

The Politics of Drugs from Production to Consumption

Peadar King The Liffey Press, Dublin, 2003

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Peadar King's book is part of a series from Liffey Press called Pressure Points in Irish Society, which the series editor, Malcolm Maclachlan, sees as "developing new perspectives on an existing debate or presenting new data that can enlighten our thinking". The books are to be contemporary and accessible and "if necessary controversial". Peadar King states that he is writing both for those working in the area of drug prevention and harm reduction and for those who "share a curiosity not just about drugs but also about global interconnectedness, neo colonialism and human rights suppression/oppression". He believes that many of those engaged in frontline work and in policy formulation need to develop an understanding of the wider issues that surround drug use – a question of "locating and contextualising" their work.

King summarises the complexities of the issues arguing that it "is clear that the centuries old desire for psychoactive substances, whether as an act of desperation or celebration, will always remain part of the human condition.....there is no King Canute." In between the introductory setting out of the issues and the brief summary chapter lie three chapters dealing with "The War on Drugs", "Drug Users, Perception and reality", and "Strategies and Interventions". The work covered in the first of these is more comprehensively covered elsewhere, most notably in Davenport – Hines book *The Pursuit of Oblivion* (2001). King's work, however, considers the complex these matters in an Irish context and he discusses how the continuing debate between the protagonists of prohibitionism and legalisation have informed the response of the Irish State to the dramatic rise in the consumption of drugs in Ireland. He is preoccupied with the United States and its foreign and domestic policies in relation to drug consumption. A genuine world view becomes somewhat limited in scope because of such preoccupations and ultimately weakens the points made. While our world view and policy debates are hugely influenced by the US is not beyond doubt but perhaps there is more to be gained by developing an understanding of how other countries, such as those in Asia, are dealing with the issues of production and consumption. King alludes to the differences between Dutch and UK approaches to drug issues and alludes to an inverse relationship between punitive approaches and usage levels. Complexity is however the watchword. The relatively low drug use levels in Sweden run alongside strict controls and state directed treatment as favoured interventions.

The Chapter on perceptions and realities in relation to drug users is stronger though the work done by King in the past on gender issues permeates the chapter. He cogently argues that "how one names the user will largely determine how one responds to their needs" and he explores the diversity of experience of drug users. This is a review that those working in Probation can read with interest, especially as we move towards an increasingly diverse and multicultural society, and as concepts of equality are increasingly debated and where actions become equality proofed. Some of the exploration is however in need of support in terms of referenced research. The section on the Travelling community seems to be based on 1999 research by Hurley, but King then goes on to draw a consequential relationship between discriminatory practices against Travellers in pubs and hotels and cannabis use. He then compares travellers to Puerto Ricans in New York, excluded from the mainstream economy and choosing the drug trade as a means of economic advancement. King distances himself from the perspective of there being "negative others" who maliciously and deliberately seek to increase drug use and dependency, criticising the use of race in the construction of drug demons, but at the same time he suggests that "entrepreneurial drug dealers" will no doubt be able to identify the victims of "ghettoisation and enforced idleness.....(resulting from) the pres-

ent governments asylum and housing policies. These "negative others" appear to have been a creation of the state, though this does not seem to allow for the entrepreneurial spirit that exists in marginalised communities that does not end up following this path. One of the challenges that a critique such as Kings faces is how to explain when people succeed against adversity, what qualities and conditions foster constructive positive choices, and therefore how can these be enhanced. A consideration of this will allow King greater latitude in relation to considering personal choices and responsibility.

In the fourth chapter King considers strategies and interventions. Here there are summaries of broad responses such as harm reduction alongside descriptions of specific interventions, some from Ireland and some from abroad. It covers a huge range of both and offers a view of actions that can be taken at both macro and micro level. It offers some interesting information but I am not sure that it fits with the rest of the book and might have been better considered in an expanded format as a separate piece of work. It also lacks a critical analysis of the interventions and approaches, reminding us of the need for a vibrant critique of the range of responses to the issue of drug use in Ireland, both North and South.

Overall Peadar King has met his target of accessibility in his writing and there is no doubt that the debate on drug use requires oppositional perspectives, and this book provides some range to the debate. Ensuring that we retain as much relevance to Ireland as possible is important in that debate. As Northern Ireland begins to deal with a growing drugs problem, and looks to learn in some way from the experience in the Republic, the book comes at a good time. For Probation Officers central to the debate is making particular sense of the complex interrelationship between offending and drug use. While not its main focus *The Politics of Drugs* makes some contribution to that debate and to contextualising our work

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