Half-baked Legalization Won’t Work

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Introduction

The origins of this article lie in a conversation I had with Alan Block in 1989 after I talked about crime and punishment in the Netherlands with the group of students he had brought to Leiden. “You think you don’t have organized crime in the Netherlands?”, he asked me. I was so taken aback I didn’t know what to say. I was familiar with what Block had written and knew his historical research demonstrated that the American Mafia gang wars of the 1920s had never occurred. But organized crime in the Netherlands, what was I supposed to make of that? We live in such a carefully planned, socially responsible country with virtually the lowest homicide rate in the world!

Alan Block asked me to stay another hour so I could listen to his own lecture on American gangsters in the Netherlands. It turned out that the Cellinis, a crime family from Washington D.C. and part of Meyer Lansky’s network, had settled in the Red Light District of Amsterdam in the 1970s to set up a gambling business. Maurits de Vries alias Zwarte Joop (Black Joe because of his black hair), locally known for his night clubs with live sex shows, served as the Dutch partner. Block had obtained his information from a police investigator from New Jersey who had been tracking down gangsters like Cellini and Nesline for years, and had taken the files home with him when he retired.

That very same evening, we went to the Red Light District to test the story. Ton van Dijk, gangster specialist at the Dutch weekly Haagse Post, served as our guide. As an amateur wrestler, Van Dijk was a regular at the athletic club upstairs from the sex palace Casa Rosso, where he lost a bout with trainer and world wrestling champion Chris Dolman every week just to keep in close contact with the Amsterdam underworld. Alan Block’s story checked out. The “Americans with Italian names” had set up Cabala Casino and then Club 26. We chatted with the guys about why the American Mafia had left Amsterdam again in 1986. Maybe it was due to mismanagement, maybe the clubs were competing too much, or perhaps it was because De Vries died ... a natural death. But the real reason must have been that with the Games of Chance Act, the Netherlands legalized gambling in 1986. From that moment on, Government
Ministries started organizing lotteries to give their own budgets some flexibility, and there was not much left for gangsters to do. So something changed, and it is one aspect of these changes – the cultivation and use of marijuana in the Netherlands – that this chapter is about.

Following the Current

One November evening in 1999, the Rivieren district in the Dutch town of Deventer was startled and unnerved by an invasion of 250 cops, city officials and power company inspectors. The six search teams this small army was divided into did a house-to-house check to see if anyone was commercially growing cannabis there. The Rivieren district was one of the former working-class neighborhoods city officials would rather not go to because the residents responded so aggressively to anything official. Things had quieted down now, the whole area had had a recent facelift and the tenants of the renovated buildings got along pretty well with each other. But the social problems were still there, there were still plenty of people out of work and lots of old-style large families who had to get by on welfare checks.

The reason for the police raid under the code name Following the Current was not the punishable cultivation of Netherweed in itself and no one had anything special against the neighborhood. On the contrary, the intervention meant a letdown for Dutch drug policy. The Mayor of Deventer was known for his progressive standpoint on the issue and this being a deprived district had made the authorities hesitant to go ahead with the raid.

It was however the Northeast Netherlands Power Company that sounded the alarm. Electricity for the strong lamps shining down on the cannabis plants was being tapped on a large scale via the cable before it reached the electricity meter. This was using up so much current that fuses were blowing. Neighborhood residents immediately remedied the situation, since in a Dutch winter, three and a half hours without current could mean the failure of a whole cannabis crop. But they were doing so by sticking iron nails in between the electricity poles, which is something the Fire Department expressly tells folks not to do. If there was a short circuit and a fire broke out, the power company could be held liable. The use of current in the neighborhood had quadrupled in the past year, which meant four million euros losses for the power plant. The strong lamps that supplied the light and heat that made the cannabis plants grow was using so much current that the neighbors had no electricity. Their television sets and refrigerators kept failing intermittently. The police were getting anonymous complaints about the odor and flooding coming from a neighbor’s house. In a number of cases, the high electricity bills were what led to the suspicion of punishable acts. An annual usage of 2,500 kiloWatt hours is normal. A bill for 4,000 kiloWatt hours presumably means cannabis is being grown, and so does a bill of 300, because this suggests that the current is probably being tapped. Prospective cannabis growers got a tremendous boost when