

# Giftets värde

Apotekares förståelse av opium i Sverige, 1870-1925

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## Abstract

*The Value of Poison. The understanding of opium among Swedish pharmacists, 1870-1925*

Before the regulation of opium as a "narcotic" in Sweden in 1923, opium was not regulated for its intoxicating properties and was freely available. But not in any kind of shop. Opium was legally available only through the pharmacies. This thesis explores how this free availability of a narcotic was understood by its traders, the pharmacists.

The title of this thesis – The Value of Poison – indicates how opium could be conceptualized as both as a safe, everyday remedy essential to keep freely available and as a drug of intoxication. As a poison it could be articulated as a matter of primarily pharmacological, not moral or medical, concern. This also gave the pharmacists, with their special knowledge of *pharmaka*; (drugs, poisons), an autonomous room space of knowledge free from the ever more intruding "medical gaze". But, in order to articulate this kind of understanding of opium, another kind of knowledge was needed to be acknowledged: that of the user. In this articulation a "sensus communis" was tied in with a broader cultural knowledge of drugs. Problems with opium were as focused on the danger of acute poisonings, not recreational intoxication. Concepts that could have problematized this kind of use were as rearticulated as problems of either of an illegitimate trade, unregulated markets and advertising or of draconian regulation by greedy or sloppy doctors. These rather oppositely elements were made equivalent through the articulation of ignorance in both cases, thus further emphasizing the special knowledge of the pharmacist.

The thesis locates a process of contradiction that contributes to the eventual diminishing of the discourse of poison towards the end of the period. The pharmaceutical knowledge that guaranteed the discourse was based on a "pharmaceutical gaze" on *pharmaka*. It pierced through the drug to identify its substituent constituent parts. In this process it was promised that the different effects of opium would as promised to be separated. "Narcotic" could be a by-product, to be discarded or controlled, without dispensing of other therapeutic effects. With this ever deeper knowledge of opium, knowledge in the pharmacies was made insufficient for the full understanding of opium, and so too was that of the traditional user. The era of opium as a poison was over.

**Keywords:** *pharmaca, opiates, narcotics, apothecary, history of opium, history of pharmacy, history of poison regulations, history of drug regulations, economic history of Sweden, 19:th century, Georges Bataille, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Michel Foucault, Fernand Braudel.*

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