

Drugs in Society

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Executive Summary

The drug-taking culture has become endemic in so-called “western society”. If we remember to include all drugs, including tobacco and alcohol, we can see that the history of popular drug taking spans many centuries. Even some of the more exotic drugs have been available to the well off for many decades. Many attempts have been made to tackle the problem. In most “developed” countries, drug taking, possession and dealing are illegal. Alcohol prohibition was established in the United States in the 1920s. It led to gang wars and ordinary people took to crime to pay for their “booze”. There was an enormous drain on law enforcement agencies in an effort to maintain prohibition. It is now illegal to take certain classified drugs, even to possess them or to supply them. The result has been to plunge many towns and cities in the United Kingdom into a Chicago-like gangster scenario. It is fashionable for “western” governments to blame their counterparts in what they term the “third world” for allowing drug trafficking. The replacement of prohibition by a system of licensed sale, purchase and consumption of drugs would lead to less crime and a reduction in the amount of public funds currently diverted into dealing with the associated criminal activities. It would also enable a more effective addiction programme to be established.

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1 Introduction

The drug-taking culture has become endemic in so-called “western society”. If we remember to include all drugs, including tobacco and alcohol, we can see that the history of popular drug taking spans many centuries. Even some of the more exotic drugs have been available to the well off for many decades.

Drug taking can be an expensive habit. For those who can afford it, there are possible health risks and the risk of prosecution. For those who can afford it but cannot control it, there is the risk of social breakdown and even the loss of income or fortune. For those who cannot afford it, the end result is usually a life of crime, misery or abject poverty. This has always been the case, and is well described in Thomas Hardy’s novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. What has changed in recent years is the scale of the problem. The drug-taking culture is now exploited by organised crime. This has led to the imposition of fear within many otherwise ordinary communities.

Many attempts have been made to tackle the problem. In most “developed” countries, drug taking, possession and dealing are illegal. There have been efforts to be “tough on crime”. There have been initiatives to be “tough on the causes of crime”. In some countries certain drugs have been legalised. There is much argument about the correct strategy to eliminate drug taking. Much of the reasoning has been confused with moral stances about the acceptability of drugs. The moral stand first surfaced as the temperance movement and, as we shall see, led to some of the most horrific gang wars, which today are still mainly associated with the drug supply “industry”.

2 The Acceptability of Drugs

Moderate drug taking has been acceptable throughout the world for many centuries. Cases of excess were often frowned upon, but usually tolerated. Indeed, it was only when the formation of industrialised societies occurred, with their high-density populations and subsequent changes in peer group pressures, that drug taking was perceived to become a problem. Within these societies, the main focus of attention was alcohol abuse. The effects of tobacco were considered less anti-social and its health implications were not apparent. More exotic drugs were usually taken in seclusion and so the effects were not generally visible.

It was this change of climate that led to the dominant position of the temperance movement. There had previously been puritanical movements, not only in “western” societies, but also in various different parts of the world. However, the ascendancy of the temperance movement was combined with the aspiration towards gentility, which was professed by the emerging middle classes. Gentility was seen as an indication of achievement of increased status within society. Thus a social climate was generated which despised poverty and all that went with it. There were many stigmas generated by this attitude, some of which persist in the twenty first century. So those in society who saw themselves as “better” than the masses came to despise alcohol and other drug-taking habits. Their answer to the “evils” of drug taking, initially targeted on alcohol, was prohibition.

3 Prohibition

Mandatory alcohol prohibition was established in the United States in the 1920s. In the states that adopted it, the results were disastrous. The best-known example is what happened in Chicago. Demand for a forbidden product led to a booming black market. “Boot-leg hooch” was produced in every conceivable place. Gang wars broke out as rivals vied for supremacy in the illicit market. Ordinary people took to crime to pay for their “booze”. There was an enormous drain on law enforcement agencies in an effort to maintain prohibition. Whereas in states where there was no prohibition the population had never enjoyed such a period of personal safety, in the areas that adopted prohibition, fear was commonplace. Mercifully, the regime of prohibition eventually came to an end and some semblance of normality was restored, although the aftermath of that era still lingers on, even today.

To consider the progress of prohibition with regard to other drugs, it is useful to consider the case of the United Kingdom. Prohibition with regard to these drugs probably first came to prominence in the early 1960s, when drug taking was associated with pop stars and other high profile people. There was a time when it was possible to register as a drug addict and obtain prescribed supplies legally. During this period there was little or no connection between drug supply and organised crime. There was certainly little temptation to resort to stealing to fund the drug-taking habit. Then came prohibition, which persists to this day.

It is now illegal to take certain classified drugs, even to possess them or to supply them. The result has been to plunge many towns and cities in the United Kingdom into a Chicago-like gangster scenario. As happened in Chicago in the twenties, there is now an enormous drain on law enforcement agencies in an effort to maintain prohibition. It is probable that the majority of crime is drug related. Unlike alcohol products, classified drugs are easy to transport. Transportation systems are much more efficient and effective than they were eighty years ago. So, whereas the Chicago scenario involved mainly local sources of alcohol, most classified drugs are traded across state boundaries. Thus, Customs and Excise efforts have been diverted away from their traditional role in an effort to intercept drug shipments. This is the nightmare scenario of the so-called “developed” world.

It is fashionable for “western” governments to blame their counterparts in what they term the “third world” for allowing drug trafficking. What they fail to take into account is that most of the population of third world countries is extremely poor while that of their own countries is relatively well off. While prohibition persists, the financial rewards for transporting drugs to the target countries is extremely lucrative. No matter what is done to restrain the trade, while it remains lucrative for the poor, it will continue to flourish. One only has to consider Parkinson’s analysis: if the benefits outweigh the penalties, there will be many willing to undertake the task. Thus, western governments need to put their own house in order. If the trade ceases to be lucrative, it will rapidly decline.

4 Considerations for a Drugs Strategy

We need to consider several factors when looking for an effective way to ameliorate the situation. These can be summarised as under the following headings.

4.1 Alcohol and Tobacco

It is well known that both alcohol and tobacco can be addictive, both can be harmful to health, both can cause behavioural problems and both can cause offence to others. These are the main characteristics of all classes of drugs, which leads to their proscription. Thus any solution to the drugs problem needs to take alcohol and tobacco into account.

4.2 The Potential for Immediate Large Profit

It is acknowledged that the much of the cocaine shipped from the Caribbean is destined for the United Kingdom. The reason most often cited is that, although the US is much closer geographically, the US street price has plummeted to the point where it is not worth the risk to ship drugs there. Presumably, were the street price in the UK to fall to a low level, the shipments to the UK would also cease. It can also be argued that, if the price of all classified drugs were to fall to a sufficiently low level, it would not be worth the risks currently taken by organised drug traffickers to continue trading.

4.3 The Effect of Prohibition

The question arises as to how to cause a slump in the street price. We have already seen a parallel between the rise in organised crime caused by the prohibition of classified drugs and the gangland culture of Chicago in the 1920s. The end of prohibition in the US was accompanied by the demise of alcohol related crime. It is only a small step to predict that the ending of prohibition with respect to classified drugs will lead to the demise of drug related crime.

4.4 The Impact on Society in General

The main popular thrust against the legalisation of drugs is a moral one. This is probably because the puritanical arguments have somehow become convoluted with the fear of organised crime. However, in societies where drug taking is tolerated and there is therefore little profit for organised crime, there has been no general reduction in moral standards. Indeed, life is often more liberal and the streets are usually safer.

4.5 The Experience from Registering Addicts

In the days of registered drug addicts in the UK, it was possible for an addict to obtain prescription supplies sufficient to prevent large-scale purchase on the black market. It was therefore much easier to monitor addiction and administer treatment programmes.

4.6 Safety and the Influence of Drugs

There are many activities where the influence of drugs can become a safety hazard. These include drinking and operating machinery. In addition, excess intoxication in a public place can lead to antisocial behaviour that could pose a threat to the safety of others. The effects depend on the individual, the drug and the degree of intoxication.

4.7 Offence to Others

People's drug taking habits are frequently offensive to others. The causes of offence are varied and include offence at unguarded language, offensive behaviour, the smell of the drug and physical reaction to the drug's side effects, such as degradation of air quality caused by cigarette smoke.

4.8 Licensing the Sale and Consumption of Drugs

In the UK, all vendors of tobacco and alcoholic drinks require a licence. In general, this gives good control over the distribution of these products. In some parts of the world, it is necessary to hold a licence to purchase alcohol. The licence restricts the amount the licensee can purchase, depending on income. This system has two advantages, plus a potential one. It not only helps to restrain over-consumption, but also helps to prevent any addiction leading to financial ruin. It could also enable a register to be kept, allowing the monitoring of addiction.

5 The way Forward

The above considerations point to a clear strategy, which can be summarised as follows:

- Prohibition should be abolished for all drugs;
- Tobacco and alcohol should be classified as drugs under the terms of the strategy;
- The sale of all drugs should be licensed;
- A licence should be required to purchase any drug;
- A national database should be established so that the licensing system can be administered on-line, in much the same way as the national lottery.
- Consumption of drugs should be permitted in private;
- The term private might include establishments dedicated to consumption, such as public houses;
- In establishments where consumption is allowed, there should be separate provision for those who are offended by drug taking;
- The status of any establishment with regard to drug taking should be prominently displayed outside the premises;
- Drug taking should not be permitted where it might compromise safety;
- An effective programme for control of addiction should be established.

6 Conclusions

The current situation in most “western” countries with regard to drug taking is untenable. It is clear that prohibition leads to a significant increase in criminal activity. There are examples from around the world and from history that point the way towards a sound strategy for dealing with the current drug-taking problem. The replacement of prohibition by a system of licensed sale, purchase and consumption of drugs would lead to less crime and a reduction in the amount of public funds currently diverted into dealing with the associated criminal activities. It would also enable a more effective addiction programme to be established. Alcohol and tobacco are drugs and should also be controlled by the same means. Modern technology can be harnessed to help administer a realistic licensing system.

7 References

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