

Book Review: Fixing Drugs: The Politics of Drug Prohibition

by Blog Admin

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*In **Fixing Drugs**, Sue Pryce tackles the major issues surrounding drug policy. Why do governments persist with prohibition policies, despite their questionable inefficacy? Why are some drugs criminalized, and some not? And why does society care about drug use at all? In a highly polarized debate, in which emotions run high, Pryce attempts to illuminate these questions and guide us through the problems, possibilities and realities of drug policy around the world. **John Collins** recommends this measured tome to policymakers and those seeking to understand why drugs policies have little effect.*



Fixing Drugs. Sue Pryce. Palgrave Macmillan. February 2012.

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Something appears to be changing in the public narrative surrounding drug policies. For a long time an academic consensus has existed that drug policies are failing. Not only that, but, as a recent LSE IDEAS Report [states](#), academics largely agree that ‘current global drug policies are worsening current global drug problems.’

For a similarly long time the public policy debate appeared impervious to this academic understanding. Politicians remained addicted to the anti-drug mantle as they promised harsher measures and more stringent controls. Now, from the British press, through the upper tiers of British government, opinion makers and public leaders are more openly questioning the current approach. This does not presage an immediate or radical change in policies, but it does lend optimism that a more rational reevaluation is underway. Given this political background Sue Pryce’s *Fixing Drugs* is a timely and valuable resource for those hoping to gain a more nuanced understanding of contemporary drug policies and problems. Pryce is the former chair of DrugScope, and now an Associate Professor at the [University of Nottingham](#).

At only 164 pages, the book is pleasantly concise, but nonetheless covers a broad field of research and thematic elements, from the history of drug control through to the present terms of debate. It begins from the (empirically justified) premise that the drug problem is ‘unsolvable.’ Following from this, the author argues that many of our current problems arise from an unwillingness to accept the fact that drug use can never be eradicated. It is this attempt to eradicate the drug problem through ‘prohibition’ that the author suggests society needs to move away from. Instead, she favours a more rational approach that accepts that the drugs problem cannot be ‘fixed’.

The main thrust of the book is an attempt at explaining the genesis of the current policy paradigm through to the current debates and inertias that surround it. Although the author gives a good indication of what policies she opposes, for example a clear (and justified) disdain for crop eradication and the criminalization of addicts, the book does not serve as a blueprint for a specific drug strategy. For those interested in this kind of intellectual exercise a good place to start is the Transform [Blueprint](#) report, outlining a potential system for the legal regulation of drugs. The author acknowledges early on that her argument tends towards an anti-‘prohibition’ polemic, but that should not discourage wonkish readers. Folded within its political message is a well researched and nuanced book.

The author follows a logical progression beginning with a discussion of why certain drugs are prohibited. Following this she examines why these ‘prohibitionist’ policies persist, by listing various reasons from ideological to bureaucratic. Finally the author concludes with a discussion of whether these ‘prohibitionist’ policies are coming to an end. Those seeking a meatier historical or theoretical analysis may wish to look elsewhere. Nevertheless, for those seeking an accessible distillation of current debates and reformist arguments against contemporary drug policies, this book serves its purpose extremely well.

The book also highlights broader epistemological questions within the discipline. Most prominent, it seems to me, is the engagement with the term 'regime'. Many of the assumptions from the book stem from the current interpretation of the international drug control system as a 'prohibitionist regime'. This term served its purposes extremely well during the 1990s as authors sought to grapple with newly available archival material and to construct an explanation for why the system adopted a supply-centric shape. Taking Stephen Krasner's consensus definition of a regime as 'institutions possessing norms, decision rules, and procedures which facilitate a convergence of expectations' the term served as a user friendly catch-all term to sum up a complex international structure. However, at some point it appears to have transitioned from a useful descriptive term into being viewed as an ontologically distinct phenomena that closely describes the nature of the international drug control system. As a result of this, much theoretical and historical analysis has been derived *from* the term regime rather than vice versa. Historical research has since progressed and undermined the empirical basis for such a monolithic conception. As a result its continued use may contribute to a misunderstanding of the various forces interacting to shape the international drug control system. For example, civil society is now so clearly intertwined with the system as to render its characterisation as a 'prohibitionist regime' incorrect. Prohibitionist forces may still be ascendant but it long ago ceased to be a monolithic '[Gentleman's club](#)'. To me this book further highlights the need to move away from this conceptual straight jacket and to take more account of the complex forces at work within international drug politics.

However, leaving aside this broader theoretical nitpicking, we are left with a very useful, timely, and well researched book. Given the deep irrationality of current drug policies one can only hope that rational and measured tomes such as Sue Pryce's help spark a normative and practical policy shift towards more rational drug policies. For those seeking to engage with this debate, and for policy makers searching for a brief introduction to contemporary drug policy issues, look no further.

John Collins is a PhD Candidate in the [Department of International History](#) at the LSE where he researches the history of international drug control. John is also the Transatlantic Relations Programme Assistant at LSE IDEAS. He edited the recent LSE IDEAS '[Governing the Global Drug Wars](#)' Special Report examining the history of the international drug control system. [Read more reviews by John.](#)