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Asterix and Obelix in Drugland

An introduction to the special issue on 'Drug Markets'

Drug markets are nowadays regarded as the *archetypal* illegal markets, but this has not always been the case. Illegal drug markets are a relatively recent chapter in a very long history. During the reign of Thutmose IV (around 1400 BC), Akhenaten (around 1350 BC) and Tutankhamen (around 1330-1320 BC) the opium trade in Egypt was flourishing and the Egyptians used to trade opium in Greece and other parts of Europe; this particular commodity was also traded in the Arab Empire, Venice during the great acme of the city, and Britain among numerous other places (see Shearing, 2004). Even in the recent past, the drug trade not only was a legitimate but also a highly important economic activity. Diacetylmorphine, for instance, the discovery of chemist C.R. Alder Wright, was taken up by *Bayer* and was sold as a medicine for a number of illnesses in the late 19th and early 20th century (Shapiro, 2004). Established at the turn of the 20th century the *Nederlandsche Cocainefabriek* was the biggest cocaine producer in the world for about two decades (Zaitch, 2002). But for a variety of reasons, including moral and religious ones (see Mena and Hobbs, this issue; Thoumi, this issue), states intervened in drug markets and thus drove significant segments of them into the domain of the illicit and clandestine. Early efforts to control drug use and trade on a local/national level can be found in the mid-to-late 19th century. The Shanghai Opium Conference of 1909 and the subsequent International Opium Convention signed in The Hague in 1912 launched an international campaign against drug production, use and trafficking. Numerous other conventions followed suit to expand the scope of control on a variety of drugs (see UNODC, 2009). Thus gradually, an inadequately thought through *prohibitionist experiment* conducted by the club of 'problem owners' (van Duyne and Levi, 2005: 24) erased the local and national *regulation* of drugs which reflected to local and national peculiarities. Van Duyne (2007) very effectively summarizes the situation with the prohibition of drugs and the inevitable transformation of drug markets into illegal settings:

"The choice of such an interference is not determined by a law of nature. History shows that a series of choices are made which leads the policy makers and legislators into a trap of their own making. The 'reasoning path' leading to such choices is rarely straight or transparent, determined by valid information, good faith or a rational argumentation. The history of the global drug policy since the beginning of the 20th century can be considered the best example of such a tortuous decision making policy" (van Duyne, 2007: 46).

From the viewpoint of consumption, markets of (illegal) drugs cater for a large clientele, especially if we include those who have used the services of drug marketers very infrequently, even just once. A proportion of this clientele are willing customers who use specific types of drugs recreationally and in the transient context of specific entertainment settings (see Antonopoulos, Papanicolaou and Simpson, this issue); others remain in the market due to addiction. The proportion of drug users in the world population aged 15 to 64 has, according to UNODC (2008), remained stable in the last few years. Approximately 208 million people or 4.9 % of the world's population aged 15 to 64 have used drugs at least once in the last 12 months, with the vast majority of them being recreational drug users.

Problematic drug users make up approximately 0.6% of the global population of the same age (UNODC, 2008). The total number of opiate users in the world (70% of which consume heroin) reaches 16.5 million with Asia and Europe being the largest consumer markets (although Europe is the primary market in economic terms) (UNODC, 2008). The largest cocaine markets are found in North America, West and Central Europe and South America, whereas the cannabis market is huge across the globe (UNODC, 2008).

Economically there are four main submarkets of drugs that are quite different in nature, namely the cocaine market, the heroin market, the cannabis market, and the synthetic drugs market (van Duyne, 1995). Combined they form what has been considered the biggest and most lucrative illegal market, and even more profitable than many legal trades. Reports suggest, for instance, that the drug trade is worth US \$400 billion a year or 8% of all international trade when the motor-vehicle trade makes up only 5.3% of all international trade (Drug Policy Allowance Network, 2004).

Under the current prohibitionist regime, drug markets have constituted an important piece on the geopolitical chessboard. They have been linked with other social problems such as public health (HIV, hepatitis etc.), acquisitive crime, and social costs (see European Communities, 2009). Moreover, drug markets have been associated with forms of (often deadly) violence and armed conflict. Stevens *et al.* (2009), for instance, suggest that the trafficking of drugs, especially in cities in South America and the Caribbean, is strongly related to urban violence, even though the distribution of poverty is also seen as a catalyst to this trend. The case of Brazil and its extremely high homicide rate is indicative of the violent practices embedded in some drug markets (see Mena and Hobbs, this issue). In the last decade accounts of the 'global drug market' have been embellished with the convergence between drug markets and other alleged 'threats' such as 'organized crime' and terrorism (see Ruggiero, this issue), and peppered with Cassandrian predictions about their impact on world order. Frank Cilluffo, for instance, the director of Counterterrorism Task Force, noted back in 2000:

"The once clear lines between the international drug trade, terrorism and organized crime are blurring, crossing and mutating as never before... Many terrorist organizations have always been involved in the drug industry... The convergence of organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism demands a new paradigm in strategic thinking. The end of the Cold War and the mushrooming globalization of the world economy have provided the right conditions for criminal organizations to work together... The world's governments have not responded coherently... It is imperative for nations to organize as effectively as the drug traffickers and terrorists have, in order to confront the issue. The lines between organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism are quickly becoming blurred..." (Cilluffo, 2000: 1-8)

While the official discourse supporting the current prohibition regime on drugs appears quite robust, it does, in fact, involve significant contradictions. For one, whereas one would expect that such generalised and austere prohibitions would be based on ample, rigorous and continuously renewed scientific evidence, one finds that research is quite often sidelined in the process. While law enforcement resources seem to be continuously upgraded and heavily focused on the supply of drugs, there is rather limited support for research on the supply side of the market (Pearson, 2006). Whatever research there is on the issue has been largely ignored by a 'specialised political and administrative elite' (Jones *et al.*, 1994: 106) that makes 'criminal policy' without seriously (or, perhaps, by only selectively) taking into account the evidence brought forward by the scientific community. Law enforcement

agencies shape their practice on the basis of particular, widely or wildly taken-for-granted assumptions and considerations of ‘threat’. These include, among others, particular notions about the entities involved in drug dealing, the role of minority ethnic groups and immigrants in the trade, profits for drug dealers as well as the rarely qualified view that drug markets are extremely violent settings.

We would argue, with Reuter (2000), that the preceding assessment of the current situation simply suggests there is still dire need for research on the realities of drug markets as a whole, especially from within grounds that somehow elude the attention of mainstream drugs discourses. By and large, the latter understand the dictates of the current prohibition regime as sacred and unquestionable truths, as if the persistence of market structures were an anomaly to be eradicated by a further stiffening of the prohibition. In contrast, our aim in this special issue of *Trends in Organized Crime* is to bring forward empirical research findings from, and theoretical accounts of drug markets, both of which raise questions about the nature of the relationship between the organization of drug markets and the official frameworks surrounding them, and, importantly, about the complexity of this relationship. Obviously, no exhaustive account of drug markets and drug control is possible here; yet the articles in this special issue highlight the embeddedness of drug markets in wider social realities and suggest that the prohibition regime is distanced from its declared purposes. They shed light on the irrelevance, disproportionality and ‘numbness’ of (much of) the policy that permeates today’s prohibition regime, and by doing so this special issue may prove useful in stimulating a more enlightened debate.

The articles and excerpt

The articles included in this special issue have been arranged in a way that will hopefully maximise the effect in the above direction. In the first article, Gavin Hales and Dick Hobbs investigate the characteristics of the drug market in a London borough with a population of approximately 200,000. Their case study draws on a variety of sources, such as police statistics and intelligence briefings, discussions with the borough’s drug squad, as well as discussions with the Drug Action Team (DAT) manager and a number of probation officers. The drug market in the particular borough is a 24/7 market, adapted to serve a diverse clientele. The authors have identified seven sub-sectors of the market which correspond to different configurations of supply and demand practices; these cover most possible variations in terms of seriousness and impact, such as dealing on and from estates; crack-dealing houses and hostels accommodating drug users; dealing from legitimate business premises; drug dealing in prison; recreational drug markets; commuting to new markets; and wholesale importation and distribution of drugs. Interestingly, although the drug market appears to involve a heavy social cost on the community, it is not considered as a significant drug market by the authorities. Rather, as the particular drug market is embedded in the local community, its practices are adapted to and unfold within the framework of opportunities and constraints of the built and social environment of the borough. It is this character of local economy that, according to the authors, highlights the need for a deeper insight on the economic variables involved in drug dealing, exactly those that are normally ignored by drug policy.

The issue of market embeddedness is also taken up in the second article. Georgios A. Antonopoulos, Georgios Papanicolaou and Mark Simpson¹ investigate the ecstasy market in

¹ The peer-review process for this article was managed by the editor-in-chief of *Trends in Organized Crime*, Klaus von Lampe.

Greece. An integral part of the “marketing of pleasure” (Taylor, 1999: 83), this market is embedded in the dance/rave scene and the night-time economy of the country. The research shows that two different, parallel ‘schemes’ of ecstasy trafficking are present in Greece: (a) trafficking in continental Greece, which has Greek youth as its primary customers and takes place preponderantly in clubs and privately organized parties; and (b) trafficking in popular holiday resorts in various Greek islands with Western Europeans and specifically British and Dutch youth as the main customers. Trafficking takes place in establishments that have been set primarily to accommodate the needs of these tourists. According to the authors, all this amounts to a drug market that is fragmented, chaotic, purely competitive: it is a discreet market configuration, intended to offer ‘consumers’ yet another pleasure and a commodity that enhances their entertainment experience. It is, therefore, a market with no particular barriers to entry, as long as one is even peripherally linked to the particular segment of the night-time economy. According to the authors, this opportunistic small trade configuration also accounts for the apparent anomalies in the retail pricing of ecstasy pills in Greece.

While the first two articles highlight how the insensitivity of the drug prohibition regime towards the particular conditions under which drug markets exist and operate essentially undermine its capacity to produce its intended results, the third article by Vincenzo Ruggiero returns to the British context in order to take up the question of the unintended consequences of escalated prohibitionism. In the early 2000s, a moral panic erupted about the growing influence of South Asian gangs in the criminal landscape of the UK, and especially the drug market. The assistant commissioner of Scotland Yard, himself of South Asian origin, directed operations on the particular ethnic communities, and a specialized South Asian Crime Unit was established in London’s metropolitan area to twin stigmatizing perceptions about the South Asian community and primarily youth. Ruggiero asks whether the moral panic about British South Asian youth and their involvement in the drug market as well as other peripheral to these activities is justified. Thus the article provides an overview of research studies on South Asian drug use and crime, and offers a range of models of drug dealing present within the South Asian communities in the UK. These include *family networks*, *mono-ethnic networks*, *issue-specific networks*, and *value-adding networks*. When the above characteristics are taken into account, there emerges a question about how drug distribution in the country and particularly networks involving South Asians may be affected by the increasing post 9-11 institutional marginalization of South-Asian communities. Ruggiero suggests that the unintended consequence of heightened surveillance of South Asians by agencies of social control may be resulting in a ‘reverse (ethnic) succession’ in the UK drug markets; in other words, British white entrepreneurs will be replacing South Asian marketers, who are now severely disadvantaged in both the legitimate *and* illegitimate spheres.

In the penultimate article Fernanda Mena and Dick Hobbs focus on the global drugs prohibition regime and the problems it has created with the first one being the establishment, promotion and consolidation of an illegal market often regulated by violent (drug) entrepreneurs; “a black market that has little concern for human rights”, as the authors suggest. Initially, Mena and Hobbs review the international drug policy developments that transformed the drugs’ master status “from *commodities* to *evildoers*”, and to ‘vehicles’ for discriminatory practices against specific groups of people and aggression against specific countries. By focusing on the historical roots of drugs prohibition and its stigmatizing effects, the authors succeed in uncovering the political rhetoric that belies today’s ‘war on drugs’, a rhetoric that is not based on empirical research but rather on a net of unchallenged concerns and spin-doctoring. Mena and Hobbs then examine the United Nations drug treaties currently in force and identify the social harm and human rights violations caused by these treaties. They focus on two countries, Portugal and Brazil, to highlight the positive effects of

decriminalization in the case of Portugal, and the violence and increases in the human right abuses due to the militarization of drug prohibition in the case of Brazil. Overall, the authors suggest that the issues relating to drug production and trade need to be dealt with by a regulatory and development rather than a prohibitive nexus.

In the final article Francisco Thoumi interrogates directly the *international* drug control regime (IDCR) which to a large extent defines today the margins for national regulatory frameworks. Thoumi provides an account of the 100-year-long history of the regime, its development and main characteristics. The original prohibition regime has been limited to the psychotropic substances that were *perceived* as dangerous and harmful in the former part of the 20th century, and specifically opiates, cocaine and marijuana. Legal drugs, such as tobacco and alcohol, have been ignored. Overall, the IDCR encompasses a prohibitionist and repressive mentality, exclusionary practices, misperceptions, dogmas, and assumptions about the dangerousness of drugs as well as about specific ‘actors’. Very importantly, the IDCR has developed into a straightjacket for attempts at a ‘management’ of the drugs issues adapted to national and local conditions. Thoumi suggests that we appear today to be trapped within the prohibitionist mentality and, therefore, is sceptical about the possibility of a serious revaluation and rethinking of the prohibition regime. He nevertheless rehearses a scenario that does away with prohibitionism: the regulation/management of the consumption of drugs – including legal drugs such as alcohol and tobacco - through an *Insurance Against Addiction* (IAA) system, which will be aimed at minimizing the social costs of drug addiction and anti-drug policies. The successful implementation of such a system would reveal the viable alternatives to the current prohibitionist regime and the fact that “...there are policy options that are socially superior to the current prohibitionism”.

This special issue concludes with an excerpt from a very informative report from the Transnational Institute which deals with issues relating to the opium/heroin and amphetamine markets in Southeast Asia, and which highlights some of the unintended consequences of policies and measures stemming from the prohibition regime.

Drug markets: How big are they?

The first issue that emerges clearly from this special issue regards the size of the drug markets. The question of market volume is highly relevant to policy: the bigger ‘the drug market’ (and indeed other illegal markets as well) appears, the higher the tendency and justification on the part of the authorities to allocate additional resources. The problem is that accurate and valid data on the size of the drug markets is very difficult to collect. Much of the data depends on numbers of problematic drug users, and on ‘guesstimates’ based on law enforcement activities that vary in intensity. One of Hales and Hobbs’s drug squad respondent’s comment that “he couldn’t remember the last time there was a proper seizure [for amphetamines] on the borough” highlights this (Hales and Hobbs, this issue). Much of the data also often ignore the fact that markets intersect one another (see Antonopoulos *et al.*, this issue), whereas fragmentation, an essential and functional feature of the market (Hales and Hobbs, this issue), contributes significantly to the difficulty of estimating the size of the markets on several levels. In addition, data are often emotionally and ideologically charged during the production or interpretation phases and, as Thoumi has suggested, “figures are often quoted to buttress preconceived agendas and personal agendas. Many times, data are quoted without a reference to sources, at others it even appears that figures are spontaneously produced, or invented” (2003: 3).

Drug market and drug marketers' characteristics

Drug markets have a number of features and internal economic characteristics similar to legal markets, such as sellers and buyers, quality specifications, price competition, profits, and contract enforcement (see Hales and Hobbs, this issue). However, drug markets (just as other illegal markets) because of the heavy restrictions imposed by the authorities, possess a set of distinct features such as:

- clandestine and covert methods employed (despite the fact that some drug market levels are open and highly visible to the public);
- the absence of *formal* and impersonal exchange networks and mechanisms regulating the whole *market* structures and functioning, property rights and access to goods (Arlacchi, 1998);
- association of a large part of the costs of the whole business with the lubrication of specific parts of the whole exchange network (e.g. payments for “loyalty and silence”, Naylor 2004: 21) rather than with the acquisition of drugs.

As the articles by Hales and Hobbs (this issue) and Ruggiero (this issue) show, drug markets can be so embedded in the (very) local communities that fear of drug-related violence may be negated, and so normalized that the career of a drug marketer may even gain some degree of ‘legitimacy’ (see also May *et al.*, 2005). Hales and Hobbs (this issue) highlight the fact that drug markets and economies should not narrowly be viewed only with regard to the negative impact they have on (local) communities. They may also offer something in return, if only by satisfying the demand for drugs that are essential for ‘a good night out’. In essence these markets are not necessarily ‘evil’ settings, but rather dynamic environments in which the demands of *consumers* are met (see van Duyn, 2003). The value of ecstasy consumption in a hedonistic environment such as clubs in the Greek islands in the summer, for instance, is not only a ‘biological currency’ (Martin, 2008), part of what ‘regulates’ much of the things humans do (or do not do); it is also a market currency for the drug entrepreneurs, and an integral element of legal economies (Antonopoulos *et al.*, this issue).

Drug markets are highly competitive environments involving horizontal structures with a range of actors, who -very often- do not meet the ‘criteria’ of the ‘cartel barons’ celebrated in media accounts. Indeed, a close look at the profiles of drug marketers can reveal among other the participation of youngsters, bouncers, teenagers ‘having a good time’ in the night-time economy, transporters, couriers, respectable professionals, ‘user-dealers’ and others. Once one gets close to these drug marketers, the image of the ‘big fish’ dissolves very quickly. Despite this, however, “the anti-racketeering rhetoric, which accompanies the law enforcement strategy is unable to distinguish between high-level and low-level players” (Green, 1998: 175), and, as a consequence, there is a tendency for those arrested, usually the more exposed individuals, to be treated as important nodes in the network. The universe of the drug market is so diverse that “those different actors in the drug markets do not share motivations, values or lifestyles, thereby inhabiting an economy based on fragmented roles and cultures rather than a homogenous social setting” (Ruggiero, this issue). Because of the high fragmentation of the drug markets and the various layers involved in the distribution of drugs, the dealers’ income is hardly ever as high as the media and law enforcement portray it to be. Hales and Hobbs (this issue) refer to the use of (intimidated or coerced) local youngsters –some as young as 15 – in the drug market or users “assuming the role of ‘dealer’ to his or her peers, often as a way of subsidizing his or her own habit”. These types of market transactions have little to offer in securing a good income for the drug marketer. Antonopoulos *et al.* (this issue) show that the pattern of distribution of ecstasy tablets in Greece is such that not only generates a price wedge on the merchandise but also determines the small (if any) profit margin from layer to layer. This is hardly limited to the ecstasy

market, however. Bourgois' (1995: 707) calculations on Game Room crack-house dealer profits led him to the conclusion that they get "slightly less than double the legal minimum wage – between 7 and 8 dollars an hour". These small profits perhaps explain very convincingly why "drug dealers still live with their moms" (Levitt and Dubner, 2005: 89).

The 'Other' in the drug markets, the 'War on Drugs'...and all that jazz (and rave)

As was mentioned earlier, an important aspect of the issues relating to drug markets has been the role of the 'Other'; minority ethnic groups and immigrants, 'outsiders' and members of subcultures. The Chinese opium marketers were the target in the United States of the 19th and early 20th century Opium Laws (see Mena and Hobbs, this issue), African Americans in the Deep South were the target in the 1910s, and so were the (predominantly black) jazz musicians in the 1940s, and 'ravers' since the 1980s (Grayson, 2003). The 'War on Drugs', declared in the 1970s, fully fledged in the early 1980s and constantly warning of a climactic battle ahead, has contributed significantly to the huge rise in the prison population primarily in the United States, through a nexus of state and federal laws adopting mandatory sentencing for drug-related offences. Draconian federal sentencing guidelines, such as the 100:1 crack: powder cocaine statutes, coupled with discriminatory law enforcement (see Tonry, 1995), have severely disadvantaged black men and women. Despite the failure of the (American) 'war on drugs', however, drug war ideologues have attempted (in a lot of cases successfully) at proselytizing other countries. Thailand's 'war on drug' launched in 2003 by Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is just an example (see Transnational Institute excerpt, this issue).

In Europe there is also a regular identification of drug markets and the 'Other'. Ruggiero (this issue) suggests that the media, the public, law enforcement as well as some academics are integral part of a nexus that tends to stigmatize South Asian minority ethnic youth in the UK. But this is not limited to the UK. There has been a media, public and official obsession and fascination with the Colombians and their involvement in the cocaine trade on an international level, and a stigmatization of the particular ethnic group (just as in the US), despite the gaps in the available evidence (see Zaitch, 2002). Europol's Organised Crime Threat Assessment (OCTA) 2008, emphasizes the 'dominant position' of "Colombian organised crime groups... [which] have developed relationships with their Moroccan counterparts", and on the control of the heroin market by Turkish 'organised crime groups' (EUROPOL, 2008). Ethnicity remains an important explanatory variable for these drug markets (and many more). Although there is a high involvement of specific minorities in specific drug markets (see Paoli and Reuter, 2008), which is facilitated by the lack of alternatives and the fact that the drug market is "the only... equal opportunity employer" (Bourgois, 1998: 64), it is extremely difficult, due to the 'openness' and multi-ethnic nature of the drug markets (Ruggiero, this issue), the practicalities involved in the (illegal) markets, the need for protection from law enforcement agencies, and the need for individuals with capital, skills, connections etc., for specific ethnic groups to be *dominating* the business.

Intended and Unintended Consequences on Drug Markets

Drug policy and practices have had numerous *intended* consequences on the drug markets. Intended consequences of actions such as *Project Cohesion*, which monitored 472 shipments of acetic anhydride in 2006, has allegedly reduced the readiness of the legal commercial sector to provide large quantities of precursors used in the opiates market (see UNODC,

2008). Apart from the intended consequences on drug markets however, there are a number of *unintended* consequences of policies and actions resulting in adverse effects unanticipated by the designers of those policies. It would be safe to suggest that these unintended consequences are the result of unfounded assumptions. For example, it was thought that the reduction of opium production in Southeast Asia would automatically reduce drug use in the area and prevent conflict. Yet, opium crop eradication not only failed to reduce drug use since users shifted to synthetic drugs, but also aggravated conflict in the area. Because the importance of drug production for poor and disadvantaged populations was ignored and economic alternatives were not offered, it also led to migratory movements (Transnational Institute excerpt, this issue; see also Dávalos *et al.*, 2009).

Excluding the infringements of human rights that come as a result of drug policies and practices (see Mena and Hobbs, this issue), unintended consequences on drugs markets are also prevalent in the micro and meso-levels of drug markets. Behavioural responses of drug market participants and non-participants can have an effect on the nature of the market. As Ruggiero (this issue) shows, specific non drug-related law enforcement choices and practices in relation to Muslim populations in the UK promote changes in ‘organized’ drug supply by making South Asians (and not only those involved in the drug market) more vulnerable to law enforcement.

From Opium and Coca to Alcohol and Tobacco

“Everything is a drug; it depends on the dose”
Paracelsus

All societies and individuals have used some form of psychoactive drugs as part of the everyday social and/or religious rituals since time immemorial. The use of drugs has even been an integral part of human evolution with humans artificially manipulating the brain systems that underlie pleasure and pain. This is a reality that continues to pervade popular culture. Even comics heroes Asterix and Obelix have been using drugs—druid Panoramix’s (or *Getafix* in English editions) magic potion!² Although some form of local and national management of (the primarily non-recreational) drug use existed for centuries, in the last 100 years, these appear to have been swept aside by the international drug control regime. The regime’s myopic view of the addictive potency and use of (specific) drugs has complicated the issue more. As is cited in the excerpt from the Transnational Institute’s report included in this issue:

“the morally-inspired move to eliminate the more ‘pleasurable’ effects of using drugs such as cannabis, coca and opium denied the fact that all these plants and their active ingredients had significant medicinal and social uses, many of them undisputed and reconfirmed scientifically today. It also created an overly-artificial distinction between ‘medicinal use’ and ‘abuse’, between ‘medicines’ and ‘illicit drugs’ that denied basic realities about why people use drugs. In real life, there are blurred distinctions between recreation, relaxation, performance enhancement, coping with hard labour, coping with pain, coping with sleeplessness or curing illnesses”.

Not only has the regime failed to effectively distinguish between pleasure and its “unattractive alter ego, addiction” (Martin, 2008: 2), but it has also drawn an arbitrary line

² The observation came up in a discussion one of us had with Petrus C. van Duyne in September 2009.

between legal and illegal drugs; it has also failed to acknowledge the effect legal drugs can have on one's addiction to legal *and* illegal drugs. It has been shown, for instance, that tobacco and alcohol are *essential* intermediates between non-use and use of cannabis (Kandel, 1975). This arbitrary distinction between 'legal' and 'illegal' drugs has been perhaps meaningless especially when users are confronted with the lack or scarcity of their chosen drug (Transnational Institute excerpt, this issue). The rule should be the reduction and minimization of social costs of drug use and addiction (see Thoumi, this issue). And the cases of alcohol (especially after the failed American prohibitionist experiment) and tobacco are not irrelevant; quite the contrary. Granted, alcohol and tobacco illegal markets do exist (see for example Johansen, 2005; von Lampe, 2006; Antonopoulos, 2008), despite the legal status of these commodities. Still, the cases of alcohol and tobacco highlight that when it comes to drugs, options other than prohibition *are* possible.

Beyond the Narcosis of International Drug Policy?

Collectively, what this special issue highlights is that there are important aspects of drug markets, from micro to macro level, which are being brushed aside by the monolithic nature of the international drug regime. The local, national and regional social contexts of drug markets possess features that are not universal to all drug markets. Likewise, there are variations in the nature of (local) markets as well as in the volume of the market and the number of potential customers. The use of drugs, for instance, presents fluctuations according to continent, region and country and use may even be of some cultural or other significance in particular local contexts; these differences are sidelined at the national and the international levels of regulation. Hales and Hobbs (this issue) suggest that even one conurbation like London is "far too big to be thought of as a single drug market". In addition, drug markets react differently to external economic stimuli. Has drug policy been numbed by the wholesale assumption that the drug industry is a homogeneous, evil entity? Is it today addicted to anxieties about the ethnic 'other', to ideas compelling a spasmodic, punitive, reactive and expensive treatment of the market by means of criminal justice rhetoric and armory? Has it become irreversibly blind to detrimental effects and huge social costs it alone engenders, and also to the fact that (some) legal drugs can in fact be more dangerous than (some) illegal ones? If such a diagnosis is correct, then perhaps the way forward for both research and normative thinking, however 'naïve' this path may appear today, must involve a radical break with the homilies of official discourse about 'harm' and 'threat'. Rather, we need an understanding of illegal markets that involves not only a political economy of crime, but also a political economy of criminalisation. It may be useful to remember our magic potion heroes: inside the gates of their small village Asterix and Obelix are not drug users, and in fact are entrusted with the most important and serious interior and exterior affairs of the Gallic village; Panoramix (Getafix!) is not a drug dealer but a wise druid; in modern terms, drugland would lie beyond the village gates and into the Empire.

In other words, what our current mainstream theoretical vistas seem to exclude is both a view from within and a bold accounting for the dynamics by which some segments of a market are relegated to the illicit and 'underworld' while others remain licit, legitimate and regulated by means other than those of penal repression. It is such an intimate knowledge of *social context*, *political economy* and *geography* of drug markets that may open up a path for a genuinely evidence-based and perhaps more rational and humane drug policy.

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