

Book review

Review of “The Cannabis Social Club”

*Edited by Mafalda Pardal
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Histories of cannabis prohibition and ideas about cannabis law reform have tended to be relatively narrowly conceived. The core questions, in essence, have been about when and why cannabis first came to be prohibited by law and whether or not its prohibition should be reversed. These are not unimportant questions, of course, but they have placed the matter of turning the criminal law on or off as the central concern for analysis. I have been arguing for many years ([Seddon, 2010](#)) that this focus is too restrictive, not just analytically in terms of our ability to understand what is going on but also as a basis for developing new ideas and directions for law and policy.

One of the places where the value of a broader vision is potentially most evident is in relation to the Cannabis Social Club (CSC) model. This is the subject of this excellent collection of essays edited by leading CSC expert Mafalda Pardal ([Pardal, 2022](#)). CSCs disturb conventional framings of cannabis law reform in several ways. They do not necessarily require changes to the law (and often exist in ambiguous relation to drug control laws), they typically collapse some or all of the cannabis supply chain (dissolving sharp distinctions between suppliers, distributors and consumers), and in their standard form, they reject both for-profit commercialisation and state-run nationalised supply models. Across the eleven chapters in this book, many of these issues are covered, implicitly or explicitly, although, as I will later

suggest, there is scope for further broadening out and extending our thinking here.

The book begins with a masterly overview by Pardal, which not only provides a superb introduction to the book but also serves as a perfect primer for anyone unfamiliar with the CSC concept. The first part of the book consists of five chapters which take us on a guided tour of CSCs in Spain, Belgium and elsewhere in Europe, as well as Uruguay and New Zealand. One of the striking things to emerge from these chapters is an appreciation of the diverse forms that CSCs take in practice. Although there are clearly common features and components, there are also considerable points of difference. This prompts the question of whether there is an irreducible core or an essential set of elements that define CSCs. Or is it a looser idea, an umbrella term that describes a connected but diverse range of models and practices? We are provided in these chapters with a very helpful guide to some of this diversity. Future scholarship in this area can no doubt fruitfully continue to explore this terrain through mapping exercises and taxonomic work.

One of the points that this book beautifully illustrates is that making sense of CSCs is a more complex intellectual challenge than it might first appear. The book provides an outstanding introduction to this task and should become a first port of call for all researchers, policymakers and others who wish to get a thorough grounding in the CSC model and its operationalisation.

An area that perhaps merits more exploration than is possible within the constraints of a wide-ranging

introductory text like this, and which also points towards possible future directions for research in this area, is the question of why CSCs emerged when they did and why they have taken the forms they have. These are not simple questions to answer, but in my view, any serious attempt to do so necessitates the type of broadening of vision I alluded to at the beginning of this review. In brief, they require us to see the emergence of CSCs as local adaptations to specific cannabis prohibition regimes, in which market actors in effect also perform regulatory functions. Conceived as adaptations, it becomes clear why there has never been a single static CSC model and why change has continued to unfold over time and across different jurisdictions. I have suggested elsewhere (Seddon, 2020, 2023: Chapters 2 and 3) that the concept of *exchangespace* may offer a useful intellectual resource for thinking about market adaptations of this kind that also have a distinctive regulatory

character. This raises the further (and intriguing) possibility that rather than representing a potential post-prohibition model for cannabis supply, CSCs may be better understood as transitional adaptations that largely exist within or alongside prohibition regimes. If so, does this imply they may eventually fade away after prohibition? An interesting test case here will be Uruguay – where CSCs have been created as one pillar within a legal regulation system – and this will undoubtedly be an important site for future CSC research.

Circling back, in conclusion, to Pardal's opening chapter, in a short section on recent developments, she refers to recent waves of activity in Central and South America and in South Africa. I strongly agree that in the next decade of CSC research, there is likely to be much innovation to be investigated in these and other regions. As Pardal notes, CSCs are a "relatively deep-rooted model in

Europe" and there may be diminishing returns from continuing to focus so much on European contexts. Not for the first time, we will learn more about the world when we loosen our attachment to the idea that Europe and North America lie at its centre.

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