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The Illicit Drug Trade

Review by Hugh Beck


PURPOSE AND APPROACH

"Unfortunately, although drug-control laws have contributed little to suppressing the illicit-drug trade, they have contributed much to social dislocations, corruption, militarization, abuse of human rights, and a general disregard for human decency." Thus goes the principle thesis of LaMond Tullis's Unintended Consequences: Illegal Drugs and Drug Policies in Nine Countries. Upon this conclusion Tullis prescribes a shift in drug control policies. His volume integrates and interprets the results of nine country-studies completed by separate scholars respectively qualified for studying the nature of drug trade in each of the countries. Eight of the nine countries in which research was conducted are net producers of drugs and thus the geographic focus of the book is on drug producing countries. The purpose of the volume is four-fold: 1) to describe and explain what is happening with the trade of illicit drugs, 2) to describe and assess the effectiveness of current drug control efforts, 3) to make more transparent the unintended socioeconomic and political effects of drug trade and of the efforts to control it, and 4) to prescribe policy changes that may address the effects seen as most hurtful. In addressing the first three objectives Tullis draws upon the findings of the studies in each of the nine countries. In discussing prescriptions for policy changes he focusses specifically on Bolivia and Columbia. These two countries represent respectively the two basic functional aspects of the drug trade: production and marketing. Thus, conclusions made about Bolivia and Columbia may be applied to other countries according to the particular mix of production and marketing emphasis they exhibit.

SUGGESTED APPROACH TO READING UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Concerning his choice of theoretical framework, Tullis states, "The answers [to the questions of the drug trade] insofar as they are possible, are not to be found in any single discipline, method, theory, frame of reference, or value preference. Although country-study authors have approached the discussion from their own disciplines—economics, political science, political economy, history, environmental studies—they have tried to be sensitive to the need for cross-disciplinary integration." Unintended Consequences thus does not neatly fall into a single scholarly discipline defined by a unifying theoretical base. The reader may therefore initially find it difficult to pinpoint the basic assumptions which the volume makes and which influence its conclusions. Choosing to first classify Unintended Consequences with a group of literature having similar characteristics, even if this classification does not sufficiently describe the broad integration of approaches applied in the studies from which Tullis draws his conclusions, may thus benefit the reader. The orientation of international political economy as such a classification is suggested here, again not so much as a sufficient description of the book’s actual theoretical base, but more as an aid to the reader in grasping the dynamics of the issues Tullis raises and the nature of the conclusions he reaches.

Political economy has as its main goal the examination of governments and markets and how each interacts with the other. It seeks to determine the effectiveness of this interaction in particular cases and also to explore the unintended consequences each sphere, in pursuing its own goals, has upon the other. At times, these consequences may be favorable but more often they are not. One political economy scholar writes, “the market and the government... generate powerful forces that reverberate throughout society and against each other with potentially damaging consequences.”

It is in this sense that Unintended Consequences can be classified as a political economy study. Tullis’s volume seeks to
examine the effects of a market (the drug market), the effects of government intervention into that market, and the unintended consequences of that intervention. Moreover, the drug trade takes place on an international scale, nation-states are affected by drug related activities in neighboring countries, and as Tullis makes clear any solutions must involve international cooperation. *Unintended Consequences* may thus profitably be seen by the reader as an international political economy study.

Viewing *Unintended Consequence* as such helps the reader to realize that the drug trade operates primarily according to market principles (the first face of the drug trade) and only secondarily in avoidance of governments’ efforts to restrict its activities (the second face of the drug trade). This distinction allows the reader to grasp the issues Tullis discusses and to see that harmful effects of the drug trade occur on both faces. This point can be illustrated by a quote from the first chapter of Tullis’s book: “Were it not for the laws, the production, consumption, and trade of drugs would not be illegal and therefore not criminal. But crimes might still result. Drug-related crimes derive from more than simple legislative artifacts that parliaments may make and unmake according to their political will. Some addictive drugs have psychopharmacological properties that may induce violent behavior against children, spouses, the unborn, and random bystanders.” Thus, some criminal behavior of the drug trade arises upon the first face of the drug trade (the nature of the drug market itself) and other criminal behavior arises upon the second face (avoidance of governments’ restrictive policies). The distinction is an important one for Tullis and he keeps it continually at the forefront of his discussion, especially as he criticizes current drug efforts and examines possible changes in these efforts. We will briefly review these issues next.

*Unintended Consequences* helps the reader to understand the way in which perspectives of the first face of the drug trade, specifically of who is most to blame for it, lead to certain types of policies to control drug trade and reactions to those policies (the second face). Historically most drug control efforts have been based upon what Tullis calls a supply side theory of addiction. The basic assumption of such a theory is that level of drug availability. Upon this assumption, policies have been directed at restricting supply at one of three levels: the production of the drug crop (crop suppression), the trafficking network for the drug (network disruption), the movement of the drug itself (interdiction). The validity of this theory’s principle assumption has been difficult to determine by virtue of the fact that efforts aimed at restricting supply on one or on a combination of these three levels have proved largely fruitless. Concerning these efforts Tullis states, “On the whole the supply-suppression-consumption reduction model has fallen on hard times. It has too many points to unravel in practical application. Usually, where it can unravel, it has unraveled”5. Because these efforts’ intended consequences (to reduce the effects of the market face of the drug trade) have proved unsuccessful, the only remaining inquiry to be made concerning them is of their unintended consequences (the effects of the second face of the drug trade, the avoidance of restrictions). As the nine country study shows, the unintended consequences of these efforts have been also been very hurtful. Tullis thus prescribes the abandoning of such supply suppression efforts. In their place he proposes “harm-reduction strategies” which focus on reducing drug consumption in those countries which consume the most and on the initiation of development programs to compensate those countries which would be hurt by such a reorientation.


2. P.3


4. P.8

5. P.126.