

**About drugs in the cities: is there something new?**

Olivier LEFEBVRE

# 1. Introduction.

There are three approaches to study the consumption of drugs (Dr Olivienstein): the approach by the product (the one of the doctors, relying on physiology), the approach by repression (how to use Law to struggle against the use of drugs) and the social approach (the use of drugs is considered as a social phenomenon). We have chosen the social approach.

Even if it is arbitrary to distinguish “factors” (since in reality they interact) we shall discriminate four factors:

- *the social imaginary*. There has been no society without drugs (Dr Olivienstein). The usages are very diverse: entertainment, of course, but also meds, sleep inducing, anesthetic, entheogens (allowing to be in touch with deities), rites of Manliness (tobacco among Indians, tea in the feudal Japan), tonic and even means to commit suicide (considered as noble by Greeks and Romans) ... Today drugs seem to be an element of the urban way of life.
- *functional aspects*. In a perspective of liberalizing of drugs the city could be an adequate place for drug consumption: providing information, a market, the lawful recourse to doctors if needed and social capital when the user chooses to cease and needs some help ...
- *economic aspects*. It is more and more recognized that drugs (like prostitution) generates wealth. While traffic and use of drugs are (more or less) still prohibited, they are counted in the National Product... Indeed, the economic factors have always been important, concerning drugs. Today the liberalizing could trigger the appearance of a vast sector: to grow the plants,

to transform and sell them to customers.

- *the problem of Law*. The both are possible: decriminalizing or liberalizing, or repression. All depends on the appearance of a majority in the Opinion. This allows building two scenarios, corresponding to decriminalizing / legalizing or repression.

## **2. The social imaginary and the drugs.**

We can consider drugs as luxuries which have become commodities. The city has always been the place where new artificial pleasures are invented and diffused. It is very well described in the Sombart's book "Luxury and capitalism". But in this book drugs are omitted. We find a description of drugs in History in the sum of Escotado "General history of drugs" (a book written in Spanish and unfortunately not completely translated in French). Also, luxury has been democratized (Lipovetsky). An emotional luxury consisting in search for emotions, sensations... has appeared (Lipovetsky). All this explains why today the use of drugs is part of the urban way of life. They are used for entertainment, but also to improve performance (students, sportsmen and sportswomen, traders ...) and to bear the frantic pace of the urban life (hard work during the week and heroin or ecstasy during the week end). Almost all the people consume drugs at least occasionally...

Economic factors should play a role. They should stimulate the evolution towards liberalizing. Not only a vast economic sector could appear, but the State should get taxes, the struggle against traffic, which is costly, should cease...

### 3. The theory of the “waves of moralizing”

The efficiency of repression has never been demonstrated:

- because of the repression of traffic, the price is high
- the traffickers are rich
- repression is costly
- in jail drugs are consumed and the prisoners become corrupt
- money from traffic triggers corruption
- etc.

But why repressive laws are voted and enforced?

Escohotado proposes an explanation: a shock on Society triggers a “wave of moralizing” which concerns drugs, the goal being to mobilize people in a moral crusade.

There were three successive waves of moralizing:

- at the beginning of the 20 th century, when the goal was to moralize the poor workers.  
It resulted in the Prohibition. Note that among the “moral entrepreneurs” (to speak as the American sociologist HS Becker) were urban planners (Le Corbusier wanting to remove the street and the coffee houses from cities ...).
- at the time of the Cold War in the USA.
- in the 1970s. There was a furious debate (on tolerance or repression) in the 1960s, which

resulted in the “material victory of the proponents of repression and the moral victory of the proponents of tolerance” (Escohotado).

A possible fourth wave of moralizing is discussed in the scenario on repression.

## **4. A scenario on tolerance.**

Decriminalizing is only allowing consumption and legalizing is allowing production (which is under control) and consumption. In some countries of Europe (Nederland, Portugal) the decriminalizing has good effects, while in the State of Colorado (in the USA) an experiment of legalizing is currently attempted, with good results. The trend is more experiments of this kind, which are described and commented, which triggers an evolution of the Opinion in favor of legalizing. Again, it seems “natural” since the use of drugs is part of the urban way of life.

## 5. A scenario on repression

A wave of moralizing, again, is possible. It could be the consequence of the new threat, Jihad.

But it is not sure. The only argument could be that often Jihadists make money from drug traffic. Indeed there are two possibilities:

- the drug addict becomes a scapegoat. But drugs are already very popular ...
- at the opposite, legalizing drugs could be a concession to compensate for less freedom in the context of struggle against Jihad. In “Qu’est ce qu’une drogue?” (“What is a drug?”), a book edited by HS Becker, there is an interesting article. It describes how the communist regimes in Central Europe after 1968 (the year of the invasion of Czechoslovakia) conceded the freedom of consumption of drugs, in compensation for less political freedom (the consumption of drugs was freer in these countries of Central Europe than in the countries of the European Community at the start of the 1990!).

## 6. Conclusion

Probably we shall see an evolution in the consumption of drugs, with “winners” and “losers”.

Note that alcohol remains an untouchable Majesty:

	Winners	Losers
Drugs	Cannabis	Tobacco Cocaine Heroin Amphetamines

The trend seems to be (1) harm reduction (2) accepting the doctors 'voice (3) jail is no more a solution.

In any way, an atmosphere more favorable to consumption of drugs should appear. But there is the risk of a wave of moralizing again.

To observe and understand the evolution of Opinion (on drugs) in cities will be a stake.

In particular these topics are interesting:

- understanding the current experiments of legalizing
- comparing the cities from the point of view of tolerance or repression. For instance, it seems that the Supervised Injection Sites are more tolerated by neighbors when drugs are decriminalized (like in Nederland and Portugal) than when they are not (like in France).

