



Our Right to Drugs: The Case for a Free Market

By Thomas Szasz

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.In *Our Right to Drugs*, Thomas Szasz shows that our present drug war started at the beginning of this century, when the American government first assumed the task of protecting people from patent medicines. By the end of World War I, however, the free market in drugs was but a dim memory, if that. Instead of dwelling on the familiar impracticality or unfairness of our drug laws, Szasz demonstrates the deleterious effects of prescription laws which place people under lifelong medical tutelage. The result is that most Americans today prefer a coercive and corrupt command drug economy to a free market in drugs.

Throughout the book, Szasz stresses the consequences of the fateful transformation of the central aim of American drug prohibitions from protecting us from being fooled by misbranded drugs to protecting us from harming ourselves by self-medication--defined as drug abuse. And he reminds us that the choice between self-control and state coercion applies to all areas of our lives, drugs being but one of the theaters in which this perennial play may be staged. A free society, Szasz emphasizes, cannot endure if its citizens reject the values of self-discipline and personal responsibility and if the state treats adults as if they were naughty children. In a no-holds-barred examination of the implementation of the War on Drugs, Szasz shows that under the guise of protecting the vulnerable members of our society--especially children, blacks, and the sick--our government has persecuted and injured them. Leading politicians persuade parents to denounce their children, and encourage children to betray their parents and friends--behavior that subverts family loyalties and destroys basic human decency. And instead of protecting blacks and Hispanics from dangerous drugs, this holy war has allowed us to persecute them, not as racists but as therapists--working selflessly to bring about a drug-free America. Last but not least, to millions of sick Americans, the War on Drugs has meant being deprived of the medicines they want-- because the drugs are illegal, unapproved here though approved abroad, or require a prescription a physician may be afraid to provide. The bizarre upshot of our drug policy is that many Americans now believe they have a right to die, which they will do anyway, while few believe they have a right to drugs, even though that does not mean they have to take any. Often jolting, always stimulating, *Our Right to Drugs* is likely to have the same

explosive effect on our ideas about drugs and drug laws as, more than thirty years ago, The Myth of Mental Illness had on our ideas about insanity and psychiatry.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The "war on drugs," charges Szasz, is a hypocritical moral crusade, a pretext for strengthening the state and scapegoating deviants. It is also racist, he asserts, pointing out that blacks are arrested on drug charges at a rate far out of proportion to their drug use. In a hard-hitting, controversial polemic, the well-known critic of psychiatry (*The Myth of Mental Illness*) advocates a free market in drugs, both for pharmaceutical medicines (including opiates) and for substances like heroin and marijuana. Szasz believes that state-sanctioned coercions to protect people from their own vices are futile and violate our fundamental rights. Further, he maintains that labeling drug abuse as illness medicalizes a social problem and helps turn drug abusers into lifelong patients. In his blueprint for decriminalization, states could ground motorists whose driving ability is endangered by drug use; he also supports compulsory drug testing in occupations where a worker's impairment jeopardizes public safety.

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From Kirkus Reviews

Szasz (Psychiatry/SUNY at Syracuse) at his abrasive best, skewering the shibboleths of the War On Drugs and giving historical context to the current national hubbub. The prohibition of drugs abrogates our constitutional right to property; Americans have lost the freedom to control their bodies; until 1914, Americans had unrestricted access to drugs of their choice without government control of the market: Thus begins this reasoned and passionate treatise, in which Szasz denounces both the prohibitionists ("the War On Drugs is itself a giant quackery") and the legalizers--"paternalistic prohibitionists" whose agenda, the author says, is to transfer control of drugs to the medical system and to continue prohibiting substances, albeit only certain ones (e.g., tobacco rather than marijuana). After a scathing indictment of Nancy Reagan's "moronic anti-drug slogan" and her encouragement of children who report their drug-using parents to the police, Szasz dissects a cast of antidrug crusaders (Father Bruce Ritter, Betty Ford, Kitty Dukakis, William Bennett) and concludes that drug education is the "name we give to the state-sponsored effort to inflame people's hatred and intolerance of other people's drug habits." Turning to legalization proponents--Lester Grinspoon, Ethan Nadelman, Eric Sterling, William F. Buckley, Jr.--Szasz analyzes their proposals as new prohibition schemes. Why do we fear making drugs freely available? Because people would choose "an easy life of parasitism over a hard life of productivity" and become "drug-crazed" criminals? According to Szasz, economic productivity, crucial for the survival of society, has "nothing to do with drugs but has everything to do with family stability, cultural values, education, and social policies." And, as for crime, it is caused not by drugs but by their prohibition. Places the rhetoric and the players in clear positions on the board, whether or not you agree with the Szasz prescription. -- *Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review

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"Our Right to Drugs is an eloquent and passionate. Our Right to Drugs carries an important message, which should be taken very seriously."-Federal Bar News & Journal

"While never departing from the moral principles surrounding the issues of drug use, Szasz makes his point in direct, simple, and occasionally astonishing fashion, namely, that every American has the right to possess and use drugs with the same freedom that attaches to any other specie of property.... What is so compelling and provocative about this book is its rational and coldly logical treatment of the issues from within an internally coherent and not unreasonable perspective of the individual and our contemporary society. Thus Our Right to Drugs can and ought to cause us to reconsider our own views about the autonomy, dignity, and moral responsibility of the individual, and the sphere in which the constitutionally empowered and constrained government of the United States may function legitimately."-Northwestern University Law Review

"U.S. citizens have a right to personal property: drugs are property, therefore we have a right to obtain and use them when we want them: the U.S., however, has become a therapeutic state that restricts the availability of drugs: furthermore, drug use is labeled a disease and blamed for many crimes and untoward events that would not happen if drugs were freely available . . . He frequently states there is no need to control drugs--but he does not mention the many lives formerly lost to children's remedies laced with opium or to vaccines that, due to manufacturer accident, contained poisons. He maintains athletes should be allowed to use drugs freely to make competition fair. After reading such arguments, you might assume he even favors drug use while piloting a car or airplane; yet three paragraphs before book's end, he allows that these activities should be drug-free. Szasz does make some good points. It's hard, for instance, to argue against this pronouncement: The War on Drugs has had many undesirable consequences, not least among them the mass production of experts on drug abuse."-Booklist

"Szasz (Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry, State University of New York, Syracuse) holds numerous awards and has written many stimulating books on mental illness. With this book he challenges US society to take a fresh look at its drug problem and the way in which its government is responding to the misuse of drugs by some of its citizens. Szasz describes how the current debate on drugs is based on a collective ignorance of the facts and issues and on inability to learn from history. He then goes on to cover issues such as the rights citizens rejected; liberty versus utopia; drugs as scapegoats; the cult of drug disinformation; the lie of legalization; perils of prohibition; and the burden of choice. Szasz makes a persuasive case for a reevaluation of US drug policy within the context of liberty and human responsibility in a democratic society. This book is well written, the arguments are clear and concise, and the logic effective. Excellent notes section and a very useful bibliography. Must read for anyone seriously interested in drugs and how US society is managing them. All libraries."-Choice

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"Dr. Szasz has written a profound analysis of the moral issues raised by the prohibition of drugs. Whether you favor or oppose our present drug policy, reading this book will transform your understanding of the real issues involved."-Milton Friedman Senior Research Fellow Hoover Institution, and Nobel Laureate in Economics

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Berneice Ritzman:

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