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Book Review

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Book Review

Erratum

The citation for this review is 3 *RISK* 259 (1992) in most commercial databases.

THOMAS SZASZ, OUR RIGHT TO DRUGS: THE CASE FOR A FREE MARKET. (Praeger 1992) [164 pp.] Notes, bibliography, name index, notes, preface, subject index. LC: 91-30378; ISBN: 0-275-94216-3. [Cloth \$19.95. P.O. Box 5007, Westwood CT 06881-9990.]

In his book, Dr. Szasz, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at SUNY Health Science Center, Syracuse, and prolific spokesperson for civil liberties, traces the historical and philosophical roots of current drug policies in the U.S. In doing so, he attempts to explain why so many interest groups have lobbied over the past century for the close regulation of medicinals and the prohibition of recreational drugs. Presenting fundamental arguments supporting individual rights, e.g., to grow and consume drugs for self-healing or other purposes, he also is true to his title in advocating the repeal and restructuring of much of the comprehensive set of laws governing virtually all drug use.

From the founding of the American Colonies until the Civil War, marijuana was an important cash crop.... The colonists, including George Washington grew... "hemp".... [H]ow many people know that hemp, coca, and opium poppy are ordinary plants, understand how they became transformed into dreaded "dangerous drugs," and realize that in losing our rights to them we have surrendered some of our most basic property rights?

Thus Szasz begins¹ by asking questions that ought be asked when we face crises with regard to both health care and a "War on Drugs." He finishes by warning that our rights may further diminish if we allow paternalism to expand. For example, Szasz observes that, rather than customers always being right, with regard to prescription drugs, it is the doctor who is always right. More particularly, with regard to psychiatric drugs, "'The Patient is always wrong': The psychiatrist decides what drug the mental patient 'needs' and compels him to consume it, by force, if necessary."² Yet, as Szasz later notes, even doctors have given up important rights. "Physicians cannot prescribe for pain as they used to.... But they have become so accustomed to state control of drugs that

¹ *Introduction*, at xiii.

² At 18.

they never lay the blame... where it belongs....”³ Thus, on the one hand, physicians gain because limits on over-the-counter medicines helps to assure them a never-ending stream of patients, many capable of self diagnosis and treatment; on the other hand, they lose because their ability to prescribe is compromised by “fear of being apprehended by agents of the American drug-police state....”⁴

In a democratic society, we recognize, indeed value, individual responsibility. Inherent in freedom of choice is the ability to make the wrong choice and to suffer the consequences. Thus, Szasz clearly favors the right of citizens, e.g., to grow and consume marijuana on their privately owned property. But what of those who supply other consumers? He suggests that we do not, e.g., blame the obesity of fat persons on people who sell them food. Why then do we blame the habits of adult drug users/addicts on those who sell drugs?

Szasz suggests that paternalistic-prohibitory drug laws are accepted by citizens as a result of the distribution of disinformation about drugs and human responsibility. He has attempted to tell the other side. If nothing else, it will help us, as citizens, to evaluate what we are told and to consider carefully the rights we surrender.

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³ At 127.

⁴ At 128.

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