

Books & Electronic Media

Drug war heresies

Robert J. MacCoun & Peter Reuter
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The title is well chosen for the subject, which is the current verbal war over drug control policies. As the authors admit, this is not a new topic, but the book is unique in several respects, especially its comprehensiveness. The authors consider almost all conceivable arguments, both in favour of changing the current drug control policies of the USA and against it. The wide range of references and citations makes it a valuable resource book for both policy-makers and researchers. Being so inclusive, the book is, understandably, quite fat — over 400 pages of text plus 70 of bibliography. However, an executive summary is provided in the first chapter to give busy readers both the outline and a practical guide to details of the arguments and supporting data, if needed. There is also a conclusion at the end of each chapter, which helps the reader to avoid getting lost in the maze of viewpoints and data presented.

Rather than keep us in suspense, the authors tell us early on in the book where they stand, which is in favour of major reforms in the punitive US policy. Nonetheless, they manage to exercise impartiality by presenting other arguments right up to the end. An interesting approach they use is to compare drug policy not only with alcohol and tobacco control but with society's attempts to deal with gambling and prostitution. "Soft" methods seem to make these vices more containable, but their applicability to drug problems is unclear.

Though the book focuses on US drug policies, European readers will find much of value in it, particularly as it provides in-depth analyses of various European experiences, and attempts to learn from them. Current European policies are characterized by emphasis on harm reduction, such as depenaliza-

tion of drug use in Italy and Spain, virtual legalization of cannabis in the Netherlands, or heroin medication for heroin addicts in Switzerland. Figures showing that decriminalization has not increased drug-induced deaths in Europe may seem to support such "soft" strategies.

In a detailed analysis of the deterrent effects of prohibition and enforcement, the authors show that the results are rather modest. They also provide a meticulous analysis of drug-related harm, dissecting it into 48 components grouped in four categories. Given the comprehensive arguments and references, readers will find it difficult to disagree with the authors' conclusion that prohibition and tough enforcement are responsible for much of the drug-related damage in the USA, rather than the abuse *per se* of these drugs. After digesting all this, most may well accept the authors' view that depenalization of the use of drugs and their variants will not significantly increase drug abuse in the USA.

However, the book would be a failure if it did not incite readers to get involved in this "war". For me, the main problem with the authors' argument is its failure to place drug control policies within the framework of overall strategy for crime prevention and control. The tough drug control strategy of America appears to me to be part and parcel of its tough anti-crime policy. Overall crime statistics, not given by the authors but reported in the press, show a steady improvement in the USA, and deterioration in Europe. The per capita crime rate of France, for example, has already exceeded that of the USA, and the gap is widening. In crime control, Europe seems to have more to learn from the USA than vice versa; could it be the opposite for drug control?

I don't think it is possible to dissociate drug problems from crime control, for the following reasons. As the authors rightly point out, "increased treatment and prevention, even under the most generous scenarios, will not solve the drug problem". Nowhere in the world can we find an example of successful containment of drug

problems without meaningful reductions in drug availability on the street. Drug availability on the street, in turn, is determined largely by the effectiveness of the criminal justice system in controlling drug trafficking. The same system is also inseparable from the overall crime rates of our societies. Therefore, the deteriorating law and order situation in Europe is a clear indication of decline in the effectiveness of the European criminal justice system. This is a much more serious matter in the long run than the drug problem, which is merely the symptom or product of an ailing system.

The second law of thermodynamics would explain the trend in Europe now. What it states — that any natural change will result in increased entropy or chaos — precisely characterizes the current transformation of European societies which were once rather stable in comparison to others. Weakening border controls have led to multiethnic societies in which individuals respond less and less to the penalties imposed by the criminal justice system following only "European standards". In other words, the existing one-size-fits-all criminal justice system based on high respect for human rights is no longer effective in dealing with the multiethnicity of today's criminal behaviour, be it international terrorism, murder, armed robbery, property crime, illegal emigration, or drug trafficking. This is a real challenge facing Europe, and it calls for whatever wisdom can be drawn from the experience of all well-organized multiracial societies. Some of those are in Asia. A review of Asian experience in prescribing a much wider range of penalties than in Western societies would provide a different perspective on this debate. ■

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