

Adrián Cannellotto and Erwin Luchtenberg (Eds.)

Medicalización y sociedad: lecturas críticas sobre la construcción social de enfermedades [Medicalization and Society: Critical Readings on the Social Construction of Diseases]

San Martín, Pcia. de Buenos Aires, UNSAM Edita, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, 2010, pp. 189

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The book edited by Adrián Cannellotto and Edwin Luchtenberg presents the results of a research project sponsored by two Argentinian institutions, the Universidad Nacional de San Martín and the Observatorio Argentino de Drogas (SEDRONAR). The research topic and the book main issue is the process of medicalization and its correlation with the wider social scene. This common thread is stated in the title of the volume: "Medicalization and society. Critical readings on the social construction of diseases". However, the title hides some characteristic aspects of the book and contains a promise which is only partially fulfilled. Let's start from what is concealed. Two further aspects characterize this volume and they can attract the interest of specific audiences of readers: primarily, the context in which the authors observe the forms of medicalization is limited and relates to mental illness and mental health; secondly, the volume moves from the South American scientific debate, integrated with insights provided by international scientific literature, and it contains critical approaches to medicalization from this epistemic framework. These statements better define the objective of the book and make it more identifiable for readers. Instead, the partially unfinished promise refers to the expectation, contained in the title, of an analysis of processes of social construction of diseases and the practice of medicalization. This purpose, which makes the volume particularly appealing to an audience interested in the sociology of medicine, is only partially confirmed in the pages of the book. The book approach tends to be more descriptive and normative rather than analytic, leaving the generative dynamics of the cure process in the background. The book consists of six chapters, linked in various ways to the issue of medicalization. The first two chapters provide an overview of the forms that medicalization plays in contemporary society, starting from the definition of the object as a process of colonization of every sphere of human life carried out by medical professionals and institutions. The argument moves to reconcile the analysis of scholars in the field of sociology of medicine such as Engelhardt and Conrad, with the indications of international institutions such as the WHO, aimed at reducing inequality and poverty, and the experiences of the community model for the treatment of mental diseases. The crisis of the biomedical model, according to which any (mental or physical) health problem is reduced to biological or patho-physiological reasons, seems to leave the

possibility for new approaches of intervention in the area of health. However, the process of medicalization impedes such innovations due to the complex ramifications of power relationships and interests that it has established in contemporary society.

The next two chapters show how medicalization acts in two specific areas of mental health: drug abuse and Attention-Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These areas become contexts through which the interweaving social pressures, scientific knowledge, industrial interests and corporate policies are highlighted and through which the contemporary forms of the medicalization process are generated. The treatment of the abuse of psychoactive substances is defined as a paradigmatic case of social control of deviance. The medicalization of addiction is not only a means of control of consumption practices; it also produces forms of social segregation and confinement of certain social categories through the legislative criminalization of such conducts.

It is possible to speak of “medicalization of social problems”. Echoing Foucault, these processes meet the intent of neoliberal purpose to ensure social stability through the introduction of infrastructures and practices to limit the deviance. Medicalization thus constitutes one of the most important manifestations of “biopower”. The next chapter describes what the author calls the “medicalization of childhood” through the inclusion of attention disorders of children, which seem to become increasingly prevalent in contemporary society, in the field of medical and psychiatric diagnosis and treatment. The essay shows the tension between two main interpretations of inattention and hyperactivity: first, these aspects may signal the existence of a disease caused by a variety of organic causes, and second, these are reduced to signs of conflicts that transcend the child himself and concern his socio-cultural environment. The two interpretations give rise to two opposed courses of action: in the first case, the result is pharmacological intervention for the active management of behaviour; in the second, the result is educational intervention intended to remove the social causes that contribute to generating the conflict in the child. A confirmation of the weight exerted by the social dimension of the process of diagnostic labelling of the disease is given by the number of American studies that have shown that the diagnosis of ADHD is particularly common among the poorer classes of the population. Medicalization thus allows inclusion in the sphere of the “pathological” of certain behaviour which is deemed inappropriate. This also legitimizes actions of individual control through pharmacological containment targeted at restoring the social order.

The last two chapters do not deal directly with the process of medicalization, but the historical evolution of the organization of healthcare institutions in Argentina, with the reporting of relevant critical issues still unresolved. The historical excursus runs through a century of Argentinian health and social services, showing the complex articulation of a building process that has gone through the different stages in the history of the

South American country. In particular, it has been noted how the State and the public institutions have taken very different roles, depending on the different historical periods. This discontinuous evolutionary trajectory seems to have led to what the authors identify as the main unresolved problems in the country: the continuing phenomenon in wide areas of the nation of low degrees of integration between public services and private structures, which tends to exclude a large part of the population of Argentina from access to health services.

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Helga Nowotny and Giuseppe Testa
Naked Genes: Reinventing the Human in the Molecular Age
Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2011, pp. 152

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This book – originally published in German in 2009 – is a good book for many reasons, but one of them prevails over all the others: it was written really together by two different authors, a crucial aspect for assessing the quality of the book, not so much in terms of style as in terms of content. There are obviously many other books written by two authors, but this one is a real novelty as the authors belong to two different fields of study, which are often, and wrongly, contrasting. It is also true that books co-written by authors coming from two different disciplinary fields are not so uncommon; however, those in which the two authors do not simply apply their own individual knowledge or offer the reader a mere juxtaposition of their points of view, and instead create a text that is the genuine result of amalgamation and harmonization free from compromise, that is a real rarity. And such is the case of this book.

Helga Nowotny, in fact, is one of the best examples of what happens when Science and Technology Studies (STS) take science seriously; Giuseppe Testa, on the other hand, belongs to the much smaller group of scientists that take STS seriously, considering them worthy of attention without superficially dismissing them with the accusation of being relativist and without unreasonably snubbing them as enemies of science. As Latour noted, to claim that STS scholars are against science would be the same as calling “biologists anti-life, astronomers anti-stars, immunologists anti-antibodies” (1999, 2).

STS being taken seriously by a scientist produces, among other things, a balancing effect that we are not used to, since STS are becoming an “object” of study the same way that science is an “object” of study for