

# The Rotterdam Junkie Union and Affiliates: How to Realize a Non-Repressive Drug Policy?

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When, in September 1986, the President of the United States of America solemnly declared he was prepared to undergo personally a urine test to prove the absence of drugs in his body, drug policy as an international fetish seemed to reach a new high point of infatuation. Indeed, what could this mean other than that even the high priest of the modern crusade against drugs could not be safe from a contamination by this evil? 'Drugs' were portrayed as a demon, able to hit even the Leader of the Free World. In fact, Ronald Reagan's offer received world-wide media coverage, but as of the beginning of January 1987, we have not yet seen him piss in a receiver to fulfill his pledge. And then, in January everybody was informed about his ureter operation. It was said it all had something to do with his prostate, but couldn't it also have been concerned with the expelling of evil itself, explaining implicitly why we hadn't seen his drug-free urine on TV until that time?

What the preceding anecdote relates to is the reification of a concept. 'Drugs' may be valid as a concept, but then only within a subjective context. Psychotropic substances may alter people's state of mind, but differently for different people in different situations. A similar kick or flush or depression or excitement may as well be gained by non-tangible means, eg music or sex or driving fast. Nor is addiction a criterion to distinguish the real drug, because what then about sex or food or shopping? And if the societal cost is the reason to outlaw 'drugs', could people then call the Norwegian policy concerning delta-planing a drug policy? And why is driving fast then not pursued very harshly? So, drugs are a very subjective and not necessarily material experience. What may be a drug for some people, can look disgusting to others (sex, food, driving fast).

Besides, even within the frame of substance-oriented drug policy, the object can fortuitously differ. Scandinavian thinking about drugs is generally much more puritanical than the attitude in the Netherlands. Indeed, this country seems flooded with advertisements

for alcohol and tobacco. All kinds of medicines are widely prescribed, although not so easily available without prescription. The selling of cannabis in specialised coffee-shops is largely tolerated and (discrete) advertising is allowed. So, *drugs* in Dutch policy means in fact heroin, cocaine, LSD, amphetamines and a supplementary random selection. And *policy* means in the first place obviating the use of those substances by forbidding them and by prosecuting the various parties in the market concerned.

In Rotterdam, there is an organisation of consumers of those illicit drugs, the *Rotterdamse Junkiebond* (*Rotterdam Junkie Union - RJB*), closely collaborating with the association *Breed Front voor de vernieuwing van hetdrugbeleid* (*Broad Front for the Renewal of Drug Policy - BF*). Their aim is twofold: defending the actual interests of those consumers (commonly called 'users' in Dutch) and working towards the acceptance of (the use of) all kinds of drugs as an ordinary societal phenomenon.

This paper is an introduction to the dilemmas that are constantly faced within the *Junkiebond* and the *Breed Front* in discussions about strategies and tactics to achieve these aims. It contains four parts:

1. a rough sketch of actual Dutch drug policy;
2. some information about RJB and BF;
3. some background information concerning recent discussions;
4. a consideration of some central problems.

## 1. Drug policy in the Netherlands

In October 1985, the former Dutch state secretary of Public Health opened an international conference on 'Local authorities and drug policy' in The Hague. Almost half of his speech dealt with the negative social consequences of the use of alcohol and tobacco. He outlined the problems of a public health policy which prohibits the use of drugs such as heroin for primary health reasons, while at the same time ensures that 'users experience more damage by the consequences of criminalisation than by the use of the product itself'. Only by abandoning the classical moral approach in these matters, would it be possible to come to a 'gradual process of integration of the phenomenon of drug use in our society'.<sup>1</sup>

It was a brave speech in the general atmosphere of a 'war on drugs' in which Dutch policy is often considered to be undermining the necessary world-wide crusade against this modern evil. On the other hand, the speech clearly showed the multiple contradictions and ambiguities within Dutch drug policy. Indeed, although the Department of Public Health is still formally and primarily responsible for drug policy, only a year later the Minister of Justice announced that he wanted to prohibit the selling of articles used for

the consumption of drugs. This was of course a very strange and rather stupid statement. Was the intention of the Minister to outlaw – in addition to syringes and waterpipes – spoons, lemons or tinfoil? Apart from this rather ridiculous prospect, the statement probably had a demagogic intention ('we are combating the drug problem by withdrawing our tolerance which has gone too far'). The primary effect however would be that pharmacies or shops, which were – after a long period of hesitation – openly selling syringes, would feel inclined to stop or restrict the dispensing of clean needles to supposed junkies. It is obvious that this policy would have an immediate effect on the panic over the spread of AIDS (and of AIDS contamination), because of addicts sharing scarce, used needles.

That the actual drug policy in the Netherlands would almost inevitably create problems by itself could be expected from the beginning. Since the first *Opium Act* (1919), Dutch drug policy has always been inspired by international treaties, criminalising the use of substances which at that specific time were even unknown in Holland, or had never caused social problems. In 1919, for example, opium was not used in Holland, while in the former colony Indonesia, the Dutch government held the monopoly on the opium trade until 1944. Later, after the ratification of the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, the criminalisation was sharpened and enlarged, while at that time there was no heroin or cocaine in the Netherlands and opium or cannabis were only used by Chinese immigrants, sailors or artists. In the 1976 amendment of the *Opium Act*, the term 'narcotics' was replaced by 'psychotropic substances', meaning 'substances which could be dangerous for the consumer and for society' – but excluding cars, fireworks, alcohol or tobacco. Now, ten years later, Dutch drug policy has become even more arbitrary. Not only are psychotropic and potentially noxious substances such as alcohol and tobacco still widely advertised, but also the use of formally illicit substances such as hashish and marihuana is tacitly accepted, while police practice in the larger towns also tolerates the possession of a small amount of heroin, cocaine or other 'hard drugs'.

According to the state secretary, there are an estimated 800,000 people who are considered to be alcoholics in the Netherlands. Annually, some 800 people die in traffic accidents, caused/influenced by the use of alcohol, he stated. In 1985 the whole country may have had over one hundred deaths because of 'hard drugs' (the Rotterdam Junkie Union mentions only 30, but the Amsterdam mayor claims about 50 of them); some of those deaths have to be imputed to the illegality of the substances (eg because of diluting with garbage, or poly-drug use, especially combinations with alcohol and medicine, or complete decay into the life of a junkie). Yet, drug policy remains mainly a *vehicle of repression*, aimed at the supply of illicit products

on the market.<sup>2</sup>

Even the practice of the Department of Public Health is permeated with this repressive spirit. One example: the rigidity concerning the doses in almost all methadone programmes is motivated, not by the interests of the clients, but by the intention to restrict the black market in methadone. So, even though the national policy is officially aimed at a 'gradual process of integration of drug use', the (also official) national policy of repression of supply obstructs the integration of drug users. At this moment (January 1987), it is completely unclear whether the statements of the Minister of Justice about taking strong action against (coffee-)shops selling cannabis or 'drug-paraphernalia' will have any consequences for actual drug policy. Anyway, the overall reactions from the big cities and the specialised assistance services was clear: driving the trade and consumption of various drugs underground again would create more and new problems.

Maybe Nils Christie is right, then, when he states that drugs (and he probably also means cannabis) should be considered as *suitable enemies* for western societies.<sup>3</sup> The moral panic created over them makes in fact all kinds of dubious repressive measures acceptable: new or enlarged juridical concepts in law (principle of universality, preparative actions, conspiracy), an increased level of punishment (hence the building of new prisons), new police methods (infiltration, undercover actions, telephone tapping). And although the consumers of drugs belong to various levels of the population, the victims of the drug policy and the criminal justice system still seem to be found in the traditional categories, only now marked with new labels that give the state much more power. (The policy on cocaine serves as an illustration of this.)

## 2. Rotterdamse Junkiebond and Breed Front

In Rotterdam in December 1980 about fifty users of illicit drugs started the first Dutch junkie union. They had three concrete reasons: the constant hunting of junkies by the police; plans discussed in the four big cities (Rotterdam, Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) to force users to kick the habit; and the poor official supply of methadone.<sup>4</sup> Before the winter of 1981, the RJB had, with the help of a few volunteers, established a small eating-house in the basement of the Paulus-church, located in the centre of town. In the evening, people can buy a cheap meal, but that is only the formal function of the place. Just as important is the fact that consumers have a place where they can meet without being dispersed immediately, where they can exchange information about 'the scene' or social events, where they can get some rest and incidentally consume their substances

without being troubled. Dealing in or around the eating-house has always been prevented by the junkie union. In December 1980, the vicar of the Paulus-church, a social psychiatrist and associate professor at the Rotterdam university, some parents of addicts and other volunteers, established the *Breed Front voor de vernieuwing vanhet drugbeleid*.

Whereas the RJB is an organisation concerned with the direct interests of its members, the *Breed Front's* objectives are more political in the narrow sense. Besides this, one of the main functions of the BF has become the actual support of, and care for, continuity in the work of the *Junkiebond*. In fact, although the RJB receives an annual municipal subsidy of Hfl. 40,000, it has no permanent or professional staff. The fact that the union is run exclusively by users (except for the function of treasurer) implies it is never very sure how solid its organisation will be. Regular work at the union requires a certain self-control over one's use and this appears to be difficult in the daily confrontations at the office with all the people coming there to consume their drugs. The alternative is to resist this temptation by leaving the union and going home to keep one's life under control with a more or less integrated use of drugs. At this time, however, a new principle has been accepted: people passing by cannot consume their dope in the union's office. It is a logical point of view – the office is not a 'social' place but a work-room – but it means at the same time a distancing from the direct 'humanitarian' contact with junkies in favour of the building up of a more solid organisation. The problems caused by the dispensing of syringes have been a crucial factor in this shift away from individual support. Some people, however, stay actively involved over a long period, although often with long interruptions.

It is important for the union that it can rely on a somewhat more stable organisation, which is also sometimes more suited to express the RJB's views towards official levels. The RJB's activities have been mainly centered on:

- a) the institution of a low-threshold methadone supply;
- b) the eating-house;
- c) information to the media, schools, conferences, *etc.*;
- d) the selling of syringes at cost-price and the collecting of used ones (this has become even more important since the AIDS panic has starting to grow);
- e) all kinds of individual help to consumers (welfare, housing, police, therapies, *etc.*).

At present, there are about twenty junkie unions in the Netherlands, linked by a national federation. Because of the different situations concerning localities, basis, official acceptance, subsidy, continuity,

*etc.*, it is difficult to establish a strong nation-wide policy. Yet, on quite a lot of levels, junkie unions are now listened to, even if they are not exactly policy advisers. Conversely, this doesn't mean that by consulting the junkie unions, one gets in touch with the representatives of all consumers of illicit drugs – although they probably still have the most reliable information on the users' worlds. Generally speaking, one could say that the people who work with the RJB are mostly men in their twenties and thirties, with a rather explicit political view, and who have been using heroin and other dope for a rather long time (six to more than ten years). This means that in general they are able to control their use or addiction. The people who are more casually involved with the union may have more difficulty integrating their drug use into their lives. Most of them, however, seem rather conscious about their problems and also about their self-value. Nevertheless, different categories of drug users are mostly not to be found within the *Rotterdamse Junkiebond*: people who integrate their recreational use of illicit drugs into their daily (or weekly) life; addicts who can integrate their consumption; tourists who come to Holland because it's relatively easy to enjoy drugs there; junks, who really have decayed into a dead-end situation. The basis of the RJB also indicates that 'drug users' are not necessarily youngsters with no history or future – a classical categorisation which may be the only way for intellectuals to make sense of the drug use of others, which they find morally unacceptable. As Ron Hemelop writes:

'... there are various reasons to use drugs, such as adventure, fascination, change in itself, pleasure, the trip, the kick, the joy, fantasy, another experience of "reality" which may be (temporarily) boring, *etc.* – or even "just like that", when formal and rational legitimation fails, so as not to take part in the societal "theatre of conventions and representations".'<sup>5</sup>

### 3. About resistance

If actual drug policy has to be considered as a repressive instrument, not only towards the users of certain substances, but also indirectly towards other 'marginal' categories (immigrants, political activists), it would seem obvious that users of illicit drugs form the pith of strategies for a new drug policy, in coalition with or supported by other parties concerned. In fact, the ideal and the examples of 'autonomous resistance' occur quite frequently within the junkie unions and affiliated organisations. Not surprisingly, a lot of users have become very marginalised by the extreme societal pressure on them and they may feel they have nothing to lose. At the same time, politically motivated and/or long-term users often like to legitimate their use as a conscious deviancy, as rebellion against bourgeois

society. From this context, models for autonomous action towards a 'right to difference' are for a junkie union and its supporters easy to find. Over the last fifteen years, difference and 'otherness' have become central themes in the work of such differing authors as eg Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous, sociologist Dick Hebdige or philosopher Gilles Deleuze. The evolution of different 'counter-cultures' in the sixties and the seventies, which have influenced the intellectual work of those authors, came to a sort of explosion at the beginning of the eighties. In various cities of Western Europe there erupted what one might call 'the autonomous feeling of life: a cocktail of resistance and desire, which could all of a sudden be lived up'.<sup>6</sup> The first junkie unions in the Netherlands arose in that period and to understand some of their discussions about strategies and tactics, it might be useful to consider the theory and practice of the 'right to difference' in the period 1980-1982. The 'youth movements' or 'new social movements' which suddenly shook Amsterdam and Berlin, but also cities in Italy and France, at that time did not really have a clear common aim. Fifteen years after the hippies and a few after punk, it was merely a conglomerate of differing milieux: squatters, feminists, people from the anti-imperialist and anti-nuclear movements, homosexuals, anarchist and Maoist students, second generation immigrants, school drop-outs and young jobless people. What many of them shared was not only a common, more or less articulated, criticism of 'the system', but also indiscriminate police repression. It should be no surprise that the people who experienced the same repression because of their consumption of various forbidden fruits (and who were also quite often rooted in the other milieux involved) started to organise themselves on the basis of their societal stigma as 'junkie'.

A look at what has become of those movements might indicate some of the dilemmas the junkie unions and affiliates are confronting today. Indeed, after a short while it became obvious that one could distinguish two tendencies within this uprising of creativity and self-direction. People who are commonly referred to as the 'alternative' groups, after some time, seemed interested primarily in defending the sanctuaries they had conquered over/in the system. Against a state strategy of confining every form of marginality (and confining almost every form of rebellion by marginality), they often had no choice but to deliberate with the 'powers' about the amount of freedom that would be left to them. For most of the Dutch immigrants' organisations and for a large part of the squatter scene, the ultimate integration into the system seems to have been reached, now that they have become dependent on subsidies to support their declared goals. The other tendency might be called the 'autonomous' one: people who didn't want to entrench themselves and for whom the constant

and immediate realisation of (all) their desires should lead to an ultimate trance, which was the only reason to live. They would always be on the move, 'unseizable' by the machinery of the state. In reality, however, the myth of 'unseizability' proved to be a constant flight to stay out of 'the claws of the system'. Quite often the 'autonomous identity' seems to consist of a circular reasoning, that only/always comes back to individual desire. (The communiqués of the *Revolutionäre Zellen* or of some 'autonomous' anti-militarist or anti-apartheid groups in the Netherlands during recent years are examples of this.) Lovink and Van der Spek write:

'The social movement may, no, must choose between legalisation/being legalised or marginalisation and criminalisation/being marginalised and criminalised.'<sup>7</sup>

Anyway, neither 'autonomous' nor 'alternative' presence looks threatening anymore, and one of the reasons why the 'movement' wasn't able to escape from the system nor to build up its own power might have been its lack of symbols to express the force of its 'otherness'. In search of proper cultural representations of the otherness they advocate, people like Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, but also Nils Christie and Louk Hulsman, have been working with terms such as plurality, non-linearity, fluid identity, cyclical time, ecstasy, tribes, etc. Publications of 'the movement' such as *Bluf!* and *De Koekrand* in Holland, *Radikal* in Berlin or *Alternative Libertaire* in Brussels speak/spoke the need for a proper language, for their own images, own symbols. However, they seldom succeeded in posing symbols which could keep their power long enough not to be absorbed by the system. Graffiti and punk music are commercialised. And the more unambiguous political symbols were mostly just a negation of the system's ones. It looks as if most of the time actions or even violence and individual desires were legitimated with reference to the dominant culture, in the face of which 'the movement' was in a position of 'self-defence'. In other words, it was/is always the system that defines the otherness.

#### 4. Strategies

In the distinction between 'autonomy' and 'alternative', the RJB occupies both positions. On the one hand, it is more or less accepted by parts of the system, and a part of its activities is concentrated on negotiations to keep and enlarge the space it has gained within the repressive system of drug policy. On the other hand, the lack of continuity within the union and the relatively small terrain it has been able to control, have kept it from being engulfed by various official services. This ambiguous position, at one and the same time inside the

system of drug policy and outside of it – as far as maintaining a drug scene is not a part of discursive drug policy – enables the union to work out different kinds of strategies. By *strategy* I mean the users' choice of the societal spaces they will try to mark out, to structure and to control. Such strategies can be mainly offensive or defensive. There can also be a distinction between *rebellion* and *subversion*; the former is mainly concerned with building up power, the latter with extorting the system's. One should keep in mind however that most of the active and passive survival strategies of users are of course not considered by them in these terms. The distinctions mentioned are also often not so clear in reality. The illegal supply of methadone by the RJB in 1982 was at one and the same time offensive (attacking the official monopoly on methadone) and defensive (giving users what they socially need and countering the control and repression mechanisms of the drug aid system). It was a form of rebellion (users building up control over a part of their own life-world, in coalition with some general practitioners) but also of subversion (undermining the image and position of specialised drug-aid).

Similar analyses could be made (and have still to be made) concerning other central points in the work of the RJB (AIDS-prevention, supply of syringes, sanctuaries, police behaviour, the legal framework for drug policy, etc.). In particular, the large-scale supply of syringes has caused a few fundamental dilemmas for the work of the Rotterdam Junkie Union. At the beginning of 1986, when it became clear that there were serious grounds for concern about AIDS among injecting dope-users, the RJB and the Federation of Dutch Junkie Unions (FNJB) decided to start a large-scale distribution system for clean syringes. In fact, it appeared that too many consumers didn't reach the official circuit for the dispensing of needles (a few assistance agencies and some pharmacies). One of the main consequences was the sharing of used and possibly contaminated needles. RJB and FNJB began to act on two levels. They set up a system for exchanging used syringes for new ones and for selling new ones at cost price. At the same time, they stepped into different official AIDS-oriented advisory or policy boards. The FNJB, which had never been able to obtain any subsidy for its office, was suddenly able to get important grants to start a prevention campaign among users and to set up a nation-wide syringe distribution system. The FNJB however did not know exactly what the officials had intended; they organised information about clean use of the illicit drugs and they are now bringing the distribution of syringes to the dope-dealers, because this is where all consumers come.

The RJB started to dispense syringes at the office. What at first looked like a very natural thing (preventing AIDS by the supply of

clean needles), bringing at the same time a lot of new people to the union, soon turned out to be very devastating. In fact, several hundreds of syringes were exchanged free each week, which cost the union some Hfl. 400 a month (while until May 1986 they were not allowed to spend their subsidy on this). More important however was the fact that daily some thirty to forty unknown consumers came to the office to get a needle and to use their dope. The small volunteer staff, constantly confronted with people using and passing around all kinds of substances, couldn't resist the temptations of joining the continuous party. In less than a year, almost all of the 'using' staff left the union in order not to become heavily hooked, or because it had become impossible to work in the office, or because indeed their individual use had got completely out of control. In October, there was no alternative but to close the office and to set the union up again with the two or three people left. Since then, the RJB has stopped dispensing syringes, on the grounds that a union doesn't necessarily have to realise its desires itself, but can create the conditions in which the interests of its members can be best met. However, when in the middle of the debacle, the RJB went to see the new alderman of public health to talk about the problems with syringe distribution, they were immediately offered a special grant to cope with the costs of the material. Another and larger distribution system, however, could not be set up with municipal support. The consequence is, that – although a few more assistance agencies sell syringes now – a lot of junkies share a product which has again become hard to obtain. The fear of AIDS seemed at last of less importance than the fear of junkies on their floor.

In the short term, the most interesting policy for the unions might be the strengthening of the scene by supplying the small dealers with syringes which they could sell at a low price (because the market will be overflowing) together with the dope. What started as a defensive action against AIDS might in this way lead to stronger unions as large-scale suppliers of a vital product on a market which is only very indirectly controlled by the system. At the same time, they use the system's money (and AIDS panic) to build up their position. On the other hand, as long as syringes are not openly available in official circles, the consumption of certain drugs remains longer in the illegal sphere from which the unions have always wanted to bring it. Similar dilemmas apply to the general aim of the *Breed Front*: a (non-repressive) renewal of drug policy. In the end this means: a policy, not specified towards certain drugs, and accompanied by regulation of the market, publicity, and distribution and accompanied by price- and quality-control. How to achieve this aim (priorities and relevant tactics) remains the enduring point of discussion within BF and RJB. And of course, we still have to define our purposes in our proper

terms, on our conditions, not (negatively) defined by the concepts and symbols of actual drug policy or society as it is.

The main problem, however, (and the reason why this discussion has to be engaged again and again) is that a great number of users have no time or energy to think about long-term goals. Survival is the first and exhaustive priority for junkies. Among the addicts who have relative control over their habit, some have developed a feeling of guilt and a negative self-image, which regularly leads them to reproduce dominant societal reactions in themselves and in other users. And those who are able to strive for long-term control over their lives, including drugs, still have to fight constantly to acquire basic conditions, such as methadone or a minimum income. This sometimes absorbs most of the time and most of the energy people have.

The preceding is an attempt to understand the mostly spontaneous work of a varying group of more or less involved people. One fundamental question however is whether the consumption of certain – until now illicit – products can be a sufficient criterion to claim 'otherness'. Moreover, an important section of those consumers doesn't want to be different – they just want to live 'normally' and be accepted as 'normal'. This doesn't only mean they want their drug use to be treated as a normal phenomenon, but also that their ambitions are (maybe temporarily) as 'normal' as possible: they aspire to nothing more than a conventional male way of life divided between 'work' and 'family'. A constant question has to be then whether issues such as the 'right to difference' or 'autonomy' can be anything more than highbrow projections of some irrelevant intellectualist ego-trip. On the other hand, one could imagine that, if this 'junkie' subculture is defined only by its marginalisation as consumers, the linking element between the users would for a large part disappear when their movement reaches (part of) its aim: decriminalisation of their drugs. When not outlawed anymore, various users might well realize that they don't have so much in common; or that the emancipatory force of their subculture shrinks to the level of the energy deployed by the only consumers who would claim their right to difference on general political grounds. The emancipatory force of the junkie unions would then, of course, have been temporary, but also (again) very much defined by the moves of their opponents (the state, the system). If there had been 'otherness' involved in the motivations of junkie unions, it might well end as consumers' rights – unless official drug policy becomes less tolerant and the scene has to grow to a creative and organised culture, out of and against the system.

#### Footnotes

1. J.P. van der Reijden, 'Opening speech at the International Congress on Local Authorities and Drugs Policy 23 Oct. 1985', *Kwartaalblad van het Breed Front*, vol. 1 nr. 4, April 1986, pp. 19-26 (in Dutch).
2. See Louk Hulsman, 'Drug policy as a source of drug problems and a vehicle of colonisation and repression', 1984, unpublished; Louk Hulsman, 'La política de drogas: fuente de problemas y vehículo de colonización y represión', in *Alcohol, drogas y criminalidad – memorias des 35 curso internacional de criminología*, Instituto de Criminología de la Universidad Central del Ecuador, 1984, pp. 445-494.
3. Nils Christie, 'Suitable enemies', in *Abolition – towards a non-repressive approach to crime*, Amsterdam, Free University Press, 1986.
4. Ron Hemelop, 'Geschiedenis, visie en praktijk van de Rotterdamse Junkiebond in relatie tot het drugprobleem', *Kwartaalblad van het Breed Front*, vol. 2 nr. 1, Juli 1986, pp. 8-21.
5. See ref. 4.
6. Geert Lovink, Jo van der Spek, 'Extase en kamikaze in West-Berlijn' and 'Buikdansen op de barrikade', *Marge*, vol. 10 nr. 1, January/February 1986, pp. 17-29.
7. See ref. 6.