

DRUG WAR HERESIES. LEARNING FROM OTHER VICES, TIMES AND PLACES. By ROBERT J. MACCOUN and PETER REUTER (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, xvi & 479 pp. £18.95 pb).

The drug war discourse is a well-trodden field summarized here as a three-way contest between prohibitionists, decriminalizers (or 'depenalizers') and legalizers. It is however a set of arguments rarely subject to rigorous empirical enquiry. That is what is attempted by Robert MacCoun and Peter Reuter in their book *Drug War Heresies*, a truly major undertaking which provides a rare instance of sustained comparative social policy analysis. This is a deeply humane book, and invariably dispassionate. It provides a conceptual framework for assessing drug policies and their varied impacts. The main body of the work, however, is a thoughtful and relentless sifting of the available evidence of 'vice' control policies in different times and places. Drugs are not the only phenomenon examined, but also prostitution, gambling, alcohol and cigarettes are touched upon. The aim is to explore what might be learned so as to improve America's drug policy which the authors characterize as 'paralysed' and also 'frivolous and uncaring' in its refusal to countenance any alternatives to its own punitive prohibitionist stance. The authors, to their credit, do not try to force any easy answers, but leave us with as many uncertainties at the end as in the beginning, albeit a better informed uncertainty.

Of the book's 400 pages of text, almost 100 are devoted to different aspects of European drug policies and their effects, including an unusually thoughtful and detailed assessment of the Dutch 'coffee shop' system. The authors do not fall into the trap of regarding European drug policies as moving in some kind of off-key harmony. In some European debates, I have noted a triumphalist tone that characterizes the Continent's drug policies as different expressions of the same progressive, rationalist 'harm reduction' project; contrasted with the backward, self-inflicted damage of America's war on itself. MacCoun and Reuter sense something different, clearly sympathetic to the idea of Europe as a 'laboratory' of drug reform from which much can be learned, although their conclusion is that 'given the resistance of even near neighbours to learn from each other, we must not be surprised if the laboratory results have little impact on US policy making' (p. 299). So, Europe is approached as a sounding board, and as a rather quarrelsome club, rather than as a beacon of light.

If proof were needed that European drug policy is currently anything but 'paralysed', it is to be found in the context of what this book does not say about Europe. Because, in spite of its encyclopaedic attention to detail, it seems almost dated in some respects. I will give two examples. First, there is no mention whatsoever of the UK government ten-year drug strategy announced in 1998, which re-drew the map in many important ways. Most strikingly, the policy emphasis was moved towards combating the drugs-crime connection, with a central aim to reduce the impact of drugs on vulnerable communities in the form of drug-related crime and anti-social nuisance. For many commentators, this has involved a 'criminalization' (one might almost say 'Americanization') of British drug policy, through the use of new legislative powers such as Drug Treatment and Testing Orders which require offenders with drug-related problems to undergo treatment and to remain drug-free. It is certainly no longer true to characterize British policy as the authors do: 'We believe that the British see heroin use as principally a problem of individual health; the primary reason for providing treatment is to help the addict solve his own problems, though the reduction of social costs is most welcome' (p. 298). Under New Labour government strategy, the reduction of social costs is the be-all-and-end-all of social policy.

My second counter-example is France. France has been seen as one of the most conservative and prohibitionist drug regimes in Europe, obsessively and anxiously casting one eye at the tolerant cannabis policy of its Dutch neighbour, but curiously uninterested in the proximity of

the cannabis fields in Francophone Morocco. However, following a controversial report commissioned by the Health Minister Bernard Kouchner in 1998 that turned its attention to alcohol and tobacco, while judging cannabis as the substance least harmful to health, the French government launched a harm reduction information programme entitled 'Know More, Risk Less' under the ministerial catchphrase from Mme Nicole Maestracci that there is no such thing as a drug-free world: 'Une société sans drogue, ça n'existe pas!' (MILDT 2000: 6). With M. Chirac returned with a powerful presidential majority in the elections of 2002, however, it was not long before she was despatched with the announcement of a new ministerial mission to turn back the clock to true republican values and a renewed emphasis on enforcement and 'security'.

So that if Europe is a 'laboratory', as MacCoun and Reuter suggest, European drug policy has become so fluid that it is a strange kind of laboratory where the equipment frequently gets broken up and replaced before the experiment has run its course. With the result that even though this book is brimming with factual evidence, there is a whole new depository of facts and loose-ends with which the authors would have to contend if they were to start researching their book again, as of now. This of course is one of the problems of writing big books. They take so long to research and write (this one took ten years) that if the concern is modern public policy, by the time the book is finished there is a good chance that the world will have moved on.

The European experience, then, contrasts sharply with that of the United States with its unchanging dedication to aggressive prohibition. Although it is not a contrast that this book helps to clarify. The drug policies adopted by different European nations reflect the ebb-and-flow of the democratic process and their different traditions of political and judicial liberty, with the newly emergent European nations adding new narratives to an already complex weave (Ferret 2000). To understand the moral-political power bloc that underpins America's implacable drug policy would require a work of political science. It is not that all is quiet: medical marijuana has provoked some lively debate in the United States, and resulted in some surprising voting outcomes in regional state referenda. But in spite of its many achievements, there seems little likelihood that the rational calculations of *Drug War Heresies* will unfreeze the American drug war impasse. Perhaps the title of the book itself is the give-away. Heresy is a departure not from fact, but from faith. Drug control policies, including European ones, are never entirely rational and always touch the nerve of morality and emotion. And whatever the nature of the drug faith is, America is a true believer.

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