

Former criminal **Steve Brown** on the international drug trade

“True drug lords are above any law”

Once he was one of the biggest drug lords of the Netherlands and trafficked tons of weed, hash and other drugs into the country. In the early nineties Steve Brown (53) decided to give up on crime. Still he remains a fascinating source of information, as becomes clear in his latest book “Steve Brown in Gangsta’s Paradise”. With this book he lays bare the central nervous system of drug trade worldwide. “At the top of the trade, crime and politics meet,” according to Mr. Brown.



Afghan growers on their land. Evidently, there is no lack of poppies, the basic ingredient of heroin. “All Afghan militias are involved in the drug trade,” says Steve Brown.

The fight against drug trafficking and care and support for problem users cost society huge amounts of money. Even though no one ever says it out loud, it is clear that in this “war on drugs” the government consistently drops behind and noticeably loses ground to the drug cartels.

International organizations like the World Trade Organization and the United Nations have regularly emphasized the threat of organized crime, in particular the criminal structures behind the worldwide drug trade, that not only weaken democracies and threaten the regular world economy, but also directly finance civil wars. Not to mention international terrorism that all too often gains its blood money from

drug trafficking. Just to get an idea of the financial implications: if not one dollar of all the drug money in the world were to flow back into the regular economy, in five years time there would be hardly any money left at all. An exaggeration? A British study found that traces of cocaine can be found on practically all banknotes that have been in circulation for a while. And in some cities an analysis of the sewage water can determine how much cocaine is used and in which neighborhoods. That should tell you something.

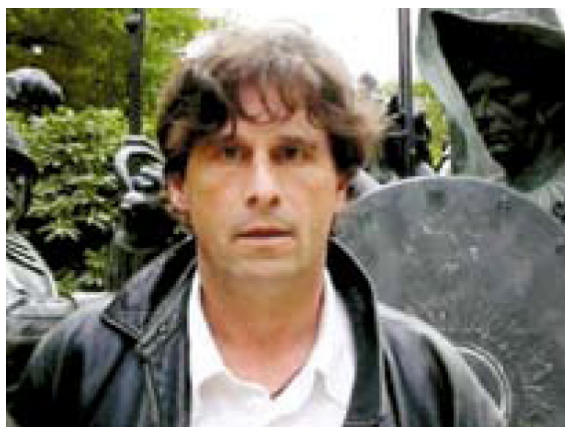
If influential organizations like the WTO and the UN are this worried, the question remains why nothing is done about the very roots of the drug evil, about the producers and the big shots, the financiers and the

launderers, about those who are involved in massive drug transports? Why, in actuality, only the relatively insignificant middlemen, the street dealers and users are being prosecuted and punished? The few large loads of drugs that the police do manage to confiscate are completely outweighed by the tons of drugs that reach the Western market without hindrance. The turnover of the largest drug lords and cartels approach the GNP of a small country and is proportionally related to the acquisition of power. Therefore drug money often lies at the basis of smaller and larger armed conflicts, the cause of both civil war and, as is the case in Mexico, the terror of daily violence or international terrorism.

For years Steve Brown worked in this environment and in his heydays he realized a turnover of 25 million euro a year, as estimated by the Dutch Fiscal Information and Investigation Service. Clearly, he was no small fish and traveling around the world as a buyer for a large chain of so-called 'coffee shops', he met the big shots of the international drug world and saw places where even the American DEA cannot or dares not come. Or rather: places they are not allowed to come, because the stories that are collected in his latest book show the strength of the ties between the drug trade and international political strategies. It should be clear that Mr. Brown himself has never been a "goody two-shoes". For years he stood at the top of the criminal world and has never denied that this was the case; he was part of the hard core of the Dutch criminal environment. He dealt with the Dutch drug lords as well as with the Chinese, South-American and Eastern European mob, who all have branches in the United States, just like regular international companies. He knew the codes and spoke the criminal lingo.

Mr. Brown, for that matter, survived a vicious attack when he was shot in front of his house in December of 1999. He had and still has plenty of enemies. Steve Brown always airs his opinion, does not shy away from an aggressive swipe and not only wrote books and columns, but also made a six-episode TV show called "Big Time Crooks". Even then he noticed how some images or conversations would not make it to the cut and he became increasingly aware to what extent the world of drugs has infiltrated the media.

This resulted in heavy conflicts with media people, amongst whom the self-declared top crime journalist Peter R. de Vries, the same who, in the case of the murder of Natalee Holloway on Aruba, so heinously exploited the grief of Natalee's mother. The same man who promised a big breakthrough in this case, but instead merely presented statements



"Half of all Dutch celebrities use cocaine," Steve Brown knows

of a confused mythomaniac, caught on hidden camera through a dubious intermediary – a heroin dealer no less – producing tapes that are of no judicial value. "People always talk about mob lawyers, bookkeepers or bankers," says Steve Brown. "Some even claim that cops and magistrates can be bribed. But the same question is never asked about journalists and other media people, while someone like Mr. de Vries is a mob journalist pure and simple. He even did odd jobs for the Bruinsma group (Klaas Bruinsma, also known

of the accurate description of a global organization that considers itself to be above the law. And, in fact, really is so. "This underworld lives off the ban on drugs," Steve Brown explains.

In what way?

Steve Brown: In the same way that the American mob profited from the prohibition to become truly big. Only through the prohibition of alcohol gangsters like Al Capone could really expand their crime empires. The same goes for the drug trade. The so-called war on drugs has been going on for thirty years

already and there is no progress whatsoever. On the contrary, the trade is thriving like never before. Is it not the right time then, to question the current policy? To consider a new approach? In my opinion, there should be a very serious discussion about the legalization of drugs, possibly with restrictions on products like cocaine and heroin. Most of the financial wind would be out of the sails of organized crime at one stroke. And more importantly: it would cut the main financial ar-

■ We need to legalize drugs ASAP ■

as the Tall One or the Reverend, a Dutch drug baron who was killed in 1991, nvdr). I have written about this before and my assertions on the mafia practices of Mr. de Vries were already confirmed in 1993 by a decree of the court in Amsterdam. The fact that Mr. de Vries failed to respond judicially, proves that my allegations are founded. If it had been complete nonsense, he would have made sure that my book was taken off the market. It goes to show that the media do not discuss drugs as objectively as you might think (laughs). If only because half of all Dutch celebrities use coke."

Steve Brown's new book 'Gangsta's Paradise' is, in any case, a good read, not merely because of the tough stories, but more so because

tery of international terrorism. The same goes for a number of regional conflicts in which the supply of weapons is almost completely financed with drug money, like that of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo, the armed military wing of the Colombian Communist Party), which is paid for with cocaine money. Society should be able to deal with this, just like we know how to handle drugs like alcohol and tobacco. It would enable us to control the quality of drugs and users could lead a normal life. It would make a big difference in what is so deceptively called "small" crime. And misuse? That will always exist, that is no different with alcohol and tobacco. The fortunes that we

now spend on the fight against drug trafficking, we could then use much more effectively for prevention and counseling of problem users, like we do with alcoholics.

According to you, it would also put an end to the double moral standard, and even the distinctly hypocritical attitude that the world, and in particular the West, now holds.

Well, that is just the way it is, isn't it? And that is really nothing new under the sun. Already during the Vietnam war, the Americans allowed certain semi-political groups that they wished to remain on good terms with to produce heroin in the Golden Triangle, the border region between Burma, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and parts of the Chinese province Yunnan. This includes the 'prince of death', the Burmese warlord Khun Sa, who peacefully died last year at the age of 73. That man, who invited me for tea once, kept a complete private army. Enemies were unceremoniously eliminated. Other groups with political ties were involved in the trade as well, like groups of the Kuomintang of Chiang Kai-shek (the Chinese anti-Communist movement that retreated to Taiwan, after Mao's victory, nrvd.). In the Golden Triangle, I myself have stood waist-high in the same extensive poppy fields that the DEA and countless liaison officers, that were stationed in those areas by the West to fight drug production, claimed they could not find. Or were they just not allowed to find them?

In Afghanistan the situation is no different. Since the beginning of the war against the Taliban the country has grown into the largest producer of heroin worldwide: ninety percent of all heroin originates in Afghanistan. And this happens while Western troops are literally staring right at it. I am no supporter of any kind of conspiracy theory, but these are facts that no one can overlook; the result of either extreme neglect, or of a covert political deal. Certain political leaders in a number of con-



The late Benazir Bhutto was not a whit better than the mafia boys of former dictator Marcos" according to Mr. Brown

flict ridden third world countries actively or passively help and support the West. In exchange Western governments look the other way when it comes to the drug interests of these leaders. The media are complicit. The image that they keep conveying of one particular type of drug trade, that of the perverted street dealer and the withering junkie, distorts our view on what it is truly about: the real big shots at the top of the pyramid and the flow of money they control.

Huge amounts of drugs make it into the West. Are our borders that leaky?

In my days, the seventies and eighties, they were as leaky as a sieve, largely because customs at that time hadn't the faintest idea of the different smuggling methods. In those days we usually picked up our own drugs, at the port of Antwerp in Belgium too. We just drove to the wharf, where we personally transferred a couple of hundred lbs of hash or whatever. Not a soul would disturb us. That has changed dramatically ever since the rise of terrorist threat. But that does not stop the drug mafia. For instance, they increasingly use diplomatic channels. Traveling ambassadors of Pakistan often use their attaché cases

to get forty up to a hundred lbs of heroin into the country. Nothing can be done about that. Basically, the drugs cannot be confiscated, the Pakistani diplomats cannot be questioned and they certainly cannot be arrested. Or they use intermediate stations. Nowadays those are mostly in Africa and the Balkans. Look, that's no secret, everybody knows this is the case. But nothing is done about it. The same goes for the laundering of all that money. They use international banks for this and mostly work through tax havens. If the UN were to decide tomorrow to put an immediate end to banking secrecy, the drug trade would have a substantial problem. Why doesn't that happen? Because the real big players on the drug market are not those who are portrayed as 'top criminals' in the media; not those notorious hardened criminals we all hear about (like Willem Holleeder, Johan Verhoek or Klaas Bruinsma, all infamous Dutch gangsters), but a select group of political leaders, mostly from third world countries. Besides, suppose that a large freight of someone like Khun Sa would be intercepted at an airport, what could be done? At the very best, the addressee would be arrested. The proverbial Khun Sa would not even be discussed, even though everyone knows that he is behind it.

Will there ever be an international arrest warrant issued against one of those top producers or traffickers? Will any of the Pakistani generals and politicians that make fortunes out of heroin ever be dealt with? No way. In, let's say, twenty years time, some social scientist will dedicate a dissertation to the question how all those dictators, generals and politicians somehow got away with it all.

And according to you this highest caste is above the law internationally?

That's true. I have seen it happen everywhere. Take someone like Benazir Bhutto. When she was assassinated, it was regarded as the death of a saint. All media were talking about a great political leader,

no one ever mentioned that she was a mob lady through and through, directly involved in the international heroin trade. She is not a whit better than the mafia clan around the Philippine dictator Marcos, the type of 'leaders' who flood the West with dirty money. In Pakistan I once met a general, a true gentleman. He had studied at Oxford, a very classy and well-mannered man. Every six weeks he sent 500 lbs of heroin to the West and whoever made trouble, was murdered just as easily. And why was this allowed to happen? Because the West, especially the United States, thought they needed him in the war against Islamic terrorism. As long as these people support the West, implicitly or otherwise, and as long as Shell can nick their oil and other Western companies can profit from exploited workers, the West is happy to look the other way. That is the double moral standard that prevails here. The drug related activities of politicians, high-ranking military men and warlords are effectively tolerated. Just about one hundred percent of all Afghan militia leaders are involved in heroin trade. They use the fortunes they make, not only to arm their soldiers, but also to built genuine palaces. These are in the neighborhood of the US Embassy, but apparently neither the CIA nor the DEA seem to notice. The same goes for the abundantly represented international press. So yes, there is indeed a caste of people who are above international law. And above any law whatsoever, as a matter of fact.

Like certain Arabic princes, as you write.

I have seen them at it in Tangier several times, basically the Sodom and Gomorrah of Morocco. The princes fly there to escape the strict religious rules of their own countries. I have seen a lot in my live, the worst of the worst, but how those princes were raving through Tangier – it was truly shocking. They arrived in daddy's private jet, were picked up with limousines at the airport, without even passing through customs, and then driven to their ridiculously ostentatious

estates. These were like sanctuaries for parties with gallons of alcohol, loads of drugs and expensive hookers. They were drinking themselves to death, fucking around for all the world to see. And then look down on everyone else in the meantime. See, this is what I really cannot stand. I wouldn't exactly call myself a respectable citizen, rather a born crook, but at least I do not pretend to be something I'm not. I came from a working-class area and feel really connected to the people in that neighborhood. If they steal a chicken or a loaf of bread just because they're hungry, they are prosecuted immediately, while others, the untouchables, can get away with the most heinous of crimes without ever being called to order. That's just asking for revenge. A decent website on this subject is www.corporatepredators.org.

In your book the active role of triads, the Chinese mafia, in the Netherlands and Belgium is striking.

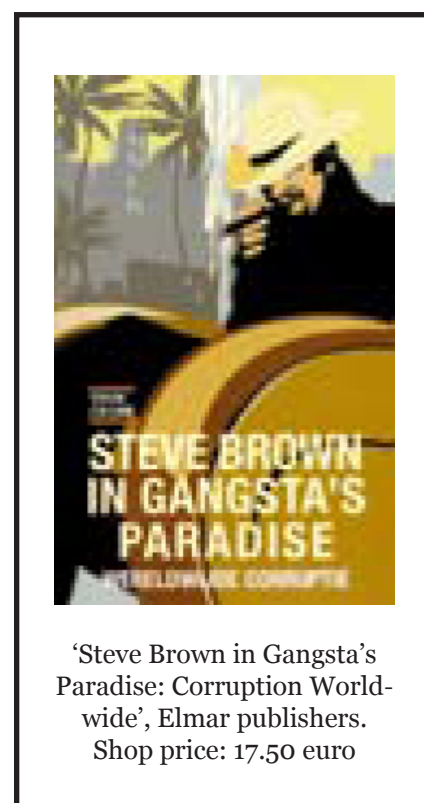
The triads are militarily structured gangs that have existed for generations, secret societies of which the membership is passed from father to son. The Hong Kong police estimates the number of one of those triads – K14 – at 80.000 men. Furthermore, in the past decades they have managed to establish worldwide networks. There isn't any city in any country that does not have a Chinese restaurant. One of those joints where you wonder how they survive because no one ever goes there for dinner. That type of place functions as a cover-up for money laundering, as conference room for mafia meetings, and as a shelter for triad soldiers who are being sent around the world in a rotation system of legal but fictitious passports – real passports on a false name. Groups like these cannot be infiltrated and their members keep to a very strict oath of secrecy, because if they do speak out, their whole family up to the third generation will be killed. I would keep my mouth shut too. The triads have their own traditional interests – drugs, prostitution, human trafficking and illegal gambling – but

they have effortlessly blended in with the globalization of crime.

The drug trade is about loads of money, political power and influence. Is there anything that can be done about it?

Once the world will see that simply prohibiting drugs is just playing into the hands of the criminal world at every level. With an unconditional war on drugs we achieve just the opposite of what we're trying to realize: with this approach, we support the drug trade instead of fighting it. Very recently it was found that the US is flooded with the purest heroin ever. From Afghanistan. NATO and the US might temporarily outfight the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, but are paying a high price for it in the streets of American cities. And besides we are financing our own worst enemy: international terrorism. I have seen so myself in Afghanistan and Pakistan. That alone should be enough to at least discuss the legalization of drugs.

Text: Dominique Trachet



'Steve Brown in Gangsta's Paradise: Corruption Worldwide', Elmar publishers. Shop price: 17.50 euro