

The War on Consciousness

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We are told that the “War on Drugs” is being waged, on our behalf, by our governments and their armed bureaucracies and police forces, to save us from ourselves. “Potential for abuse and harm” are supposed to be the criteria by which the use of drugs is suppressed—the greater a drug’s potential for abuse and harm, the greater and more vigorous the degree of suppression, and the more draconian the penalties applied against its users.

In line with this scheme drugs are typically ranked into a hierarchy: Schedules I, II, and III in the US, Classes A, B, and C in the UK, and so on and so forth all around the world. Thus, to be arrested for possession of a Schedule I or Class A drug results in heavier penalties than possession of a Schedule III or Class C drug. Generally if a drug is deemed to have some currently accepted medical use it is likely to be placed in a lower schedule than if it has none, notwithstanding the fact that it may have potential for abuse or harm. In the absence of any recognized therapeutic effects, drugs that are highly addictive,

such as heroin or crack cocaine, or drugs that are profoundly psychotropic, including hallucinogens such as LSD, psilocybin, or DMT, are almost universally placed in the highest schedules and their use attracts the heaviest penalties.

The notable exceptions to this system of ranking according to perceived “harms” are, of course, alcohol and tobacco, both highly addictive and harmful drugs—far more so than cannabis or psilocybin, for example—but yet socially accepted on the grounds of long customary use and thus not placed in any schedule at all.

The Failed War

When we look at the history of the “War on Drugs” over approximately the last 40 years, it must be asked whether the criminalization of the use of any of the prohibited substances has in any way been effective in terms of the stated goals that this “war” was supposedly mounted to achieve. Specifically, has there been a marked reduction in the use of illegal drugs over the past 40 years—as one would expect with billions of dollars of taxpayers’ money having been spent over such a long period on their suppression—and has there been a reduction in the harms that these drugs supposedly cause to the individual and to society?

It is unnecessary here to set down screeds of statistics, facts, and figures readily available from published sources to assert that in terms of its own stated objectives the “War on Drugs” has been an abject failure and a shameful and scandalous waste of public money. Indeed, it is well known, and not dis-

puted, that the very societies that attempt most vigorously to suppress various drugs, and in which users are subject to the most stringent penalties, have seen a vast and continuous *increase* in the per capita consumption of these drugs. This is tacitly admitted by the vast armed bureaucracies set up to persecute drug users in our societies, which every year demand more and more public money to fund their suppressive activities; if the suppression were working, one would expect their budgets to go down, not up.

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Meanwhile the social harms caused by the “War on Drugs” itself are manifest and everywhere evident. In the United States, for example, there have been more than 20 million arrests for the possession of the Schedule I drug marijuana since 1965 and 11 million since 1990. The pace of arrests is increasing year on year, bringing us to the astonishing situation where, today, a marijuana smoker is arrested every 38 seconds.¹ The result, as Rob Kampia, executive director of the Marijuana Policy Project, recently observed, is that marijuana arrests outnumber arrests for “all violent crimes combined,” meaning police are spending inordinate amounts of time chasing nonviolent criminals.² And it goes without saying that those who are arrested for the use of marijuana and other illegal drugs do suffer immense harm as a result of the punishments inflicted on them—including, but not limited to, personal trauma, loss of freedom, loss of reputation, loss of employment prospects, and serious, long-lasting financial damage.

Inventory of Harm

Such matters are only the beginning of the long inventory of harm caused by the “War on Drugs.”

Western industrial societies, and all those cultures around the globe that increasingly seek to emulate them, teach us to venerate above all else the alert, problem-solving state of consciousness that is particularly appropriate to the conduct of science, business, war, and logical inquiry, and to such activities as driving cars, operating machinery, performing surgery, doing accounts, drawing up plans, accumulating wealth, etc., etc., etc. But there are many other states of consciousness that the amazing and mysterious human brain is capable of embracing, and it appears to be a natural human urge, as deep-rooted as our urges for food, sex, and nurturing relationships, to seek out and explore such “altered states of consciousness.” A surprisingly wide range of methods and techniques (from breathing exercises, to meditation, to fasting, to hypnosis, to rhythmic music, to extended periods of vigorous dancing, etc.) is available to help us to achieve this goal, but there is no doubt that the consumption of those plants and substances called “drugs” in our societies is amongst the most effective and efficient means available to mankind to explore these profoundly altered states of consciousness.

The result is that people naturally seek out drugs and the temporary alterations in consciousness that they produce. Not all

people in every society will do this, perhaps not even a majority, but certainly a very substantial minority—for example the 2 million Britons who are known to take illegal drugs each month³ or those 20 million people in the US who have been arrested for marijuana possession since 1965. And these of course are only the tip of the iceberg of the much larger population of American marijuana users, running into many more tens of millions, who have, by luck or care, not yet fallen foul of the law and are thus not reflected in the arrest statistics.

Needless to say, it is of course exactly the same urge to alter consciousness that also impels even larger numbers of people to use legal (and often extremely harmful) drugs such as alcohol and tobacco—which, though they may not alter consciousness as dramatically as, say, LSD, are nevertheless undoubtedly used and sought out for the limited alterations of consciousness that they do produce.

For the hundreds of millions of people around the world whose need to experience altered states is not and cannot be satisfied by drunken oblivion or the stimulant effects of tobacco, it is therefore completely natural to turn to “drugs”—and, since the “War on Drugs” means that there is no legal source of supply of these substances, the inevitable result is that those who wish to use them *must* resort to illegal sources of supply.

Herein lies great and enduring harm. For it is obvious, and we may all see the effects everywhere, that the criminalization of drug use has empowered and enriched a vast and truly horrible global criminal underworld by guaranteeing that it is the *only* source of supply of these drugs. We have, in effect, delivered our youth—the sector within our societies that most strongly feels the need to experience altered states of consciousness—into the hands of the very worst mobsters and sleazeballs on the planet. To buy drugs our sons and daughters have no choice but to approach and associate with violent and greedy criminals. And because the proceeds from illegal drug sales are so enormous, we are all caught up in the inevitable consequences of turf wars and murders amongst the gangs and cartels competing in this blackest of black markets.

It should be completely obvious to our governments, after more than 40 years of dismal failure to suppress illegal drug use, that their policies in this area do not work and will never work. It should be completely obvious, a simple logical step, to realize that by decriminalizing drug use, and making the supply of all drugs available to those adults who wish to use them

through legal and properly regulated channels, we could, at a stroke, put out of business the vast criminal enterprise that presently flourishes on the supply of illegal drugs.

It ought to be obvious, but somehow it is not.

Instead the powers that be continue to pursue the same harsh and cruel policies that they have been wedded to from the outset, ever seeking to strengthen and reinforce them rather than to replace them with something better. Indeed the *only* “change” that the large, armed bureaucracies that enforce these policies has ever sought since the “War on Drugs” began has, year on year, been to demand even more money, even more arms, and even more draconian legislative powers to break into homes, to confiscate property, and to deprive otherwise law-abiding citizens of liberty and wreck their lives. In the process we have seen our once free and upstanding societies—which used to respect individual choice and freedom of

Enforcement Administration agent or a prison guard, you naturally have a deeply vested interest in maintaining the miserable status quo, justified by the “War on Drugs,” that keeps you in your job, that ensures your monthly paychecks continue to come in, and that continuously expands your budgets.

The second main category of beneficiaries is—of course!—the criminal gangs and cartels that the present misguided official policies have empowered as the sole source of drugs in our societies. Over the past 40-plus years they have earned countless billions of dollars from the sale of illegal drugs which, had they only been legal, would not have earned them a single penny.

Who are the losers? First and most directly those millions upon millions of good, nonviolent people in our societies who have been jailed or otherwise punished for the possession and use of drugs. And second (regardless of whether or not they use illegal drugs themselves), virtually everyone else in our societ-

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conscience above all else—slide remorselessly down the slippery slope that leads to the police state. And all this is being done in our name, with our money, by our own governments, to “save us from ourselves”!

Winners and Losers

Who benefits from this colossal stupidity and systematic wickedness? And who loses?

The beneficiaries are easy to spot.

First, the large and ever-expanding armed bureaucracies, funded with large and ever-growing sums of public money to suppress the use of drugs, have benefited enormously. Everyone who works for them, including the PR people and spin merchants who concoct the propaganda used to sell their policies to us, including their subcontractors both public and private, and including the (often privately run) prisons stuffed to bursting point with their victims, are the beneficiaries of this catastrophic failure on the part of our governments to think laterally, generously, and creatively. Whether you are a Drug

ies as well. For the quality of life of all of us has been diminished by the growth of the police state and by the murderous activities of the criminal gangs enfranchised, and kept in business, by the blind and mindless perpetuation of this failed and bankrupt “War on Drugs.”

So, in summary, the criminalization of drug use has brought no positive effects, only negative ones, and it has not stopped or even reduced the use of dangerous and harmful drugs. On the contrary, we have been so little “saved from ourselves” by this phony war that the use of almost all illegal drugs, far from decreasing, has dramatically increased during the past 40 years.

Learning from Tobacco

A contrary example, but one that is most instructive, concerns the use of tobacco in our societies.

Tobacco has never been illegal; far from that, its use has been actively encouraged by clever advertising campaigns mounted by the multibillion-dollar tobacco industry. But the use of tobacco does undoubtedly lead to great harms, both for the

health of the individual and the health of society at large, and facts about these harms have been widely and successfully disseminated without a single tobacco user ever being arrested or persecuted.

It's interesting in this connection to compare the success of public information campaigns about the dangers of tobacco use with the utter failure of public information campaigns about the dangers of marijuana use. The reason the anti-marijuana campaigns have failed is that millions of users know from their own direct, long-term experience that marijuana does *not* do them any great harm and (with reference to the most recent anti-marijuana propaganda) most definitely does *not* drive them mad. It may well be true that very small numbers of fragile teenagers whose mental health was already compromised have had their latent schizophrenia or other similar conditions worsened by the use of marijuana—but the vast majority of marijuana users are not at all affected in this way. Likewise efforts by government agencies to persuade us that new, stronger strains of marijuana presently available on the market (e.g., “skunk”) are more dangerous to our health than traditional strains of marijuana because they deliver much more of the active ingredient THC to our systems, have not persuaded anyone. Regular marijuana users presented with a stronger strain simply adjust their consumption, consuming far less of it than they would of a weaker strain in order to achieve the same effect, and feel intuitively that smoking less of any substance has got to be better for their lungs and general health than smoking more.

The consequence of this disconnect between personal experience and “facts” purveyed by official public information campaigns is that huge numbers of people no longer believe anything that our governments have to say to us about drugs. There is an increasingly widespread recognition that tainted, unreliable, and tendentious information is being passed on—information that cannot be trusted. And this distrust of official sources of information is, of course, only worsened by the propagandistic character, witch hunts, and scare tactics of the “War on Drugs” and by the realization that the health information purveyed in anti-drug campaigns is not underwritten by caring and nurturing official policies but instead by draconian criminal sanctions and punitive authoritarian attitudes.

Where the health hazards of tobacco use are concerned, on the other hand, since there are no criminal sanctions against tobacco users, no large, armed bureaucracies to enforce them, and no special interests to serve by the dissemination of misleading information, the evidence has been accepted and believed by most rational adults freely making up their own minds, precisely as one would expect.

The result? While the use of illegal drugs has everywhere skyrocketed over the past 40 years, regardless of the violent persecution of the users of these drugs, the use of tobacco, in a climate of free choice and reliable information, has plummeted to an all-time low. The consumption of tobacco, once seen as a socially approved, even desirable, and, indeed, “stylish” habit, has come to be regarded as a pariah-creating activity that only idiots would indulge themselves in. Although there are, of course, still many tobacco users—because nicotine is intensely addictive—their numbers continue to fall dramatically year on year as more and more of us make the free choice to give up the habit for the sake of our health.

Is it not obvious that the “tobacco model” could be applied with equal success to all illegal drugs? In other words, is it not obvious, if our governments really wish us to stop using drugs, that immediate legalization of adult personal use must follow, that the giant, armed bureaucracies that persecute drug users must be closed down, and that the whole matter must be thrown open, in the way that tobacco use has been thrown open, to the effects of good, reliable information and the sound common-

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sense of the vast majority of the population? If that happens then we can be certain that drugs that are genuinely harmful to health and wellbeing (in the way that tobacco certainly is) will fall out of favor with their users in exactly the way that tobacco has done. And if it turns out that some of these drugs are in fact not so harmful, then it should not concern us at all if some adults make the free choice to continue to use them.

Of course, even against a backdrop of legalization and good information, some adults will make the free choice to continue

to use genuinely harmful drugs as well, just as some adults today do continue to make the free choice to continue to use tobacco. But that, too, is as it should be in a truly free society. Republican Congressman Barney Frank was spot on the truth of what a free society really means when he announced a proposal in August 2008 to end federal penalties for Americans carrying fewer than 100 grams (almost a quarter of a pound) of marijuana. “The vast amount of human activity ought to be none of the government’s business,” Frank said on Capitol Hill. “I don’t think it is the government’s business to tell you how to spend your leisure time.”

It goes without saying that Frank’s proposal is unlikely to succeed in the hysterical climate of disinformation that presently surrounds this subject, and we must ask ourselves why this should be so. Why are commonsense proposals for the legalization of drugs never adopted, or even seriously considered by our governments? Why, on the contrary, are such proposals dogmatically opposed with even more propaganda and tainted information emanating from the big, armed anti-drug bureaucracies?

That legalization of drugs would shrink the budgets of those selfsame bureaucracies, and ultimately put them out of business, is part of the answer. But to find the real engine that perpetuates the “War on Drugs” we need to look deeper and ask fundamental questions about the relationship between the individual and the state in modern Western democracies.

Freedom of Consciousness

What is Western civilization all about? What are its greatest achievements and highest aspirations?

It’s my guess that most people’s replies to these questions would touch—before all the other splendid achievements of science, literature, technology, and the economy—on the nurture and growth of freedom.

Individual freedom.

Including, but not limited to freedom from the unruly power of monarchs, freedom from the unwarranted intrusions of the

state and its agents into our personal lives, freedom from the tyranny of the Church and its Inquisition, freedom from hunger and want, freedom from slavery and servitude, freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, freedom of thought and speech, freedom of assembly, freedom to elect our own leaders, freedom to be homosexual—and so on and so forth.

The list of freedoms we enjoy today that were not enjoyed by our ancestors is indeed a long and impressive one. It is therefore exceedingly strange that Western civilization in the twenty-first century enjoys no real **freedom of consciousness**.

There can be no more intimate and elemental part of the individual than his or her own consciousness. At the deepest level, our consciousness *is* what we are—to the extent that if we are not sovereign over our own consciousness then we cannot in any meaningful sense be sovereign over anything else either. So it has to be highly significant that, far from encouraging freedom of consciousness, our societies in fact violently deny our right to sovereignty in this intensely personal area, and

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have effectively outlawed all states of consciousness other than those on a very narrowly defined and officially approved list. The “War on Drugs” has thus unexpectedly succeeded in engineering a stark reversal of the true direction of Western history by empowering faceless bureaucratic authorities to send armed agents to break into our homes, arrest us, throw us into prison, and deprive us of our income and reputation simply because we wish to explore the sometimes radical, though always temporary, alterations in **our own consciousness** that drugs facilitate.

Other than being against arbitrary rules that the state has imposed on us, personal drug use by adults is not a “crime” in any true moral or ethical sense and usually takes place in the privacy of our own homes, where it cannot possibly do any harm to others. For some it is a simple lifestyle choice. For

others, particularly where the hallucinogens such as LSD, psilocybin, and DMT are concerned, it is a means to make contact with alternate realms and parallel dimensions, and perhaps even with the divine. For some, drugs are an aid to creativity and focussed mental effort. For others they are a means to tune out for a while from everyday cares and worries. But in all cases it seems probable that the drive to alter consciousness, from which all drug use stems, has deep genetic roots.

Other adult lifestyle choices with deep genetic roots also used to be violently persecuted by our societies.

A notable example is homosexuality, once punishable by death or long periods of imprisonment, which is now entirely legal between consenting adults—and fully recognized as being none of the state's business—in all Western cultures. (Although approximately thirteen US states have “anti-sodomy” laws outlawing homosexuality, these statutes have rarely been enforced in recent years, and in 2003 the US Supreme Court invalidated those laws.) The legalization of homosexuality lifted a huge burden of human misery, secretiveness, paranoia, and genuine fear from our societies, and at the same time not a single one of the homophobic lobby's fire-and-brimstone predictions about the end of Western civilization came true.

Likewise, it was not so long ago that natural seers, mediums, and healers who felt the calling to become “witches” were burned at the stake for “crimes” that we now look back on as harmless eccentricities at worst.

Perhaps it will be the same with drugs? Perhaps in a century or two, if we have not destroyed human civilization by then, our descendants will look back with disgust on the barbaric laws of our time that punished a minority so harshly (with imprisonment, financial ruin, and worse) for responsibly, quietly, and in the privacy of their own homes seeking alterations in their own consciousness through the use of drugs. Perhaps we will even end up looking back on the persecution of drug users with the same sense of shame and horror that we now view the persecution of gays and lesbians, the burning of “witches,” and the imposition of slavery on others.

Meanwhile it's no accident that the “War on Drugs” has been accompanied by an unprecedented expansion of governmen-

tal power into the previously inviolable inner sanctum of individual consciousness. On the contrary, it seems to me that the state's urge to power has all along been the real reason for this “war”—not an honest desire on the part of the authorities to rescue society and the individual from the harms caused by drugs, but the thin of a wedge intended to legitimize increasing bureaucratic control and intervention in almost every other area of our lives as well.

This is the way freedom is hijacked—not all at once, out in the open, but stealthily, little by little, behind closed doors, *and with our own agreement*. How will we be able to resist when so many of us have already willingly handed over the keys to our own consciousness to the state and accepted without protest that it is OK to be told what we may and may not do, what we may and may not explore, even what we may and may not *experience*, with this most precious, sapient, unique, and individual part of ourselves?

If we are willing to accept that then we can be persuaded to accept anything.

Endnotes

1. Uncredited. (2008). Legislators aim to snuff out penalties for pot use. CNN, 30 July. 2. Cited in *ibid*. 3. *Independent*, London, 15 August 2008, page 1, citing Department of Health research.

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