Radical Recovery: The Social and Political Roots of Lincoln Detox & NADA

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Origin stories: The National Acupuncture Detox Association (NADA) protocol
The People’s Program at Lincoln Hospital (aka Lincoln Detox or Lincoln Recovery), 1970.

Left: demonstration at Lincoln Hospital, 1970.
Above (ca 1971/72), Luis Surita (seated), an early director of the program, with Carlos Alvarez, a volunteer and later paid staff member. (Courtesy of Alvarez)

“Radical Recovery”: Civil and Human rights

- Historically, Radical Recovery is the critical political stance that problems of drug abuse derive from local and global political and economic arrangements of (often racial) capitalism. Proponents often contrast theirs with the approaches of psychotherapists or other models which focus specifically and almost entirely on the individual user. Emerging in the late 1960s, “Radical Recovery” was usually grounded in a deep critique of U.S. domestic and foreign drug policy; and as well in an analysis of race, class, and urban underdevelopment.
- Aligning themselves with Third World, Black Power, Puerto Rican, and Native Peoples Liberation movements, Members of RR movements typically describe as fundamental rights health security, among other things. Part of Radical Recovery is also the foundational notion that recovery from addiction can and should be accessible to all.

political mobilization

Left: Political Education class at Lincoln Detox. Right: front page of White Lightning magazine, the organ of the white antiracist Maoist/Marxist organization of current and former heroin users. White Lightning was allied with Lincoln Detox.

In the South Bronx in order to do any organizing in the community, one must confront the problem of drugs. Addiction (and its companions, crime and police) is one of the worst of the ‘peoples’ ills’; it controls significant portions of everyone’s life in that community. The addicts, according to the political analysis of these groups, can be seen as a potentially ‘revolutionary’ group. Addicts are a lumpen class—they don’t produce anything but crime [but] have a keen sense of hardship and they must stay away from the police. [The goal is to establish] organization [as] an attractive means through which to raise political consciousness among the area’s drug users so that all could understand why both groups [addicts and organizers] are fighting the cops.

-- People’s Program member, ca. 1971
Radical recovery organizations were only loosely affiliated in informal bonds of mutual support, often sharing members with other RR organizations or anti-war, Civil Rights, or poor people’s movements. There seems to have been no leadership structure guiding all of the RR organizations as a movement. They certainly were not as centralized as methadone policy.

The Addiction Services Agency (ASA) was putatively community-oriented but ultimately not community-based. The early ASA was passively against methadone maintenance treatment (MMT), but took criticism from the community-based organizations whom the ASA was supposed to fund and assist.

Methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) was highly technocratic, based largely in large research labs, not under community control.

Radical recovery’s critique of methadone maintenance treatment (MMT): Bureaucracy and Technocracy

Lincoln Detox is a community-based program. All our 45 workers come from the South Bronx and other nearby Black and Latin communities. Most of our workers have been victims of drugs in the past; many have been in prison. You can easily see that most of the Detox workers would never qualify for civil service as the laws are now written. On the job training is a cornerstone of our program. We have taught ourselves to be acupuncture technicians, teachers, medical assistants, laboratory specialists, bookkeepers and above all, community leaders. Under civil service we would have been janitors and file clerks at best.

Powerful groups who benefit from the drug plague and other social corruption have consistently tried to destroy the people’s program. We know that the police, the courts, drug companies like Eli Lilly which makes methadone, and barbiturates, methadone profiteers, organized crime, the AMA, landlords, etc. are our enemies.

"City Is Trying to Destroy Lincoln Detox; Defend the People’s Program" (ca. 1975). Michael Smith papers.
Radical recovery's critique of methadone maintenance treatment (MMT): Pharmaceutical capitalism

Cover of report by the drug users' and former users' rights group White Lightning. This political cartoon depicts the Eli Lilly Corporation as “the legal [drug] pusher.”

Technologies and techniques of radical recovery: auricular acupuncture & the “NADA protocol's” low technical barriers to entry
Conclusions

"At Lincoln Detox we have always felt that just detoxing a victim of drugs is not enough to stop the vicious cycle of drug selling and drug consumption in poor communities. We have developed an extensive preventative medicine program for all of our clients and their families; a remedial education program; daily classes on the social and political realities of drugs; and special counselling programs for welfare and legal problems." (Lincoln Hospital Detox Acupuncture Research. "Program Description." 1975. p2)

We hope that with the use of acupuncture we will be able to painlessly withdraw people off of drugs. These treatments will be coupled with our political education classes and aftercare program. Since the drug plague is the result of the diabolical, avaricious, racist, sexist and classist nature of this society, acupuncture is no cure. In that it will allow for drugless detox, however we believe it will be a positive addition to the people's program.

-- Lincoln Detox, 1974

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Jim Dyson, “Methadone is Slavery” (image from the *Think Black Coloring Book*, New York: The East, 1970). By 1970, many critical political groups – black, Puerto Rican, and white – had come to view with skepticism the nationally ascendant treatment modality of methadone maintenance (MMT), especially its potential as a form of political and social control.

From that position, as this image illustrates, there entered into the critique popular beliefs that methadone had the capacity to “destroy the genes,” or even to be used as a form of genocide.

Similar ideas could be found among methadone’s political critics nationally after 1970. The caption, “Anything you don’t control can be used against you,” is a statement attributed to former Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairman and Black Panther Party Justice Minister H. Rap Brown, although Brown may not have made the statement in the context of methadone.

We Charge Genocide

Thinking in terms of the “traces” that mark social assemblages (Latour 2005), the imputation of genocidal intent in MMT may be regarded as part of the larger political economic critique of drug policy generally. Nancy Scheper Hughes (2002) also refers to the “genocidal continuum.”