

Drug Policy

By Alison Ritter

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How should drug problems be governed and what can be done to produce better drug policy? Alison Ritter skilfully guides us towards her visionary (and hopeful) conclusion that the solution lies in fostering deliberative and participatory democratic processes that inform and engage the public and include the affected community within an empowering environment.

The book provides a clearly written account of drug policy that covers key theoretical approaches, highlights the multi-dimensional nature of drug policy, and disentangles the complexities of the policy process. It offers an overview of current international and national drug policies and illustrates the contested nature of drug policy, drawing on research studies and including many examples of drug policy from around the world. The author integrates an examination of drug policy with an analysis of the policy process based on three ways of understanding how policy is made: policy as 'authoritative choice' which aligns with the evidence-informed perspective of policy making, policy as a process of 'structured interaction' which brings stakeholder and network actors into the picture, and the policy process as 'constructing collective meaning' which regards policy problems as shifting and constructed within the policy process through interaction and meaning formation between formal and informal networks. These theoretical perspectives form a thread through the chapters.

Having set the broad approach and introduced a wide range of key theories and concepts informing drug policy discourses, chapters two and three examine health and harm reduction policy, and legislative and regulatory responses to drug use and drug supply. Prevention policy is mentioned in places but is not discussed in any detail. Chapters four to seven will appeal to anyone interested in policy studies; they address different aspects of how drug policy is formed and implemented, how policy problems emerge within the policy making process, how the subjects of policy are defined and how decision makers arrive at 'acceptable' solutions. The role of research in informing and directing policy is seen within the framework of stakeholder and advocacy action, highlighting the constructed and contested nature of drug (and any other) policy, the importance of power structures and of the social and political ethos influencing policy making and the opportunities for research to penetrate the policy process and effect policy change. However, as Ritter discusses in chapter seven, securing policy change needs a values-led dialogue that recognises how values underpin understandings of drugs and policy responses to drug use. Using the example of eligibility to receive social welfare benefits, the author illustrates how policy proposals, such as drug testing before benefits can be received, reveal different underlying values and moral positions between proponents and opponents of the policy. The contention is that we should recognise the limits of the evidence-informed policy ideal and

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engage explicitly and respectfully in a dialogue on values; this is an approach that is currently missing from drug policy discourses.

In the final chapter, the author makes a case for the democratisation of drug policy and considers how this ambitious goal might be achieved. While the argument for this solution is well made, how to achieve it is clearly a work in progress. Part of the solution is to improve inclusion, especially of (marginalised) affected social groups, keeping in mind that this is a heterogeneous community that includes people who currently use or formerly used drugs, families and other affected individuals -- all with numerous varied, situated experiences. As Ritter notes, there are many different models for engaging citizens in deliberative processes. These include formal processes, such as Citizens Jury or submission to parliamentary enquiries, as well as informal methods such as marches, protest movements and community campaigns. The big question -- which still needs an answer -- is how to make sure that affected communities are included and that those who are included represent those who remain on the outside. However, as the author concludes, there is a possibility that meaningful participation will result in better policy and a chance to redress the power imbalance, so ... 'What have we got to lose?'

For those who are new to drug policy, this book is an excellent introduction. For those who are more familiar with drug policy and policy science theories, it marries the two aspects in a way that brings fresh insights and raises some good questions for research and further policy debate. Highly recommended.

Prof Betsy Thom
Middlesex University London