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DRUGS



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INTRODUCTION

A good way of apparently winning a debate is to substitute a false debate for the real one, thus ensuring that people waste their time discussing irrelevancies. A case in point is the drug problem which is presented as one of law and order. More effective policing will arrest all the dealers and stop the sale of drugs - this is the message put across by the media, especially in fantasies like the film Year of the Dragon. The thriller format diverts attention from the consequently unchallenged assertions that the use of heroin can (and should) be stopped by the police. The debate appears to be won by avoiding it. We discuss more effective means of policing, thus missing the point that prohibition is wrong in principle and unworkable in practice. Of course it is only possible to rig a debate in this way when the means of communication are firmly under control but that's another story. As you are about to see the truth about drugs is very different from the fantasy put out by the media.

If someone wants to take drugs then that's their business. It is irrelevant whether or not the drug in question is comparatively innocuous in its effects (like cannabis) or extremely dangerous (like alcohol or heroin). It is irrelevant whether the drug is legal or illegal. The word drugs is often used to refer only to illegal drugs, as if drugs were something outside of normal society. In fact the three biggest drug problems in Britain are caused by alcohol, tobacco and tranquillisers prescribed by doctors and there is no justification for restricting the use of the word to those drugs which happen to be illegal. It is irrelevant whether or not any harm comes to the drug user. The only qualification to be made is that there must be an age of consent set and imposed.

The view that we should be able to take whatever drugs we want to is a particular example of the general principle that we should be allowed to do whatever does not harm other people. Mugging harms people other than the perpetrator and is quite rightly seen as morally wrong. In contrast, heroin taking harms the person who has consented to take heroin - a victimless crime. Individuals should be sovereign over themselves (and not over anyone else). The individual is not the property of some external entity such as government or God and this is so whether the entity is real (like government) or imaginary (like God). Yet this is precisely what is asserted by anti-drug laws.

The libertarian principle just outlined is not generally accepted. In particular governments show their rejection of the sovereignty of the individual by trying to forcibly stop

people from taking drugs. (Note that trying to force someone to do or not do something is different from trying to persuade them similarly.) Why governments reject the sovereignty of the individual is a question to return to. For the moment there is another point to look at. Prohibition has been a complete and utter failure. The only limit to the number of people taking heroin appears to be self-imposed. When everyone stupid or depressed enough to stick a needle in their arm is doing so then the number of addicts will stop rising. So why has prohibition failed? To answer this requires a short diversion into economics.

Drug dealers, like other merchants, are motivated by the desire to make profits and profits are dependent on price. If the price of what is sold is higher than that of what is bought then the result is a profit. In turn price is dependent on conditions of supply and demand. Supply is the amount of something that's on sale and demand is the amount of money that people are prepared to pay for it. In the economic jargon of supply and demand prohibition is the restriction of supply. This has the effect, since demand has not been similarly restricted, of raising the price. Every big seizure of drugs boosts the profits of those drug dealers whose imports haven't been seized. The more that gets seized the better the prospects for the other dealers and the greater the incentive to import more. In other words, prohibition guarantees the profits of the dealers. No wonder it has failed.

Prohibition has various other effects. It recruits a sales force of small time users who sell drugs in order to help pay

for their own consumption. It boosts crime, since those who have acquired expensive addictions will steal to get the money they need. Dealers dilute their products in order to sell them for more and this increases the health risks run by drug users. Prohibition also leads to police corruption. Dealers bribe the police to ignore their activities and occasionally give them the names of other dealers, business rivals, so that the police have arrests to their credit and the dealers have reduced competition to contend with. When a dealer is arrested any cash handy and most of their drug supply can disappear. The dealer is not going to complain since a serious charge of possession with intent to supply has been reduced to one of simple possession and for their part the police now have cash and drugs for their own use or for paying informants. The only point at issue here is the extent to which such corruption occurs. (It could be argued that the police are already so corrupt that additional opportunities for corruption make no difference but this line of argument doesn't seem to have been advanced as yet.)

In the face of state persecution (and other hazards) drug dealers persist in providing consumers with the products they demand. Drug dealers are the heroes of the curiously-named free market. Why, then, are they unacknowledged by the so-called free marketeers in the legislature who contradict their free market principles by trying to forcibly stop the use of drugs? Prohibition is a perfect example of a do-gooding nanny state interfering in what is none of its business and trying to run peoples' lives for them. It seems that most of those who advocate the free market don't understand what it is.

What are we to do about the problem of drugs? Obviously it is undesirable that people should use drugs to the extent that they damage their health and all possible means should be used to persuade people not to do this. Proper information should be available on the dangers (and benefits, if any) of drugs. There should be adequate rehabilitation facilities for those trying to kick dependency. (The inadequacy of rehabilitation facilities shows how shallow the government's commitment to the fight against drug dependency really is.) But the government's failed attempt at prohibition must be rejected, as must the medical profession's attempt to play God by treating drug use as a medical problem. If doctors want to do something to help people with drug problems they can start with the tens of thousands of tranquilliser addicts created by their prescribing. Finally, why should the free market in the shape of drug dealers be allowed to profit from what can be human misery? The profit should be taken away from the dealers by having drugs given away free to all those who want them. This will remove the incentive on small dealers to help pay for their own consumption by selling to others and will cause a fall in crime committed by addicts in order to meet the high prices charged by the unholy and unadmitted alliance between government and the market. The only losers will be the dealers and corrupt police.

There is, of course, no chance of the libertarian solution to the drug problem being adopted. Any rich philanthropist who tried to set up such a scheme would simply be arrested. There are three main reasons why government makes the

drug problem worse by persisting in its failed prohibition. For a start, government is too small-minded to admit that it has failed. Secondly, governments reject the principle of the sovereignty of the individual. Once it is accepted in one area, drugs, people will try and extend it to others and who knows where that may lead? Whether people use alcohol or heroin to escape a dull, dismal and exploitative society is a secondary question. Their desire to escape reality through drugs is what comes first, not the choice of drug. Any proper anti-drug campaign will start by questioning the type of society where people do useless, meaningless jobs in order to earn enough money to pass their leisure time in a state of semi-consciousness. Thirdly, the government is not worried about the failure of prohibition because the whole thing is a massive confidence trick.

Prohibition is wrong in principle and has failed in practice. Government uses issues like the drug problem to justify its own existence but, as we have seen, the governmental solution makes the original problem worse and creates an additional problem in the form of increased crime. So what is the real purpose of government? Clearly not the protection of the general public. In the field of drugs the verdict is not merely that government is not the solution. It is that government is part of the problem.

The mass media myth about drugs centres on the pusher who entices innocents to their destruction with evil and mysterious substances. It being taken for granted that people should be prevented from taking drugs, the main way to achieve this is by imposing long prison sentences on the pushers. That's the myth, now for some facts.

The biggest drug problems are caused not by the illegal drugs the mass media condemn, but by alcohol and tobacco. But the mass media get advertising revenue from the alcohol and tobacco industries, and the government tax those industries, and so it doesn't pay to tell the truth. As for the pushers, their customers call them dealers. They are making money by meeting consumer demands and are

obviously part of the wondrous free market whose praises are sung so loudly. Drug dealers are, in Mrs Thatcher's powerful and imbecilic phrase, wealth creators. Illicit drugs and their suppliers are simply another form of capitalism, differing from the mainstream variety only in illegality.

The libertarian position on drugs is that however sad it is for someone to damage themselves, possibly fatally, with alcohol or heroin, in the last analysis, it's their life (this refers to adults, not children). But there is no reason why capitalists should be allowed to profit from human misery and this goal can be easily reached. If heroin were given away free then the dealer's profits would evaporate (and addicts would no longer have to resort to theft,

prostitution, dealing, etc in order to finance their habit). Instead of this we have (failed) prohibition which restricts supply, thus forcing up the price and guaranteeing exceptionally high profits. The drugs squad are ostensibly the opponents of the dealers but in reality they are their allies and the fiction that police action will help solve the drugs problem is part of the wider law and order confidence trick. Partly because of the financial reason given earlier and partly for other reasons including the law and order con, neither the government nor the mass media will tell the truth about drugs. But their hold over the exchange of information is not total and the truth is beginning to seep out.