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FEAR OF DRUGS*

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The ban on drugs is so evidently and openly in conflict with Mill's principles of individual liberty, on which our society claims to found itself, that one must assume that this ban is caused by extraordinarily deep-laying fears. Drugs are considered 'taboo' in the strict sense of the term. Taboos generally centre around fears of unlimited sex and violence, i.e. phenomena linked to our primitive, animal state. Since drugs artificially induce irrationality they trigger similar fears of a relapse into an 'uncontrolled', irrational, animal form of existence. However, ironically, drugs are precisely for that reason a positive phenomenon. As a form of 'chemical carnival', providing a temporary and reversible slackening of the bonds of reason, they in fact indirectly serve to strengthen the societal framework. An easy availability and large variety of drugs is a sign of civilisation. More specifically, drugs form one of the most positive aspects of modern Western culture. The ban is a form of puritan terror and an extreme case of violation of human rights, it should be lifted.

Although it is almost never expressed directly, the drug debate in society has everything to do with taboos. Generally speaking, taboos are concerned with the great and crucial questions of sex and violence. Therefore the reason to consider the drug problem from this angle is perhaps not immediately evident. Yet strange, irrational motives play an important part in the drug debate. To begin with, a sober balancing of the attractive sides and dangers of the use of these substances is almost never made. Because of the 'war on drugs' the mafia has made it big internationally. But a truly international debate on possible legalisation is still to be started. The president of El Salvador, Armando Calderon Sol recently proposed launching such a world wide debate with

little or no results: the intimidated silence continues. Where are the respected statesmen and scientists who would dare to call for a change of course? Even in the Netherlands pleas for total legalisation are relatively scarce. Recently Peter Cohen, a Dutch social scientist specialising in drug use, and Marcel van Dam, a Social Democratic foreman, have produced contributions along these lines. However, the debate remains focused on the utterly marginal questions around the toleration of small scale trade in cannabis, otherwise called 'soft drugs'.

Equally typical for the strange atmosphere in the debate is the fact that, although generally accepted liberal norms of civil liberty are so blatantly infringed through prohibition of drug use, this is hardly noticed. In 1859 the British philosopher John Stuart Mill, continuing on principles enunciated in the French 'Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen', wrote the following words in his essay *On Liberty*:

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely

*This is a translation from the Dutch by Mario Lap (Drug-Text) of an article by Dr Erik van Ree called 'Angst voor Drugs' published in *Vrij Nederland*, 18 May 1996. It is a slightly abbreviated version of a lecture held in May 1996 at the cultural centre De Balie in Amsterdam, as part of a series of lectures on 'taboos', organised by the Stichting Literaire Activiteiten Amsterdam

the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. [. . .] The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. (Mill, 1985)

In sum, a citizen is allowed to do anything he desires as long as he does not harm his fellow citizen. Mill, by the way, was formulating the above words also with the use of alcohol in mind. Like any other principle, that of Mill's too has its problems of interpretation and its limitations, or better a frayed boundary beyond which it transforms into an absurdity. Nevertheless, Dutch society largely functions on the basis of this liberal principle nowadays, and no longer nurtures the Christian idea of the intrinsic evil of certain actions that do not lead to demonstrable harm to others. But Mill's wisdom, by now almost an open door, is totally forgotten when dealing with those damned drugs. Not even the pretence is kept up that a citizen should have the right to use those substances if he wishes. That drug prohibition violates fundamental rights, freedoms which in other fields are regarded as self-evident, seems to be simply irrelevant. Whoever raises the issue of the freedom of drug use as a matter of principle, is usually reprimanded with an angry one-liner on 'inflation of rights'. A quite bewildering indifference is displayed when it comes to the principle of individual sovereignty.

The panic concerning drug use in my view springs from a deep but barely conscious fear that a boundary, a taboo, is being transgressed. There will come a time when historians will require all their powers to

explain the mystery of this weird crusade against drugs in the second half of the 20th century. A war in comparison to which the USA alcohol prohibition of the 1930s was a mere child's game. We are dealing here with nothing less than a puritanical campaign of terror. Perhaps this characterisation seems somewhat heavy or overdone, but there is good reason for it. Since 1994 one can be sentenced to death for the production of cannabis in the United States. The American Mr and Mrs Mooring who have been extradited from Holland to the United States will possibly have to spend 40 years in an American jail for growing 257 cannabis plants. And even in the Netherlands people can be put in jail for years for the production of and trade in opiates or cocaine, or even cannabis or XTC. That is to say for the production of substances of which there is no proof that they lead to more harm than a drink.

Where is the origin of this madness? When regarded from the viewpoint of 'historical materialism' the answer to this question would have to be that there are certain economic interest groups that sustain the prohibition from behind the curtains. The answer would have to be that the drugs mafia is controlling the governments of France and the United States or that police forces, judicial authorities and the 'treatment' professionals are simply keeping themselves in business. I do not believe those explanations to be valid. This issue is not primarily related to interests but much more to irrational motives. Drugs appeal to deeply rooted fears that overrule all rational considerations almost as a matter of course.

I would like to attempt a slightly broader, anthropological perspective of the drugs problem. There is good reason for such an approach. Drug use has in common with other things in the 'taboo' category such as sex that man has a great fear of it and at the same time feels an almost irresistible need for it. Drugs are of all times and of all cultures. I know of no culture, from the most simple to the most complex, that has not known some kind of narcotic. Even in the Indian Vedas, thousands of years old, there is the 'soma', a hallucinative beverage, probably produced from fly-agaric. Archeological findings suggest that already in the European Neolithic age pain-killing poppy drinks were consumed. The Indians from the Andes region have been chewing coca leaves for

centuries and the peyote that contains mescaline is part of the culture of the North-American Indian. The use of narcotic substances is not less of a constant fact in the history of mankind than for example the execution of power. Apparently drug use is something without which man could not exist and would no longer be himself. It is this perseverance of the longing for artificially induced ecstasy which makes this phenomenon so fascinating and important, and forces us to observe it in a much broader context than just that of the second half of the 20th century.

Generally speaking the ultimate significance of taboos is the prevention of an all destructive orgy of sex and violence. Man senses that his desire for the extravagance of unbridled promiscuity and violent self-confirmation is of such dimensions that it can potentially destroy everything. That the necessity of maintaining ourselves is indeed acute has been most powerfully illustrated in a culture-historically tinted book published in 1991, *The Origins of the Sacred* by the British literary scientist Dudley Young. He made the suggestion that man's awakening reason was sufficiently powerful to break the instinctive limitations that the animal imposes on itself, but not strong enough to break the equally instinctive animal passions. The rational superstructure of our mind has kept in place our animal, instinctive needs whereas it has effectively swept away the instinctive animal self-restraint and self-limitation. The result is an extremely explosive mixture, a creature more 'beastly' than the animal itself, emotionally a chimpanzee, but contemptuous of any limitation. From such a perspective the taboo appears as sort of a safety-brake we just had to pull, for the brakes were failing while the train was roaring on.

The French philosopher George Bataille has emphasised in his work that the two major taboos, sex and violence, are the expression of one single basic fear, the fear to fall back into the animal state. According to Bataille, man has built himself 'a world of labour and intellect', a cocoon in which he can screen himself off from the elementary powers of nature and from his own physical passions. Taboo marks the borderline between the purely human and the animal in man, the border screening off our safe rational world from that of irrationality. The one and only real 'commandment', the mother of all taboos,

therefore reads: 'Thou shall not be an animal'. But why is man so afraid of his animal side? This fear is based on a very obvious and infact totally rational basis. Biologically we are extremely weak, as in our nakedness we cannot even survive in 'nature'. We do not have claws or tearing teeth, and our skin does not provide any kind of protection, we have no shield or fur. In short, we simply shouldn't be there, we are freaks of nature, an anomaly, a larval specimen. And we know this, and this knowledge is the cause of the deep existential fear lurking in us. The only reason we are here at all is because we out-smart nature. We have our intelligence. Anything that would affect this intelligence and the order based on it, is therefore directly life threatening and has to be screened off by means of a taboo. When the animal surfaces, the alarm bells ring, not because of false shame but because our very survival is at stake.

Observed from this perspective, sexual and violent lusts are in a way the most fundamental human emotions, because they are rooted in the former animal state. We are not dealing here with any real memory – to speak of that would be purely speculative – but with an acute experience of still powerful animal passions and lusts. Here we experience both nostalgia and desire, and a deep aversion and fear, the two inextricably interwoven. Nostalgia because we are longing for the state in which we were not burdened by our tiresome rationality and the responsibility of the conscious ego, a longing close to the desire for death. And fear because we know that owing to our plainly ridiculous body, any turning back to the animal state, any doing away with reason, would indeed mean our immediate end. Bataille, like Freud, has pointed to the fact that the Polynesian term 'taboo', which is more or less equal to the Latin term 'sacer', bears this ambivalence in itself. They both have the connotation of the holy as well as the unclean. The world of nature and instinct is repulsive and primitive, often literally dirty and in consequence deadly, but it is also full of an irresistibly tempting raw 'differentness', that is always making eyes at us from beyond the boundaries of 'normal' everyday life.

The repulsion generated by drug use, as well as its temptations, are part of this complex of deeply based fears and desires. For artificially induced ecstasy,

though sometimes producing a sense achievement, in fact always causes a decrease of consciousness and therefore a partial return to the semi-conscious 'animal' state. We fear drugs because they seem to contain the promise of breaking down the barriers of reason. Fear of addiction is an extreme variant of this phenomenon, as this is the fear of a situation in which the conscious will has definitely lost the battle. In sum, the fear of drugs is rooted in precisely the same fear as that at the basis of the taboos surrounding sex and violence, namely the fear of loss of control, of drowning in animal primitivism and of experiencing the decline of our unique, human sovereign mind. Under the influence of drugs we transcend the taboo border between animal and human, and that's where the real roots of the irrational panic raised by the use of these substances lie. The discussion of drugs is therefore deeply related to the essence of the nature of taboos and even to the very nature of mankind itself. The fact that alcohol seems not to be part of the taboo is not at all contradictory to the above statements, for every taboo contains its limited infringements.

It is a simple fact of life that the emotional repulsion we feel of our own rational harness is so powerful that it simply has to give way periodically. However, this is not a problem, because precisely through such limited infringements the conflict between the demands of reason and instinct can be kept in check. For instance, sports activities can also serve as a manageable form of the violent instinct. The whole phenomenon of religion, which is fully based on irrationality, is an infinitely ramified form of 'return' to the prerational mind, a 'high' on a society wide level. And so the real drug induced 'high' is also a way to transcend temporarily the boundaries of the world of the intellect. The 'high' equals the desire to derange consciousness temporarily and it therefore provides a useful, pleasant plunge into chaos. Drugs bring us back to a forgotten primitive level, and it is undoubtedly because of that that they produce their ecstatic impact. They fulfil an essential role in human society for the very reason that they are agents of disorder and 'decay'. Their value consists in providing us with a means to step from order into chaos, to leave culture behind us for a moment, without blowing it up. In other words, drugs have a whole-

some role to play because they are destructive, but, when used sensibly in a 'curable' way.

Psychotropic substances are to be regarded as a form of chemical carnival. Where the traditional 'carnival' temporarily turns the social hierarchy upside down, psychotropic substances, especially when we think of psychedelics such as LSD, temporarily turn the whole rational world upside down. And just like carnival, drugs are a positive factor because (and as long as they) are not taken too seriously. I am not saying that the use of drugs does not contain any risks, but the thought that our social order would be necessarily endangered by it is a monumental stupidity of the same order as the idea that carnival is bad because it gives the wrong ideas to people or causes too many traffic casualties. Drug prohibition in the name of social order is even unintendedly ironic, as there are few phenomena that contribute as much to social stability as the induced 'high'. The proliferation of the use of drugs is not a sign of decadence and not the expression of a dark fin de siècle atmosphere. On the contrary, a society dealing in an open and sensible way with drugs, accepting their use as a pleasant, if risky way of passing time, has not fallen victim to decadence. Such a society is rather strengthening itself because it provides its citizens with the possibility of an outlet without endangering the productive orderly framework around which it is built.

I think that the disproportionate fear of drugs in western society is also based on the fact that the Christian and Enlightenment tradition provide arguments against the use of mind altering substances that strangely enough seem to be almost identical. Mind altering substances are also 'joyful' substances and therefore a source of dangerous temptation from a New Testamental point of view. In his 'letters' the apostle Paul gets carried away time and again in sombre contemplations about the 'carnal' character of mankind. He regrets the fact that his autonomous mind that only hungers for God is bombarded by 'sinful' desires born of his body. What Paul describes is nothing but a 'craving', a painful addiction to his own body. He wants to neglect it, he wants to get rid of it, but he fails miserably. This in fact is a splendid example of how a psychology of addiction is created, simply by a definition of evil. Unfortunately the rational Enlightenment has not only brought us

liberation from many Christian preoccupations, but has in some respects even strengthened them. The definition of man as an autonomous and above all purely rational creature who has to strive for a total, rationally based control of its own life, is hardly more than a secular translation of Paul's desperate attempts to bring himself under the control of his own rational mind.

It is therefore not just conservative Christian Democrats but also many followers of the Enlightenment who are declaring war on the dangerous drugs. Let me quote as an example the Dutch journalist Bastiaan Bommeljé (1996) from an article in a recent issue of the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsbad*:

Apart from the fact that the individual is deprived of his autonomy and his most important human qualities (his free will and his critical mind), drug addiction is a phenomenon that erodes a society based on the organisation of autonomous people with a free will and critical minds. One should therefore expect of a liberal-socialist government that it acknowledge that drugs are in conflict with human dignity and with the ideas of the Enlightenment on which the modern western civilisation is built.

A touching misunderstanding. This argument is totally counterproductive. Whoever turns reason and the autonomous individual into absolutes, make life impossible for mankind and thereby inevitably produces a madness that will destroy the intended free will and critical mind. An organisation of autonomous, free people can only exist by the grace of periodic interruptions of the rationality on which it is based. A further argument against the position of the 'enlightened' drug war crusaders is the fact that they wage a rear guard battle. Western culture is becoming more rational every day. Technology, control, growth, the market and the economy are its main concerns. Inevitably the temptation of mind altering substances will and must become ever more pronounced as a necessary counterpoint, in order for this society to remain intact. The ever increasing rationalisation of western culture could very well be the main historical explanation of the enormous increase in drug use in these regions.

Our modern European culture breathes a strange ambivalence. It is based on a capitalistic market principle that swallows up everything and in which business and money determine almost everything. But on the other hand the European twentieth century culture was very much coloured by irrationalistic counter-movements. The great totalitarian systems, that of Adolf Hitler on one side and Lenin and Stalin on the other, were based on the psychology of blindness, of the primitive horde trotting behind their leader, destroying everything on its way. But also a second irrationalistic counter-culture emerged, which seems to be ordered around certain types of music, such as formerly jazz and now rock, music which grumbling old men tend to call 'jungle noises'. These people hit the nail on the head, as one indeed can feel the jungle pulsating in much of contemporary music. It is not a coincidence that the charged atmosphere in stadiums where demagogues are speaking and the ones in which rock bands perform have strong resemblances. In both cases the same primitive energy is tapped. In the one case in its demonic form, in the other in the form of a pleasant hedonism, which provokes the over-rational western society but without threatening it. It is precisely this combination of market dynamics and rationalism on one hand and cultural primitivism on the other, that has made western society so irresistible and a worldwide temptation.

The explosion of drug use can be seen as part of the irrationalistic counter-culture that was especially strong in the sixties. The dissemination of drugs was not a sign of decline but rather a sign of the unequalled power and diversity of the society we know. The Dutch journalist Paul Brill wrote in the newspaper *De Volkskrant*: 'Very few foreign journalists in Holland conclude that the home-grown Dutch cannabis represents a higher step on the ladder of civilisation. But most of them do conclude that Dutch drug policy is a useful form of damage control.' But Dutch cannabis is indeed a matter of civilisation. And in general one can say that a wide choice in and availability of mind altering substances constitutes a sign of civilisation. For those ready to accuse me of irresponsible madness, French wine is seen as a part of the culture of a nation. Why shouldn't Dutch cannabis?

Drug use is not a social problem at all. This only applies to drug abuse. I would therefore plead for a complete legalisation of drugs, including the so-called 'hard drugs'. And definitely not only as a way of 'damage control', not as the least damaging way of dealing with an acknowledged social evil, but as the natural way for a society to deal with a social benefit, with substances whose use on the one hand can produce serious risks and that have to be used in a self-controlled way, but that are also simply pleasant to use – just like alcohol. They are a source of pleasure. Drug use certainly does not have to be some kind of reaction to a situation of personal emergency. It is not necessarily an 'escape'. Drugs can add a fascinating, somewhat unpredictable dimension to the life of the user, just as many people from the lowlands decide to travel to the highlands each year in order to broaden their horizon. They go into the mountains seeking a raw, romantic sentiment not found at home. But nobody in his right mind will think of accusing mountaineers of 'escaping reality', even though some of them probably are.

The attention the media pay to drug use, especially by young people, is actually most odd. We just don't see it anymore because we have become used to it. Some time ago the media were signalling an 'alarming rise' of XTC use among young people. Alarming? There is nothing alarming about it at all. That young people use XTC is perfectly normal, it is a pleasant substance, a nice companion for the weekend. It is also true that some young people get into trouble because of it, and tragically there are even fatal casualties. But never in my whole life have I read that the increasing number of accidents in the mountains is caused by an 'alarming rise of alpinism'. That mountaineering is described as a sign of criminal self-destruction. I have not seen any TV programmes in which distraught mothers of children killed in the mountains called on the world to stop the evil of 'mountain craving'. The sale of pickaxes and Karabiners is not punished by 15 years imprisonment. Nor have I sensed a sentiment among the general public that hanging is even too good for the retailers of mountaineering articles.

The problem is that the discussion of drugs, and even thinking about them, is as it were polluted by their illegality. Both in the medical and therapeuti-

cal world there is extensive knowledge, and it is also made available in a sensible way. But the insane demonisation of these substances is of such magnitude that the information is not really reaching the public consciousness. Also in this respect one may indeed speak of an irrational, taboo-like atmosphere. To begin with the currently most demonised substance: heroin. It is a medical fact that this opiate, if not consumed at overdose levels, does not cause any significant physical damage. In contrast to the alcoholic, an individual addicted to it can grow old in good health. But when you say this, a lot of people simply do not believe you. The addictive danger of heroin is certainly high, much higher than that of alcohol, if just because of the fact that after a couple of weeks of steady use severe withdrawal symptoms can be observed. Therefore heroin use is to be regarded as high risk behaviour, but that it leads to inevitable addiction is simply a stupid myth. Though this might be difficult, even heroin can be used in a controlled, moderate way.

It is beyond any doubt that cocaine can be addictive when used excessively. Under such circumstances it can produce fear and paranoia. But there are huge numbers of people that use cocaine year after year in a moderate way without suffering from it in any sense. The physical damage of cocaine is limited when compared with that of alcohol. I fail to see any moral difference between the heroin- or cocaine-dealer and the liquor store owner around the block.

The entire classification of drugs into so called 'hard and soft drugs' is a good example of how discussion in society is dominated by legalistic categories that have no basis in reality. Currently drugs are classified in three categories, alcohol and tobacco – the allowed substances – cannabis – the only so-called 'softdrug' – and all other drugs are labelled 'hard'. This classification has the same scientific basis as a biology book classifying the mammals in a first category containing the Siberian tiger and the shrew, a second category called herbivores and only containing the opossum, and a third category of carnivores containing all other mammals. Any general statement on 'hard drugs', dozens of which can be read every day in our newspapers, is by definition nonsense. For what do substances such as XTC, cocaine,

LSD and opium have in common? 'Hard and soft drugs' don't exist. It is very nice that cannabis is tolerated in the Netherlands, but the Dutch complaint that president Chirac fails to see that soft drugs are less dangerous than hard drugs is pure rubbish. Chirac is right. When you smoke a joint you inhale tar, a source of cancer. Cannabis is as dangerous as tobacco, while the first physical damage of the 'hard drug' LSD is still to be shown. Cannabis addiction is rare but it does exist. I have never heard of LSD addiction. And from my own experience I know that a big chunk of space cake can cause mental deregulation of dimensions similar to an LSD trip.

The principle of Mill mentioned above, to the effect that the possible self-damage by an individual is in itself not sufficient ground for a penalisation of the act that causes that damage, would consequently lead to allowing a hypothetical pill causing the ultimate 'trip' followed by certain death to appear on the market. Fortunately, this issue need not be considered in the light of current practice. All present mind altering substances allow for social and harmless use, and in most cases relatively easily. The vast majority of users of most substances enjoy them in a socially integrated way. Current prohibition means that the substances of their choice are taken away from people because a certain percentage of them can't handle them. And all that under the conditions of the terrible inconsistency that alcohol and tobacco, both with significant lethal risks, can be consumed freely. In all reasonableness current drug prohibition can only be characterised as paternalism by a government that has fully lost track and that apparently sees its citizens as children.

The use of drugs should be regarded in exactly the same way as other forms of high risk behaviour such as drinking, car driving and boxing. It is allowed, but governed by specific rules and regulations destined for the protection of fellow-citizens. The production and sale of the various substances is to be organised in a decent way, according to a differentiated legislation. Legalisation is not just necessary because of the right of citizens to have a free choice but paradoxically also because of the risks of drug use. Under prohibition proper quality checks of the various substances and normal information about their effects, especially in schools, is made impossible. The

illegality of the substances greatly increases the risks that are connected to their use. When users do get addicted they naturally drift to the margins of society. It is precisely the present situation that leads to the nuisances caused by the junkies that are rejected by society and by the criminals amongst the dealers.

I don't want to deny that drug legalisation would have serious consequences for the Netherlands. The current moderate and conservative Dutch cannabis policy is already causing outbreaks of hysteria in Paris. So what would be the international consequences of further steps? I still think the time has come to renounce the treaties, for which I think there are at least two arguments. First, the international organised crime that profits enormously from the illegalisation is approaching such dimensions that one can speak of a gradually increasing threat to the entire international world order. Countries such as Colombia are taken over by the mob and the troublesome situation of for example Italy would be unthinkable without drug prohibition. The Dutch police too would have none of the current problems if drugs were legally obtainable. Drug madness is eating away the international legal order and it is about time that some countries openly and loudly proclaimed that the emperor is wearing no clothes. We should not go further on this fatal road.

Another equally important argument is of a moral nature. It is to be regarded as a sign of a frightening moral vacuum when solely foreign pressures are used as the decisive argument for maintaining any law calling for serious punishments. This is an implicit acknowledgement of the fact that criminal law fails to have an independent moral basis. And we are not talking about 'peanuts' here. Just because of 'abroad' we put people in prison for years. Surely the day will come when people will shiver when thinking of the time when you could be imprisoned for the sale of certain drugs, just as we shiver now when we hear that someone in Iran is imprisoned for alcohol use, indecent clothing or blasphemy. Locking up an XTC producer is simply barbaric. Drug producers and dealers who have not committed violent crimes should be adopted by Amnesty International, for the whole drug prohibition is thoroughly immoral and a historical disgrace of immense proportions. Those who use the terms 'norms and values' and accuse

proponents of legalisation of 'neglect of the victims' I would like to ask them to imagine what it would be like to be handcuffed for the simple possession of a bottle of cognac. They should realise that there is a subculture in the Netherlands of between half a million and one million people for whom the use of drugs is as common as beer is to them. The current policy indeed turns a substantial part of the population into victims, victims of the justice department.

The most important aspect of the illegality of drugs is the pure madness, its surrealistic quality. Every time I take a pill or a trip and realise that possession of these substances is prohibited I have problems understanding it. The simple idea that there is a government that has the audacity to deny me the right to experience a trip or to float about in a mental paradise on a Saturday evening, remains in fact incomprehensible to me. It is simply crazy. And it is that which will definitely cause this policy to fail. It may take a long or a short time, but in the end the present policy makers will suffer total defeat. And the

final, real reason of their defeat is that they are not even taken seriously by the large mass of drug consumers, who know that their habit is a completely normal thing. All arguments in favour of criminalization are simply lost on them. The average drug user is not even filled with indignation. He simply laughs at the government. And that is something no government can cope with in the long run.

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