Globalisation and the Governance of Dutch Coffee Shops

Francis Pakes
Reader in Comparative Criminology, ICJS Institute of Criminal Justice Studies
Portsmouth, UK

1. Introduction

Few establishments are more iconic than coffee shops in the Netherlands. They embody not only a liberal approach to the consumption of cannabis products but they also symbolise difference. Coffee shops emphasise the idiosyncratic nature of drugs policy in the Netherlands, with its emphasis on public health and the avoidance of social exclusion of cannabis users. Difference is invariably challenged, but not obliterated by globalisation. Although it is often assumed that globalisation produces convergence, as in McDonaldisation it can also be conceptualised as a ‘particularizing force’. Edwards and Hughes are right in emphasising that globalisation (or for that matter, Europeanisation) does not simply lead to homogenisation. Instead, global pressures can produce local defiance so that differences in fact become accentuated at a local level. The story of coffee shops today is indeed one of international pressure versus local defiance.

This article therefore relays the story of the rise and fall of coffee shops as one of globalisation and its effects. In order to make sense of how globalisation is threatening the very existence of coffee shops several strands need to be tied together.

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The first is the strictly national context in which coffee shops appeared onto the scene. Secondly, we must come to terms with the current governance landscape. We can only succeed in doing this if we unpick the various effects of globalisation and transnationalisation that have impacted on the governance of coffee shops. Four trends will be discussed. The first is the transnational dimension to retail and growth of cannabis. That is an issue that particularly affects coffee shops in small border towns near Belgium or Germany. Secondly, we need to appreciate the shadow cast by the harmonisation of drugs policy in the European Union. Although the EU discourse on drugs policy is one of harmonisation not homogenisation that does not place coffee shops directly in the firing line, coffee shops may turn out to be the cuckoo’s egg that needs to be thrown out of the European nest. Thirdly, the rise of community safety in the Netherlands is of relevance as coffee shops are increasingly affected by community safety considerations. This can perhaps be conceptualised as the result of the transfer of ideas or as policy diffusion, as identified by Jones and Newburn.5 Finally the process of pushing governance down to a local level has been conceptualised as an effect of globalisation by Aas6 and described in the Netherlands by Van Swaaningen.7 8

These developments have brought about a radical regionalisation of policy making. This regionalisation might in fact be the most profound chance in the governance of coffee shops. The Burgomasters (mayors), in particular, have become important local agenda setters. Whilst not quite a narrative of the state in demise, the nation state is certainly facing challenges from above and below regarding the governance of coffee shops.

2. ‘The Growth of Cannabis Will Make Very Few People Rich’

In order to explain how globalisation affects coffee shops today we need to understand how ‘strictly national’ the context of their initial appearance was. Coffee shops were arguably an accident of history. A landmark event was the passing of the so-called Opium Act 1976 that codified the distinction between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ drugs. The formal distinction between soft and hard aimed to legitimise a strategy

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6) Aas, op. cit.