Getting gangsters out of drugs

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Young men in the ghettos and millionaires' daughters up at Oxford die horribly of it. Wherever it spreads, crime rates soar. Policemen are murdered for it, politicians suborned for it. Central Americans buy whole governments through it. Lebanese and Afghans nourish their feuds with it. The traffic in illegal drugs — partly in mildish marijuana and worse cocaine, but most dreadful in heroin — has become a main tragedy of this age. The trade was created in its present worst-possible form because democratic politicians fell into a well-meant confusion of policy 20 years ago.

Governments decided then to threaten long terms of imprisonment against the suppliers and pushers who were making your daughter a junkie, but to treat her possession of a little marijuana and cocaine as much less of an offence. Supply was made highly illegal, some demand was not — exactly as during America's prohibition of alcohol in the 1920s, and thus with the same results. Gangsters market the stuff to people who feel no guilt about buying from them. The expert criminal organisations that were so enriched by the attempts of earlier American governments to prohibit alcohol and gambling (another addictive practice) are applying Capone's old murderous skills to the international narcotics business.

Subsistence peasants in wretched places are glad to take cash for poppies and coca leaves which, after simple processing, are marked up by 5,000 times for sale to final consumers. This distributors' margin — turning $1m of raw material into $5 billion of revenue — makes drug smuggling the world's most profitable business. Drugs are very-high-price and light goods, easily transported in hand-baggage or even inside people. The most prudent smugglers get big organisations to launder the money and make unrefusable offers to politicians and policemen and rival salesmen in the way. A small group of criminals now probably launders tax-free sums of over $100 billion a year, more than the GNPs of 150 of the 170 nations of the world. If these huge mark-ups went to governments in tax, as a big slice of profits from drugs like alcohol and tobacco does, they would use it for better purposes, including reducing addiction. Is that the right way?

There have been escapes from tragedies as great as today's narcotics trade, significantly almost all along this same road. America's effective answer to Capone's bootleg gangs was not gang-busting but the legalised, taxed and regulated sale of quality-controlled liquor. The best enemy of the numbers racket is the state lottery and the off-course, licensed, taxed betting shop. The British coped similarly with the main drug scourge of the first industrial revolution. Gin Lane sold cheap rot-gut to the not-quite-destitute, who drank themselves out of misery into inefficiency. So the government brought the sale of spirits under local licensing courts, forced the distillers to sell only liquor of approved quality and strength, and raised prices by excise duties as high as the market would bear without driving drinkers to poisonous cheat intoxicants like methylated spirits. People got less drunk less damagingly, initially on untaxed beer (the brewers were delighted). The distillers, forced to sell better hooch, grew rich and respectable on exports of Scotch whisky and London and Plymouth gin.

Drugs are not a "disease of affluence", or any such glib slogan. Some big British companies founded their fortunes on the officially sponsored sale of Indian dope to the poorest people the world has ever known, the Victorian Chinese. Bhang and hashish and coca and kola-nuts and qat are the opiums of their respective poor peoples. None is good for them, but nor is alcohol for rich countries.

Legalise, control, discourage

Today there are four big recreational drugs on the market in most of the world's big cities. Two of them (alcohol and tobacco) are legal, two (marijuana and cocaine)
illegal. People have been attacking their brains with the first of these poisonous chemicals since Noah had vines (Genesis ch 9,20). Christianity uses alcohol in its central rite, as does most of mankind (outside the strict Muslim nations) in its social relations. Yet in countries like Britain lawful alcohol directly kills some 10,000 people a year, and is instrumental in about half of the country's violent crime. Cigarettes in Britain kill 100,000 a year. Marijuana, one of the illegals, has hardly killed anybody yet; but the toll from it will rise because it is a poison with the defects of both the legal drugs. Tobacco and marijuana give you lung cancer; alcohol and marijuana make you run over pedestrians in your car.

In the United States marijuana is now virtually tolerated, because tens of millions of Americans have smoked it or eaten it in cookies. They think it about as befuddling per dollar as alcohol, as bad for their health as cigarettes, and less habit-forming than either. The great extra worry about marijuana is that, while the addict gets his tobacco and whisky from a lawabiding and taxpaying publican, he gets his joint from a sinner who sometimes sells adulterated poison, pays no tax and — this is important — is often keen to lead his customers on to much more harmful drugs.

A sensible public policy might be to treat all three — alcohol, tobacco marijuana — the same, with licensing, taxes and quality control. Since all are bad for you, it may be right to plaster them with larger health warnings that those that are at last helping to cut smoking. Wary governments might stop the pub culture spreading to the communal joint culture by restricting marijuana sale to boringly uncongenial premises, like the glum state liquorstores of Sweden or New Hampshire; or give monopolies to state shops like the post office, which has perfected the art of driving customers away. But a main weapon should be tax: high enough to deter consumption, and varied enough to move people from the worst drugs.

Today's worst are possibly cocaine and certainly heroin.

Cocaine came back into high fashion only recently. It is more stimulating than alcohol, less addictive than tobacco. It may be worse for you than either, including being eventually more likely to poison you. What is certain is that it is causing more murders than any commodity ever before. Because it is newish and illegal, its supply is in the hands of the worst illegals. About 80% of American supply is channelled through one group of Colombian gangsters (see page 62) who kill the law-enforcers whom they cannot suborn. Cocaine most needs to be brought under the aegis of controlled and thus legal suppliers, either by treating it like alcohol, tobacco and marijuana (see above) or like heroin (see below), depending on how statistically awful it proves to be.

How present law hooks people on heroin

Heroin is different. It is more addictive than tobacco, and damages the health far more rapidly. It can enslave the mind, so addicts want more to satisfy a craving that obsesses them so that they cannot work. Without work, they have two ways of affording more: stealing or, more easily, dealing. Encouraged by their supplier, they buy a little more than they want, and sell it on at a profit by recruiting new users, whose supplier they become. The furtive illegality of this trade increases its danger, since by the time an addict realises that he needs help he is likely to have started supplying others, so that he cannot seek outside help without risking big trouble with the law. Illegality locks people into addiction.

Legislation pretends that heroin is not significantly more dangerous than marijuana or cocaine. Since dealing in all three is a crime, the same criminal gangs handle them all. Customers for the milder drugs are therefore exposed to salesmen of the really dangerous one. So marijuana (but not alcohol) gets blamed for leading its users on to hard stuff.

Recent developments in the market for heroin give clues to how its use might eventually be curbed. Increased demand in the early 1980s led to increased production (in, among other places, lawless Burma and Afghanistan), just as the publicity about AIDS began to deter new users from experiments with sticking filthy needles into themselves. Demand and prices are falling. The evidence, scant as it is in this mysterious world, is that most long-term heroin users want to break their addiction, although probably then to destroy themselves with some other drug, usually alcohol. Since alcoholics do not recruit fresh heroin users, this is sadly to be encouraged.

So the best policy toward existing heroin users might be to bring them within the law, allowing them to register for the right to buy strictly limited doses. Taxes should be high enough to help deter consumption, but low enough to put illicit dealers out of business. To get addicted to heroin you have to be crazy, or weak-willed,
or young and foolish. It is a problem of mental health, treated as one of crime and therefore made worse. If some extra stick is wanted, then in America registered heroin and cocaine users could be disqualified from driving cars. They might then have an incentive to get listed as cured.

Even if the present narcotics trade could be beaten, self-destroyers will seek other ways to bend their minds. Calming pills from respected multinational companies produce doped-up addicts when doctors prescribe them for non-medical ills such as poverty or unhappiness. Backroom chemists find and market new drugs. The LSD of the "psychedelic" 1960s was followed in the violent early 1980s by PCP, or angel-dust. There will be more nasty successors. But these drugs, cheaply produced close to their markets, do not spawn the sort of international racketeering that today's narcotics do. They go through brief cycles of fashion, newspaper scares and oblivion. They are destructive teenage fashions, rather than social menaces, which might also be reduced by discriminatory tax.

If there were a lasting answer to drug abuse, it would lie beyond all this, in the chemists' dream of the good drug, the soma, driving out bad poisons by its controllable merits. It may lie close in the future, if research for it can be brought into the open. That is another reason why the worst policy is the present one of making the supply of noxious drugs illegal, so that only dreadful illegals engage in their supply.