

Letter to the editor

Letters from Barnett, Blickman and Lines

John Collins

Dear Editors,

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

As to the methodological issues raised:

Mr Barrett and Blickman are clearly mistaking interpretive disagreements for methodological issues. My piece is an impressionistic account aimed at contemporary historiography. If Mr Barrett's claim in particular is to stand I would be interested to hear how the other pieces in this special issue differ in methodology from mine or what academic background he claims enabling him to offer such a statement. The only point raised is that I did not conduct "interviews", which is incorrect as I reference private discussions to anonymise my sources. Further, I would highlight that I have published elsewhere on the poor historicising in this field which I think applies to these critics' works in a number of cases (Collins, 2017).

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

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

As for Mr Blickman's interesting counter:

He is of course wrong that I was the only proponent of the "progressive school". The UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform accepted the premise of a reinterpretive and flexibilities-based approach and argued for this in their Guidance[1]. Governments and UN officials were quietly and often publicly supportive of this initiative – for example hosting events at CND and in the lead-up to UNGASS in NYC. Meanwhile, INCB Member Francisco Thoumi wrote with a similar approach, highlighting legal inconsistencies within the conventions rendering their interpretive scope far broader than previously explored (Thoumi, 2016). Further, the letter of the Uruguayan Foreign Ministry to INCB is archetypal of the views which I term "the progressive school" (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Uruguay, 2014). This is not to mention the US and Canadian approaches to interpretive reform. Lastly, "flexibilities" were explicitly written into the UNGASS Outcome Document as a means to enable further reforms (United Nations General Assembly, 2016). The much advocated "expert commission" did not come to pass and many of the processes he mentioned were omitted as they seem destined for historical obscurity.

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

Meanwhile, I agree, as Dr Lines convincingly demonstrates, HRI maintained a strong advocacy strategy throughout the process aimed at achieving tangible results in terms of harm reduction. For example, I would argue their 10 by 20 campaign represented one of the most tangible advocacy campaigns around the UNGASS process[2]. Indeed my conclusion on the normative

shifts evident at UNGASS specifically relates to the language around harm reduction interventions and public health approaches. My article did not, or did not seek, to portray otherwise. I referenced Dr Lines and Mr Barrett's work as an early example of a division in narrative whereby some civil society groups described UNGASS in terms of unexpected failure, while others began to unpick the substantial progress made. For example, to quote one reformer soon after UNGASS, "the UN drug control system was faced with a choice: evolve or die. They have chosen the latter. It now falls to reform-minded states and civil society to build something better from the ashes of this UNGASS" (Rolles, 2016). It is against this narrative, which dominated some reformist discourses, that I sought to juxtapose Dr Lines and Mr Barrett's more measured analysis (Lines and Barrett, 2016). If I did not make the distinction clear enough in my article it was out of a desire not to overly personalise. Although a generalist narrative of UNGASS being a partial "success" has recently solidified, even since I wrote the article in question, the quotation I give above should re-highlight that this was absolutely not the broad perception at the time.

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

Sincerely,

John Collins

Notes

1. UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Policy Reform, "Guidance on Drug Policy: Interpreting the UN Drug Conventions," 2015.
2. "10 by 20 Campaign," Harm Reduction International, available at: www.hri.global/10by20. (accessed 27 June 2017).

References

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- Thoumi, F.E. (2016), "Re-examining the 'medical and scientific' basis for interpreting the drug treaties: does the 'regime' have any clothes?", in Collins, J. and Soderholm, A. (Eds), *After the Drug Wars: Report of the LSE Expert Group on the Economics of Drug Policy*, LSE IDEAS, London, pp. 19-29, available at: www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/LSE-IDEAS-After-the-Drug-Wars.pdf (accessed 1 June 2016).
- United Nations General Assembly (2016), "Our joint commitment to effectively addressing and countering the world drug problem", A/RES/S-30/1 §, New York City, NY.