

[Even drug prohibitionists should be embarrassed by Peter Hitchens](#) [1]

Written by [Sam Bowman](#) [2] | Wednesday 29 August 2012



Peter Hitchens has been around a lot promoting his new book, *Drugs: The War We Never Fought*. I have not read his book, nor do I intend to ? unless it is significantly better than the extracts he has published from it, I would rather not waste my time. Hitchens?s thesis is that it is misleading to talk about a ?war on drugs? in the British context.

This is actually a fair point. The War on Drugs is an American phenomenon, and British drugs prohibition has, indeed, been a lot less heavy-handed than America?s. Not that that would be difficult. Even still, it's quite an overstatement to say that there is a 'de facto decriminalization' of drugs in Britain. [There are over 10,000 people in jail in the UK for specific drugs offences](#) [3], and many more for drugs-related offences.

This is just about all that Hitchens has right. [His article for the Mail on Sunday this weekend](#) [4] was a study in the use of logical fallacies, and he is remarkably inconsistent in his reasoning.

Using false generalizations and question-begging, Hitchens concentrated on cannabis, ?one of the most dangerous drugs known to man?. But his argument ? that cannabis is much more dangerous than is commonly believed ? was staggeringly weak. His justification for this premise in full:

?The cannabis user can cause terrible distress to others. He could wreck his life and the lives of his friends and close family through irreversible mental illness. He could destroy his good prospects. Its use by teenagers is associated with under-achievement in school. Many who fail in school go on to fail in life, and so become an unquenchable grief to those who love them, and a costly burden to us all.

?Campaigners for cannabis legalisation often claim that the drug, especially in comparison with alcohol, promotes peaceful behaviour. I am unconvinced by this broad claim, partly because of the frequent newspaper accounts of violent acts by people who are known cannabis users. . . .

?There are also several cases, which I have for the most part set aside, of killings by mentally ill people who have been taking cannabis.

?It is not possible to say whether they were ill in the first place because of cannabis, or whether they were already ill for some other reason, and cannabis has made their problems worse.?

That?s it. No survey data, no medical evidence ? nothing, except some specious anecdotes and flimsy correlations. [Contrast this with actual, you know, medical research](#) [5] which says, basically, that it?s not

good for you, but you could do worse. [There isn't a clear link between cannabis use and violence to others](#) [6]. The [risks of psychosis are slim](#) [7]. And Peter Hitchens may be surprised to learn that there have been several cases of killings by mentally ill people who have *not* been taking cannabis as well.

Like many other hobbies, cannabis is a potentially harmful thing to use. There are troubling studies that suggest a link between suicide and cannabis use ([and studies that do not find such a link](#) [8]), but Hitchens does not cite them.

Of course, all of this is beside the point. As in all scientific questions, the jury is out, and it is absurd to think that a few studies should be able to determine how *other people* are allowed to live. As an adult, I should be able to stick whatever I damn well like into my body. Provided that I am aware of the risks, nobody is better placed to make my personal cost/benefit calculation for any given action. Nevertheless, it is staggering to see how weak the premises of Hitchens's argument are.

There seems to be some sort of convention that people criticising Hitchens must first praise his consistency and intellect. I don't know why; he is not an interesting writer or a profound thinker. He huffs and puffs, and rarely writes well enough to justify his affectations.

He is also considerably less consistent than he might appear. He follows his authoritarianism to its next logical step ? he wants alcohol banned as well as cannabis, though he does try to wriggle out of that by saying that ?alcohol is too well-established here for such measures to work? ? but what about other dangerous hobbies, like [horse-riding](#) [9] (worse than ecstasy), boxing, rugby, or sky-diving? What about sex with people in high STD risk groups? What about driving to work instead of getting the train (twelve times less lethal than driving)?

Hitchens is silent about all of these things. He might simply be inconsistent. He might be a coward who is only prepared to attack things that are already illegal or, in the case of alcohol, under assault by the health lobby. He might believe that the pleasure that some people take from driving is more important than the pleasure that some people take from using cocaine. If he does, then he is simply advocating for a law based on Peter Hitchens's own preferences, and is certainly not a serious thinker.

There are many good reasons not to use drugs, and there are a few good reasons not to legalize drugs. Peter Hitchens has given none of these. As he has never tried drugs himself, he even manages to undermine the best argument against taking drugs ? that they turn you into a pompous, incoherent bore. Hitchens's paper-thin arguments should be mocked and ignored, and nothing more.

Update: Apparently Hitchens has admitted trying 'illegal drugs'. Why hasn't he handed himself into the authorities?

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[5] http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/opus1714/Estimating_drug_harms.pdf

[6] <https://www.ncjrs.gov/txtfiles/psycho.txt>

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