

Paris jet-set pushes drug legalization

by Ivès Zilli

What do right-wing neo-liberals Alain Madelin, Milton Friedman, George Soros, and French left-wing cabinet officials Environment Minister Dominique Voynet (Greens) and Dr. Bernard Kouchner (Socialists) have in common? They all back legalization of stupefying illegal drugs. Among the most active, we find Dr. Kouchner, Secretary of State for Health, former bureaucrat in the François Mitterrand government, and founder of Doctors Without Borders. He told the Dec. 2, 1997 issue of *Libération* that he backs the distribution of heroin: "I favor it; I would like to see some near-term efforts to pick it up." He also made a plea in favor of the distribution of so-called medical cannabis (marijuana): "I am speaking prudently, but obviously, there has to be some way of being able to prescribe it. For a doctor, this could be a real help."

A petition, signed by 350 people, including 111 "big names," is also causing a stir in the Paris trendy set. The initiative comes from the radical "anti-AIDS" group, ACT-UP Paris, to support its president, Philippe Mangeot, who is wanted by the 16th chamber of the the Paris criminal court for breaking the public health code against presenting illegal drugs in a good light. He is charged with having written and distributed a leaflet entitled, "I Love Ecstasy," during a Sept. 14, 1997 demonstration to protest the closing of five Paris night clubs where drug consumption was common.

The signers, show-biz folk for the most part, admit in their petition to having "at one time or another" in their life "taken narcotics." "I know," states the petition, "that in publicly admitting to having used drugs, I could be charged. I take that risk." These would-be martyrs, of course, know that, since the passage of the law in 1970, no one in France has gone to prison for advocating drug use, or even been hit with heavy fines. The statement of super-star Johnny Hallyday, who confessed in *Le Monde* that he occasionally takes cocaine, "in order to work, to get the machine moving," apparently created some imitators. Jack Lang, Mitterrand's Culture Minister, sent a message of support to the president of ACT-UP.

These positions are far from making up a majority among the left wing, however. Ségolène Royal, Minister-designate for Scholastic Education, who has a long history of defending

youth against all sorts of abuse, rose up against positions which "put everything on the same plane, whereas crack, heroin, and cocaine can lead to death, and are a major cause for delinquency." She reiterated her opposition to any effort at decriminalization. In the same vein, Minister of Youth and Sports Marie-George Buffet (Communist Party), believes that "it is essential for society to set a prohibition."

What does the population think of all this? According to one poll, last December, two out of three Frenchmen opposed to any decriminalization.

'I Love Ecstasy'

The French Observatory for Drugs and Psychotropics has recently released two groundbreaking studies on consumers in Paris, Lille, and Bordeaux, of the hallucinogen Ecstasy (methylenedioxy-methamphetamine, or MDMA), which gives the lie to its reputation as an innocuous "love pill." The first was carried out in Lille and Paris by the Research Institute in Epidemiology and Drug Dependence (IREP), while the second was undertaken in Bordeaux by the Committee for the Study of Information on Drugs. The consumption of Ecstasy in France is constantly growing, if drug seizures are any measure: 349,000 doses in 1996, compared to 255,000 in 1994, and 13,000 in 1990.

The "Ravers-Techno-plus" group estimates that a million people are involved. The consumers are young people, well within the social mainstream. Their average age is 26.5 years, and the majority are men, singles, and those with degrees. "Since 1995, it appears, Ecstasy has become much more widely distributed, available in all social settings at a constantly dropping price (between 50 and 150 francs a pill)," says the IREP study.

France's night-life now includes high school and college students and young workers, whose first experience with Ecstasy takes place at private parties. "The first time, Ecstasy is often offered for free in the setting of a Collective Initiation" at the urging of "acquaintances or very close friends," according to the study. All told, 26% of the young "heads," take the drug two to three times a month; 21.5% four times a month, often every weekend; 62% take Ecstasy at discotheques. The fact that 61% of the people attending "raves," night-long parties with mind-numbing "techno-music" involving hundreds and even thousands of young people, doesn't bother Culture Minister Catherine Trautman, who hastened to add her support to the rave-technos. The CEID calculates that 15% of the users are heavy users of MDMA.

The health problems, psychological and/or physical, caused by these substances are numerous, and range from anxiety attacks, to insomnia, to memory loss, mental confusion, and personality disorders. One consumer stated: "With 'Ecsta,' y'always want to take it, to take it all, see—to use it up, to drink—everything to excess, so, of course, if you're on 'Ecsta' and someone offers you LSD, you're going to take it."