

ISA International Guest Lectures

Pharmaceutical Grey Zones

Life and Its Constituent Ambiguities in Cambodia

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Centre de recherche médecine, sciences, santé, santé mentale, société (Cermes3)

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Georg-Coch-Platz 2
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This communication advances the notion of pharmaceutical grey zones as an analytic framework for understanding the constitutive ambiguities through which drug life unfolds in Cambodia. Drawing on multi-year, multi-sited ethnographic research conducted from the capital Phnom Penh to some of the country's most remote areas, it argues that pharmaceuticals do not simply move through circulation channels but are continually recomposed within socio-technical arrangements that defy stable categorizations. Liminal pharmacies, improvised dispensing practices, and partially regulated infrastructures produce forms of therapeutic action that unsettle binary distinctions between legality and illegality, formal and informal economies, and biomedical orthodoxy and vernacular pharmacologies. These indeterminate spaces are not anomalies at the margins of pharmaceutical order; they are the structural conditions through which pharmaceutical value, authority, and accessibility are constituted. Pharmaceutical grey zones thus denote regimes of practice in which overlapping normative orders coexist without closure. By tracing both the institutional liminality of pharmacy work and the full chain of drug circulation and recombination, this presentation shows that ambiguity functions not as a deviation from governance but as a central modality through which pharmaceutical worlds are continually made and remade. Thinking through pharmaceutical grey zones requires holding together three analytical regimes too often kept apart—governing from the margins, normative plurality, and the socio-technical assemblages of pharmaceutical life—an approach that opens avenues for comparative inquiry across regions and beyond the pharmaceutical domain.



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Laurent Pordié is an anthropologist, Senior Researcher at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), affiliated with Cermes3 in Paris. His current work examines the social and material dynamics of pharmaceuticals, heterodox medical practices, and the everyday politics of medical waste in Cambodia. He has published widely, including the recent edited volumes *Healing at the Periphery* (with S. Kloos, Duke University Press 2022) and *Global Health and the New World Order* (with J.-P. Gaudillière et al., Manchester University Press 2020), and serves as Editor of the Routledge series "Health, Medicine and Science in Asia."

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