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Letters from Barnett, Blickman and Lines

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Manuscripts

Drugs and Alcohol Today

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3 Dear Editors,

4 I thank Mr Barrett, Mr Blickman and Dr Lines for taking the time to share their comments on my paper.

5
6 As to the methodological issues raised:

7 Mr Barrett and Blickman are clearly mistaking interpretive disagreements for methodological issues.
8 My piece is an impressionistic account aimed at contemporary historiography. If Mr Barrett's claim in
9 particular is to stand I'd be interested to hear how the other pieces in this special issue differ in
10 methodology from mine or what academic background he claims enabling him to offer such a
11 statement. The only point raised is that I didn't conduct 'interviews', which is incorrect as I reference
12 private discussions to anonymise my sources. Further, I would highlight that I have published
13 elsewhere on the poor historicising in this field which I think applies to these critics' works in a number
14 of cases.ⁱ

15
16 Mr Barrett is incorrect to assert that I was not present at many of these discussions nor did I have
17 access to strategy documents. I was present at (too) many civil society forums, closed door
18 gatherings, strategic discussions and conferences during the process. As anyone close to the process
19 would attest, strategic documents were circulated widely among civil society groupings and I
20 referenced a number of publicly available documents in my paper.

21
22 The key problem of those who 'bear the brunt' of my attack is that, under this author's opinion, they do
23 not recognise the limits imposed by their own interpretive biases. My basic point stands, that of a
24 fundamental contradiction between the ideas of those wanting to expand states' rights in more liberal
25 directions through more complex interpretations of international treaty obligations, and those seeking
26 to highlight the 'full range of options' so as to demonstrate the latter as clear, certain and closed and
27 thereby limited to 'prohibition' and ultimately driving towards a 'collision' with the international system.
28 The seeming inability of many reformists to recognise a potential trade-off between those two
29 approaches is, as my paper seeks to suggest, at the heart of their strategic contradictions and thereby
30 failings.

31 As for Mr Blickman's interesting counter:

32
33 He is of course wrong that I was the only proponent of the 'progressive school'. The UK All Party
34 Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform accepted the premise of a reinterpretive and flexibilities-
35 based approach and argued for this in their Guidance.ⁱⁱ Governments and UN officials were quietly
36 and often publicly supportive of this initiative - for example hosting events at CND and in the lead-up
37 to UNGASS in NYC. Meanwhile, INCB member Francisco Thoumi wrote with a similar approach,
38 highlighting legal inconsistencies within the Conventions rendering their interpretive scope far broader
39 than previously explored.ⁱⁱⁱ Further, the letter of the Uruguayan Foreign Ministry to INCB is archetypal
40 of the views which I term 'the progressive School'.^{iv} This is not to mention the US and Canadian
41 approaches to interpretive reform. Lastly, 'flexibilities' were explicitly written into the UNGASS
42 Outcome Document as a means to enable further reforms.^v The much advocated 'expert commission'
43 did not come to pass and many of the processes he mentioned were omitted as they seem destined
44 for historical obscurity.

45
46 As to Mr Barrett and Mr Blickman's post-hoc claims of strategic logic among the groups in question I,
47 with a great deal of respect to those concerned, colour myself deeply sceptical.

48
49 Meanwhile, I agree, as Dr Lines convincingly demonstrates, HRI maintained a strong advocacy
50 strategy throughout the process aimed at achieving tangible results in terms of harm reduction. For
51 example, I would argue their 10by20 campaign represented one of the most tangible advocacy
52 campaigns around the UNGASS process.^{vi} Indeed my conclusion on the normative shifts evident at
53 UNGASS specifically relates to the language around harm reduction interventions and public health
54 approaches. My article did not, or did not seek, to portray otherwise. I referenced Dr Lines and Mr
55 Barrett's work as an early example of a division in narrative whereby some civil society groups
56 described UNGASS in terms of unexpected failure, while others began to unpick the substantial
57 progress made. For example, to quote one reformer soon after UNGASS, 'the UN drug control system
58 was faced with a choice: evolve or die. They have chosen the latter. It now falls to reform-minded
59 states and civil society to build something better from the ashes of this UNGASS'.^{vii} It is against this
60 narrative, which dominated some reformist discourses, that I sought to juxtapose Dr Lines and Mr

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3 Barrett's more measured analysis.^{viii} If I did not make the distinction clear enough in my article it was
4 out of a desire not to overly personalise. Although a generalist narrative of UNGASS being a partial
5 'success' has recently solidified, even since I wrote the article in question, the quotation I give above
6 should re-highlight that this was absolutely not the broad perception at the time.

7
8 My article was an attempt to challenge a perceived lack of self-reflection in pre and post-UNGASS
9 strategic analyses among key civil society actors. I take these responses as having fuelled some
10 introspection, even as interpretive differences remain wide.

11 Sincerely,

12
13 Dr John Collins
14 Executive Director, LSE IDEAS International Drug Policy Project.
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16

17 ⁱ John Collins, "Rethinking 'Flexibilities' in the International Drug Control System – Potential, Precedents and
18 Models for Reforms," *International Journal of Drug Policy* In Press (2017).

19 ⁱⁱ UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform, "Guidance on Drug Policy: Interpreting the UN
20 Drug Conventions," 2015.

21 ⁱⁱⁱ Francisco E. Thoumi, "Re-Examining the 'Medical and Scientific' Basis for Interpreting the Drug Treaties:
22 Does the 'Regime' Have Any Clothes?," in *After the Drug Wars: Report of the LSE Expert Group on the*
23 *Economics of Drug Policy*, ed. John Collins and Alexander Soderholm (London: LSE IDEAS, 2016),
24 <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/LSE-IDEAS-After-the-Drug-Wars.pdf>.

25 ^{iv} Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Uruguay, "Señor Subsecretario Del Ministerio de Relaciones
26 Exteriores Ante JIFE," February 4, 2014, [http://www.bvcedro.org.pe/bitstream/123456789/543/9/4377-DR-
27 CD.pdf](http://www.bvcedro.org.pe/bitstream/123456789/543/9/4377-DR-CD.pdf).

28 ^v United Nations General Assembly, "Our Joint Commitment to Effectively Addressing and Countering the
29 World Drug Problem," A/RES/S-30/1 § (2016).

30 ^{vi} "10 by 20 Campaign," *Harm Reduction International*, accessed June 27, 2017, <https://www.hri.global/10by20>.

31 ^{vii} Steve Rolles, "The Drug Warriors Who Derailed the UN Drug Policy Summit Have Made a Terrible
32 Miscalculation," *Transform Drug Policy Foundation*, accessed June 27, 2017,
33 [http://www.tdpf.org.uk/blog/drug-warriors-who-derailed-un-drug-policy-summit-have-made-terrible-
34 miscalculation](http://www.tdpf.org.uk/blog/drug-warriors-who-derailed-un-drug-policy-summit-have-made-terrible-miscalculation).

35 ^{viii} Rick Lines and Damon Barrett, "The Human Rights Win at UNGASS on Drugs That No One Is Talking
36 About and How We Can Use It," September 5, 2016, [https://hrcessex.wordpress.com/2016/05/09/the-human-
37 rights-win-at-the-ungass-on-drugs-that-no-one-is-talking-about-and-how-we-can-use-it/](https://hrcessex.wordpress.com/2016/05/09/the-human-rights-win-at-the-ungass-on-drugs-that-no-one-is-talking-about-and-how-we-can-use-it/).

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