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'Silk Road' Was Safer Than the Streets for Buyers/Sellers

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In the aftermath of the guilty verdicts handed down in the case of Ross Ulbricht, some journalists have been having a field day reporting on the downfall of the 'alleged mastermind' behind Silk Road, while others are shining a light on the apparent miscarriage of justice. But curiously absent in the deluge of reporting around Silk Road is the discussion about the drug war. While it's disappointing that we'd rather use words like 'alleged mastermind' than 'evidence of drug war failure,' it's perhaps understandable, because it's not always easy to talk about the uncomfortably obvious:

People use drugs. They get those drugs from someone else. In order to consume drugs, someone had to buy them, and someone had to sell them. We don't have to like it, but we do have to acknowledge the reality of it.

Our entire approach to responding to that reality has thus far been a dismal disappointment. Silk Road was, in the most basic sense, a product of our failed war on drugs—a response to our woefully inadequate way of managing not only drug use, but also drug demand and drug sales.

Many reformers, myself included, have long been highlighting the forward-thinking benefits of Silk Road and the ways it began to slowly revolutionize drug sales around the world. It provided a platform that could allow indigenous growers and cultivators around the world to sell directly to the consumer, potentially reducing cartel participation and violence. It created an economic opportunity for drug sellers with previous felony drug convictions and others typically excluded from participating in the regulated and controlled US drug sales marketplaces (such as dispensaries where marijuana is sold).

Silk Road was a far better way for people to buy and sell drugs than on the streets. It was a workable model of largely peaceable and less dangerous drug transactions. Transactions that did not result in women drug buyers being sexually assaulted or forced to trade sex for drugs. Transactions that did not result in anyone having a gun pulled on them at the moment of purchase.

Journalist Mike Power had this to say in response to the verdict:

> "...regardless of legality, we now live in a reality where anyone can buy any quantity of any illegal drug they want, as often as they like, at any time of day or night and have it shipped to their house in a few days or less.
>
> The question is: does the rise of Silk Road mean the final nail in the coffin for the War on Drugs? Prohibition isn't now just misguided, it's clearly impossible."

Drug war blogger Poly Paradyme echoed that sentiment:

> "The Silk Road trial has concluded, but why are we here in the first place? The larger conversation regarding the War on Drugs has been ignored on the whole and the trial has surrounded 'Did Ross sell drugs?' instead of 'Do we care Ross sold drugs?'
>
> The War on Drugs after almost a century has only wrecked lives, empowered the police state, and funneled money into a prison industrial complex. This is already common knowledge to many, so why is it missing from the media context of Silk Road's trial?"

We need to bring drug sellers into the conversation about ending the war on drugs. We need to acknowledge the role they play. We need to prioritize the realities of people who sell drugs all around the world, the terrible consequences (including death) many of them face, the risks they take and the way they so often are excluded from our demands for justice and drug policy reform.

We need something better than what we have now, which is nothing but failure, cartels and beheadings, mass incarceration, mandatory minimums, a vibrant and throbbing illicit market, and a prison industrial complex totally out of control.

Drug sales and e-drug marketplaces are illegal only because we say they are. We could equally decide to say they are not illegal, but rather they are controlled and regulated environments, with enforced product quality standards, age verification measures, fair trade agreements with drug cultivators, healthcare workers dispensing drug safety information in chat rooms, and any number of other policies that would enhance safety and reduce risks. We could decide to create models that champion human rights, promote eco-stewardship and sustainability and create good jobs for people. Or we could choose to do nothing and let the disastrous global drug war keep grinding away, ruining lives and destroying opportunity.

Silk Road gave us a new way to imagine better management of the drug trade. It remains to be seen if policy reformers embrace and champion this new model, or if we allow that innovation to fade into our history of opposing the failed war on drugs.

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