

Darin Weinberg (2024) *On Addiction: Insights from History, Ethnography, and Critical Theory*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 188 pages. ISBN: 9781478030829

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“On Addiction” approaches its title topic from several angles. In an earlier work, anchored in ethnography, Darin Weinberg (2005) explored the inclusion/exclusion of insane, homeless and addict people in two Alcoholic Anonymous groups. In the present book, the author narrows down his focus to addiction yet expands his intellectual resources beyond fieldwork. As the subtitle indicates, there are plenty passages dealing with the history of addiction and of sociology itself. In a sense, this book aligns itself with a tradition within ethnomethodology interested in mental health – Garfinkel’s studies on intersexuality, Pollner’s explorations of mundane reasoning and Sack’s conversational analysis of a suicide hotline, to name a few. One can also find a collage of Foucauldian subjectivity studies, Bourdieu’s habitus, embodied cognition *à la* Merleau-Ponty, analytic philosophy of mind (Davidson, Frankfurt and Rorty) as well as STS. Chiefly, Weinberg claims that existing theories of addiction leave unaccounted the alternating gain and loss of self-control. And as a consequence of this, the status of addiction as a disease is still contested, thus debilitating possible alliances between scientific inquiry and policy-making on the matter. The book’s ultimate goal is to provide a more nuanced comprehension of addiction, hoping to close this gap.

Right from the introduction one sees the ambitious scope of the project. In a tone reminiscent of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Weinberg argues that both natural and social explanations

are insufficient to comprehend the entanglements between suffering, willpower, self-exploration, performance enhancement and other key features of addiction. Medical research fails to reconcile neurological, epidemiological and clinical data, all of them pointing out to different contributing mechanisms of addiction. For their part, social theories have a historical ambivalence between subscribing to health discourses that conceptualize addiction as a disease on the one hand, and adopting a morally agnostic stance stressing the subcultures around drugs and the rational choice of users on the other. According to Weinberg, both approaches fall short in providing a convincing justification for therapeutic assistance – rather than indifference or legal persecution – for addicts. The two perspectives are plagued with several antinomies – free will/determinism, mind/body, science/ethics, rationality/emotion, nature/culture, universal/particular, theory/practice, objectivism/subjectivism, macro/micro, presentism/historicism – leading to reductionism in theory as well as inefficiency in practice. The alternative, Weinberg suggests, is to craft an interdisciplinary view capable to overcome these dichotomies and explain the labile gain and loss of self-control in the diverse situations people inhabit. Not an easy task, to say the least.

The first half of the book is primarily a historical review of how addiction came to be of interest for health sciences, the different (dis)encounters between medical and social research, and



the underlying philosophical compromises of attempts to theorize addiction. One of the main concerns for Weinberg is that despite the wide range of hypothesis of addiction – focused on withdraw symptoms, deficits in impulse regulation, functionality deterioration, attributed meanings, cultural (dis)approval of drugs or cost-benefit calculations – scientists have not established a sharp boundary between normal and pathological drug intake. Besides contemporary scientific debates, Weinberg also alludes to controversies between Puritan and Civic republican discourses in the early modern era to remind us that the notion of ‘disease’ is not immune to historical mutations. Although terms such as ‘sin’, ‘slavery’, ‘redemption’ and ‘virtue’ may strike as odd to our current secular sensitivity, they address the issue of addiction as a chronic condition embedded in certain lifestyles. There is also a detailed reconstruction of Alfred Lindesmith’s seminal work on the sociology of addiction. As I read these pages, I learned a great deal about the fierce struggles among different theories within the sociology departments in America at the dawn of the 20th century and the uneasy relationship with the rising paradigm of behaviorism.

The second half advances what Weinberg calls ‘an ecological understanding of addiction’. Even if defined as a disease, clinicians have been suspicious about the prognosis of addiction. Therapeutic communities, first inspired by indoors hospitals and later recast as outpatient programs, are said to be the better treatment – and thus, for Weinberg, the best places to do fieldwork. Most notably, these communities are artifacts capable of establishing a division between ecologies of addiction and recovery. Patients and counselors must adopt two non-negotiable prepositions to be admitted in these groups: 1) addiction is a genuine disease; and 2) it can solely be cured through the ongoing participation in the program. To support the former tenet addicts ought to be conceptualized as victims of pathological mechanisms, while to substantiate the later patients must be portrayed as choosing agents. These shifting discourses are not intended as factual descriptions, but rather as a peculiar choreography of various incoherent elements of the patient’s self, niches inhabited and available theories about

addiction. Then, passing to a more abstract tone, the book discusses this issue of discontinuity alongside the akrasia (deficit of willpower) thesis proposed by psychologist Nick Heather. Weinberg insists that volition and emotional restraint do not always go hand in hand, and that self-control should be understood as inserted in practical situations with singular cues, group dynamics and learned patterns of behavior. Unfortunately, these arguments are embedded in abstract discussions of critical sociology and philosophy of mind, rather than illustrated with the gathered ethnographic material. Even though Weinberg advocates for casuistry over theoretical generalizations, he seems to prefer erudite philosophy over thick descriptions.

The book closes with an explicit engagement with ANT and post-humanism. This is a feast for readers familiarized with the writings of Haraway, Hayes, Pickering, Latour, Gomart and Mol. At last, Weinberg seems to have found a new, non-dichotomic vocabulary. Here we find statements such as: “addictions take form as learned embodied sensibilities and felicities that tend to bind us to the worlds within which they are acquired and can be availed” (p. 144); “[w]e also differ with respect to our relative freedom to leave or transform the environments within which particular bodily articulations have developed (p.145)”; and “the status of addiction as a form of disease need not be decided with rigid reference to whether suffering can be decisively linked to dysfunctional biological mechanisms but with reference to patterns of seemingly harmful and intransigent bodily articulation with which we cannot, or do not want to, identify ourselves (p. 146)”. Indeed, it is promising to re-conceptualize addiction outside the traditional frameworks of medical and social research. Yet the reader might feel that this new perspective is somewhat underdeveloped in the book. A more sustained dialogue with STS would enrich the discussion on some themes like the heated controversies around drug policies (Stengers and Ralet, 1991), the labile boundaries between normal and pathological (Gieryn, 1983), the uneasy relationship between sociologists of science and policy-makers (Collins and Evans, 2002) and the actual harm of dichotomies in the patients’ bodies (Whynacht, 2018). Weinberg set his own expect-

tations high and frames his project echoing the ANT-style critique of naturalism and sociologism, so one might wonder why not pursue this line of

though further. Having said that, "On Addiction" is a highly recommendable book that hopefully will influence future studies on the matter.

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