoric impact. Consequently, there is the likelihood of the casual reader misconceiving Szasz and certain elements of the legal fraternity have also been seen to dismiss the author in an indifferent manner. Nevertheless, the author's semantic sword cuts across both divides; there has been an increasing unease in judicial as well as legislative arenas regarding the rights of mental and hospital patients. This growing concern is, for the most part, associated with Szasz's work. The author also challenges the legal system to bring changes to the system as we still have many laws on positivistic ideations and *parens patriae* philosophy of human problems.

Szasz talks from the position of respectable social-scientific and political traditions. The issue raised by Szasz, thus warrants our critical examination, as opposed to ignoring them. And neither should take rightly the outline of the right of the free individual. There is a dire need to carefully examine legislations that restrict individual freedom as a means of ascertaining if they serve a legitimate goal. Szasz's work affords us a fresh and compelling outlook from which we can then assess how addicted we are at the moment to drug laws.

Reference

Szasz, T (2003). *Ceremonial Chemistry. The Ritual Persecution of Drugs, Addicts, and Pushers*. New York: Syracuse University Press.