

War on drugs in Portugal

In the seventies the dictatorship organized a strong campaign against drugs use. From Marocco (haxixe) and over all from Africa (liamba), brought by the soldiers fighting the last colonial war, waves of new drug culture attack the country. The official statement was "Drugs, Madness, Death". The first judicial inquiries started at the beginning of decade.

Only more than ten years later, after the democratic revolution and above all after becoming clear that Portugal was going to join European Union, has been the time for serious drug traffic attack the very long and defenseless Atlantic Portuguese coast. It happens at a time of serious financial and social difficulties in Portugal, after the revolutionary period of the 70's, when the Portuguese State was using IMF financing programs, and before entering and benefiting from European structural financing programs.

In the beginning of the 80's, preparing the entry at the EEC club (actual EU), Portuguese State organized the new social rehabilitative institutions to cope with social problems the way Social State do – and authoritarian former Portuguese State have not done. Given the lake of financial and technical resources available in Portugal at the time, the neo-liberal political turn in the western world that restraint the investments on social work programs, the need to conform formally with the European criteria in order to join EEC, most of the content of social work in Portugal has been administrative paper work for judicial proposes and few field social programs. The assessment of the programs or the State social system is problematic. In general, the Portuguese State and the Portuguese administration resist and try to control any assessment program.

This conjuncture still works in Portugal. It means that the announcements about new social integration and rehabilitative programs do not have correspondence with what really happens in the field. At the legal system, for instance, is very common the Portuguese frameworks being the best in the world. However, the State – politic institution or/and administrative authorities – does not feel obligation to develop efforts to comply with the law. So, the public presentation of good intentions are abundant, the openness to many kind of philosophies of intervention are many times declared, but is very difficult to know for sure if it works, how it works, how many people are involved staidly and with success in a given period of time in each kind of experimental program. In fact, Portuguese State does not produce many data or studies about social problems and social institutions. The social institutions, public or private, are, in general, very closed to outside looks and very defensive to any kind of critical exercise.

What happens in Portugal, by the facts, is the presence of a prohibitionist policy in reference to drugs, since the 80's, without academic or political assessment about the results. Two kinds of opinions come to public: a) the immorality of helping people abusing from drugs and the refuse of recognizing the prohibitionist policy as a cause of the spread of drug dealing; b) the ineluctability of being against international prohibitionist policy, caused by the alleged conservative feelings of the people and because national modernization politics is to try mimetically to do the same as every other European countries does, even if it is clear the bad results of prohibitionist policy.

By the law, it is supposed each prisoner has his own single made personal rehabilitation program written down on paper since the first weeks in jail. It is supposed each drug addict prisoner has the same kind of opportunities to get access to healthcare as people living free. By the facts, prisoners are not supposed to be able to get drugs in side prisons and only have two alternatives: a) to join free of drugs programs (4 programs comparing 50 establishments); b) to adopt methadone substitution program, which is more spread all over the system. The joining efforts of prisons and CAT (therapeutic state centers for drug addicts) to take care of inmate problems is legislated but it is only a paper solution for the concentration of drug problems Portuguese prison have.

By the 80's the drug market become invaded by new drugs (heroin, mainly) and by new working class consumers, who have benefit from the higher of wages resulting from strong class struggles that happens in Portugal during the seventies. In the institutional side, new born Attorney General System take as its special task to persecute drug dealing and drug use, developing in the judicial practice a tradition, still operating, of strong feelings against whoever be accused of being near the drug world. By the beginning of 21th century the law no longer incriminates drug users, reducing imprisonment decisions on that matter. Any way is difficult to find a big difference inside prisons, for the time being.

In side prison system what happened was a growing presence of drug users (estimated between 40 and 80% of inmates) transforming the prisoners' culture from a crime type related hierarchical social relation against authorities into a more conciliate and bargaining like relations between inmate and prison authorities over favors and flexibility on prison regimes.

The main prison program on drugs is abstentionist ("Alas livres de droga"). Whoever declare want to stop using drugs can be candidate to join a year program of rehabilitation from drug use in very good prison conditions, compared to normal prison regime. There is no place for everybody who asks for it. The program opens the opportunity for self managing of inmates at a special spot inside prison, segregate from other prisoners. To be chosen to this program a period of observation is needed, besides a vacancy on the program planning. There are some administrative and judicial problems running the program, since it happens inmate s cannot end the program since they are declared free in the middle of it. Or else, the inmates ending the program have to face the probability of returning back to prison normal regime, and to an ambience where drug runs, since their time has not over yet. During the program it can happened to be found drug dealing inside. Nevertheless this is the showoff Portuguese prison system does to present their policy on drugs.

For that time being, the government wants to implement an experiment of institutional assisted injection for the minority that uses this type of drug use, avoiding dirty, multiuse and non functional instruments and minimizing damages. The experiment only now a day begins to be implemented, given the references of good practices in Spain and Swisserland, but opposition of the guards and other prison staff is still going on.