

Boekhout van Solinge, T. (2004) *Dealing with Drugs in Europe. An investigation of European Drug Control Experiences: France, the Netherlands and Sweden.* The Hague: BJu Legal Publishers.

‘Dealing with Drugs in Europe’ is published under the aegis of Pompe Reeks, a publishing arm within the University of Utrecht. The vision of Pompe Reeks is to publish volumes which address “fundamental rights in a changing world”. This text fits well within that framework having the aim of identifying what is crucial and immutable in the formulation of ‘drug control systems’. Pursuing this, Boekhout van Solinge examines attitudes to drugs, treatment, prevention and control across three European Countries: France, The Netherlands and Sweden, examining differences in approach and attempting to trace the roots of policy within the attitudes and structures of the nation states.

Composed of six substantial chapters, ‘Dealing with Drugs in Europe’ begins with an outline of the issues. It suggests that comparisons of the ideology and theory of drug policy have in the main been descriptive and that this volume seeks to analyse the reasons for different trends. Thereafter the book examines the common history and constraints experienced by all European nations in relation to drug control – the rise in influence of the USA and its attitudes and the fact that complete freedom of policy is not feasible within the constraints of the United Nations conventions. These two chapters, though broad in their sweep, offer a useful historical overview of the issues to readers who are new to the subject of international drug control.

Central to the book are the three chapters concerning the responses to drug use within Europe. In the selection of France, The Netherlands and Sweden, Boekhout van Solinge examines the full spectrum of European response: from the prohibitionist drug-free aspirations of Sweden, through the law enforcement responses of the French, to the pragmatic and harm minimising policies which characterise Dutch policy. The discussion – though it minimises any pan-European dimension - is very welcome and will be helpful to students of international drug policy. Moreover, viewing policy-making across nations allows the reader to make helpful constructions even about countries which are not discussed. However, in delineating national policy there is a fine line between providing useful background information and detracting from more important points. The level of detail about the nature of the nations under discussion is sometimes intrusive and it is not always clear how connections to developing drug policy will be made – if indeed they can at all. For example tracing French history back to the Hundred Years War (1453) may be interesting, but it cannot be said to impinge directly upon 21st Century drug policy.

However it is in the final chapter that the book runs into most trouble. It is here that Boekhout van Solinge develops his thesis that national drug policy is guided by five fundamental principles: the social characteristics of users; the role of scientists; geography; traditions in policy making and the state/citizen relationship. However

placing a platform of drugs policy on these factors alone suggests that responses within nations are static – or at least that change is glacially slow. Undoubtedly these factors are important; however there are other issues in play. Changes in political direction; a high profile death or economic shifts can precipitate rapid change. Consideration of the growth of drug markets and the influence upon these of global trends in trafficking or the opening and closing of trafficking routes are not addressed. The relationship between national and European policy is not tackled.

It is debatable whether an analysis which suggests that drug and alcohol policy within and between individual nations conforms to a discernible and fixed pattern can be accurate at more than a very broad level. Boekhout van Solinge does admit this to some extent suggesting that policy must accommodate contradictions when these become necessary. At the book's conclusion he charts the gradual rise in Sweden of harm reduction measures, in direct opposition to the policy of a drug free Sweden, and much more comparable to the pragmatic response he associates with the Dutch. More in this vein, though it may have occluded a single argument, would have engaged the reader in the full complexity of the issues.

Overall this is an interesting and readable text. The content is clear – despite some translation flaws – and the central arguments are engaging. It is perhaps inevitable that Boekhout van Solinge fails in his expressed intention of understanding drug control in its social, political and cultural contexts. The brief is simply too broad, and in reducing the fundamentals of policy-making to five headlines much is ignored which influences the debate. Nevertheless this book makes a useful contribution to the understanding of the history of international drug policy at a number of levels and, in opening up discussion of what factors inform that policy develops debate on a relatively under-researched area.

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