

Herschel Grossman Interview with Webpondo

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Webpondo: Thank you very much for giving Webpondo the opportunity of doing this interview. We hope to cover several subjects, from your professional work on conflict to questions about Bogotá.

Herschel Grossman: I reserve the right to say no answer.

W.P: Definitely, and that would be respected.

H.G: You see, we have in the United States Constitution, the so-called Fifth Amendment, to avoid incriminating yourself.

W.P: Our first question has to do with the great diversity in your research career, with contributions spanning from monetary theory to political economy. Why such diversity?

H.G: I have many interests, I've been curious about many things. But also I think I followed a natural progression in my work. As you probably know, I started off doing Keynesian macro economics. I started that work almost 40 years ago, and I did it for maybe 15 years. Some of this work was published in 1976 in the book with Robert Barro, a book that many people used to learn macroeconomics in those days, almost 30 years ago!

There were several unanswered questions that attracted me. One question was of course the central question in Keynesian economics. Keynesian economics is built on the observation that nominal wages are sticky. As a result, monetary policy and other nominal disturbances have real effects in the economy. That is the central idea in Keynesian economics. That is what Keynesian economics tries to understand: Why is it possible for a central bank to create a recession?

W.P: Because it has the power.

H.G: That's true, but why? Why do we have to care about monetary policy other than for inflation? Why it is that monetary policy has real effects? That's the central issue of Keynesian economics. Keynes observed, and I think it is a correct observation, that monetary policy has real effects on the economy. And the fundamental answer in Keynesian economics is that there is nominal stickiness in the economy. People contract in nominal terms. That is an answer but it is not a complete answer because it leads to the next question: Why do people contract in nominal terms?

For many years I struggled with this question, and finally I concluded that the standard paradigm of neo-classical economics cannot provide a satisfactory answer, that an answer requires ad-hoc assumptions that violate the postulates of neo-classical economics. Many economists think that neoclassical economics provides one grand theory that can account for all economic phenomena. But neoclassical economics does

not allow for what that we observe: namely, the connections between monetary policy and real activity.

While thinking about this problem I did some interesting work on labor contracts, which at one time I thought could provide an answer, but now I think it doesn't provide one. It still pushes you back to the same questions: Why don't people contract in real terms? Why do they contract in nominal terms? I guess after 20 years of working on this question I got discouraged.

W.P: But before you put that away you managed to made significant contributions to monetary theory and policy, especially regarding the importance of credibility and the reputation of a central bank.

H.G: Yes, at about the time that I got discouraged about trying to answer the central metaphysical question of Keynesian economics, I was, as everyone in the world was in the seventies, concerned about the great surge in inflation. Why were we having world wide inflation? It was in every country in the world, in some worst than in others, but it was the case everywhere. Even the United States inflation reached double digits, 13-14% a year. So attention shifted quickly for all macroeconomists: This was the question you had to address. One line of research tried to attribute inflation to problems of credibility and time consistency. It turns out, I think, that problems of credibility and time consistency are not the right explanation for the inflation of the 1970s. Nevertheless the development of the theory of credibility and time consistency was an important innovation in economic theory.

Perhaps the most interesting and important part of this development was the introduction of the idea of reputation, which involved thinking about monetary policy as a repeated game. In a repeated game a central bank should be able to develop and maintain a reputation for delivering non inflationary monetary policy. Once you think about reputation in the context of monetary policy you quickly realize that the problem of credibility and time consistency should be easy to solve. And that the problem of inflation is probably not a problem of credibility. I was caught up in this controversy, and I wrote some things on credibility. But, even though credibility and time consistency probably are not central issues for inflation, my work on credibility and time consistency led me to a new research program.

When you model a repeated game, say monetary policy as a repeated game, a critical factor in the equilibrium that is generated from your model is the discount factor. For a foresighted policymaker concern about his reputation provides almost a perfect substitute for commitment. But, if the policymaker is nearsighted, by which we mean that the policymaker discounts the future heavily, then the reputation equilibrium will not approximate a hypothetical equilibrium under commitment.

So I began thinking about the issue of what determines the discount rate that a policymaker uses. What is the appropriate discount factor that economists should use when we are trying to model monetary policy, fiscal policy, tax policy, or any economic policy with intertemporal implications?

Well, as I thought about this problem I had the idea that the discount factor that a policymaker uses reflects the survival probability of the political regime. Then I began

thinking about the survival of the political regime, research that led, first of all, to my work with Suk Jae Noh.

W.P: Published in 1990

H.G: Yes, in *Economics and Politics*, work that I actually discussed in the Universidad Javeriana yesterday. And I think that's one of the nicest pieces I've done. I like that paper a lot.

Even in that paper, however, the political process that generates the survival probability has some exogenous parameters in it, which are not explained. In that paper we pushed the question it back one step. We developed a model for determining the survival probability in which we related this survival probability to the policy itself. I think this was a neat and very clever idea, I have to say, to my own credit.

Nevertheless it is still the case that the political structure is taken as exogenous. People began asking me, can't you push this further? Can't you endogenize it more? And that led me to think about revolution, as a way to model the process by which a political regime changes.

W.P: And why not introducing into the model the political regime itself?

H.G: good question. When we talk about the survival of political regime, what do we mean by political regime? Let me give the example of the United States, because that's the one I know best. Some people would say, that when Bush, the Republican candidate, was elected, defeating Clinton's designated Democratic successor Gore, there was a change in the political regime. I reject that completely. That is not what we mean by a change in a political regime. In a country like the United States, or any long time stable democracy, the Democrats and Republicans are a ruling clique. It may make some difference for some relatively minor issues as to whether the Democrats or Republicans are in office. But Democrats are never going to do anything to completely emasculate the Republicans or vice versa. Democrats and Republicans are basically a clique, a coalition, a ruling political establishment that divides up political power. No, what I mean by change in regime is a complete displacement of the incumbent political establishment.

When we talk about political competition in a country like United States, I emphasize this a lot, I think what we mean by political competition is not the competition of Republicans and Democrats. We mean the ability of outsiders to enter into the political process. So, I think there is political competition in the United States. My example of political competition has to do with ability of complete outsiders like Ross Perot to threaten the established parties. The fact that Perot didn't win any elections is not important. What is important is that he is a threat. As in the theory of contestable monopoly, the threat of entry is what constrains the monopolist. In the political system what constrains Republicans and Democrats is not the competition between them, they've worked that out. It is the possibility of entry that I think is the critical element.

In France for example, there is competition, more than in the United States, between the established left and the established right. Nevertheless, the real competition is Le Pen. Whether Le Pen ever wins any election is not important, and the Le Pen program is not important, as long as he doesn't win any election. The fact that he can

stand up and represent people who he claims are dispossessed, maltreated, ripped off, whatever, forces the existing parties to pay attention.

W.P: This is then what led you to concentrate on the technological factors in regime change.

H.G: Precisely. Obviously, in some countries the ruling elite is able to insulate itself pretty much from all types of competition. In other countries less so, and of course in some countries the competition is like in the United States. I mean Ross Perot never was a revolutionary. His followers didn't take up arms or anything like that. He went into the electoral competition which they were able to enter into. But in other countries of course the outsider has to take up arms to become a credible threat to the establishment.

W.P: Before continuing with this issue of political conflict and revolution, why don't you let us go back and give us your opinion on the mushrooming literature on electoral systems, voting processes and the analysis of the political system?

H.G: I don't think that voting, especially electoral competition between established political parties in stable democracies like the ones in the United States or Western Europe, is what we should look at when we talk about how much political competition. The theory of voting is interesting and for some issues voting is important, but the big issues are not settled by voting. The more basic question is whether a political system is competitive or exclusionary

W.P: Moving to your work on the economics of conflict. You used two types of fundamentals. On one hand you stress technological factors such as the technologies for predation and production, and on the other, distributive factors such as the degree of inequality, the tax rate, poverty, etc. Is this interpretation correct?

H.G: First of all, in my work, and in the work of others in the economics of conflict, the agents are engaging in predation or producing independently. Cooperation either in production or any type of exchange after production is assumed away. Most of my models are of that sort. Obviously, that is done for simplicity, but it ignores a number of issues.

The key construct that you must have in any model of conflict is the technology of conflict, which we usually represent by some type of contest success function, and which is analogous to a production function. The production function is a mapping between inputs of time, effort and other resources and the output of goods and services. Conflict technology or the contest success function, is a mapping from inputs into conflict, and also maps inputs into a distributive outcome.

My own work in this area, with some exceptions, has ignored or simplified markets for inputs as well as markets for outputs. We don't typically have exchange in inputs or exchange in outputs. Producers are viewed as self-sufficient, producers produce for their own consumption.

W.P: But you also stress the distributive side having effects on the intensity of the conflict.

H.G: When you think of an agent allocating resources over various uses, including the use of resources for appropriative conflict, you can model a choice problem for the agent, subject to a resource constraint. In simple models we assume that the allocation of resources to appropriative conflict satisfies the first order conditions for an interior maximum according to which the marginal returns to conflict and production are equated. If that is the case total resources available for conflict don't matter a lot. In that type of setup one key result, established some years ago, is Jack Hirshleifer's finding called the paradox of power. This result holds that appropriative conflict benefits the poor relative to the rich. This is an insightful result, but it is a result that only goes through if you have interior solutions in the maximization problem. If the poor agent is so poor that it cannot allocate resources to the conflict, or would like to allocate more than its total available resources to the conflict, then the poor agent faces a binding constraint on its allocation of resources to appropriative conflict. In this case the rich will beat up on the poor because the rich has more resources to allocate in the conflict than the poor.

So, one really important issue that I perhaps have not stressed enough in my own work, is how critical it is whether or not the poor agents are just a little bit poorer than the rich, or whether they're really poor. I have a paper where we worked out exactly how poor the poor agents have to be before they became resource constrained, and before the paradox of power result no longer hold.

W.P: What is your opinion of the models that relate the distribution in the characteristics of the population and the conflict intensity, like Esteban and Ray's JET paper.

H.G: Of course when you talk about conflict you're talking about conflict between agents. But, what do we mean by agents? More realistically we should mean groups of individuals and this leads to the whole question of how the groups collaborate, how the groups make decisions, how fluid is the membership of the groups, and so forth.

I'm afraid I have not worked on that. I have abstracted in almost every model I've developed from the issues of collective choice. I've always taken the easy way out by assuming the group has a leader, that the leader makes decisions for the group. And that's the end of it.

Of course that leaves a whole big research project of how the groups coalesce, how they're composed, how fluid is their membership, and how the groups make their collective choices. That's something I have not worked on, I'm sorry. But that doesn't mean that these are not critical questions for understanding conflict.

W.P: A connected issue with this comes from what is called the World Bank view of conflicts which stresses the financial viability of predation –the access to illegal rents from narcotics, kidnapping and crime- as a fundamental cause of conflicts. Here in Colombia this view has strong proponents who sometimes disregard alternative views stressing what here in Colombia are called objective causes, mainly linked

with distributional factors. Which view you think is more appropriate to analyze conflicts?

H.G: Both are. I had a professor who told me once, when I was a young student, that there is a grain of truth in every idea anybody ever thought of, no matter how silly, absurd or ridiculous it seemed. In this case, we don't have to go that far. I think there's obviously some truth in both views and both are useful.

The question is, how does one integrate them, how does one extract the elements of truth of each one.

I like to think about the conflict problem in the following way: One can imagine that insurgents are simply interested in appropriating rents. Insurgents are simply bandits. And that would be one view point, an extreme view point, what you would call the World Bank view.

Another extreme view, which I have modeled also, is that the insurgents are revolutionaries. They don't want simply to appropriate the current income from the owners of that income, whether private owners or the state. They want to become the state, and to have the capability of taxing directly as the state.

I think the correct way to look at it, to reconcile these view points, because both can be right, is perhaps to view banditry as instrumental. So, one can imagine that the ultimate objective of insurgency is to take political power, to displace the state, and to remove the existing ruling class or ruling elite. But in order to do that, the insurgents must finance the insurgency, and in order to finance the insurgency they engage in banditry. In that case it is important to understand that banditry is what they're doing now, but it's not their end, it's just a means to the end, it's just an instrument. Of course it may be the case that a group starts off thinking "ah ha" we would like to make a revolution and we would like to become the state, so we will devise a way to mobilize the resources to do that, and the way we will mobilize resource to do that is to engage in banditry. Banditry then turns out to be highly lucrative for them. And then they may say to themselves explicitly or implicitly, well maybe revolution is not so important after all, since we are quite successful simply as bandits.

People who engage in extortion and kidnapping can also engage in the production of extra illegal products. There is a good example model of that: the mafia. But, the mafia has never attempted in either the United States or in Sicily to become the state. They have been content, for the time they have existed, a few hundred years, to be a group that extracts rents through illegal or extra legal activities, like banditry, extortion, and so forth. More recently they've become, as I understand, more involved in the actual production of extra legal or illegal goods.

Now, we didn't think that the mafia or any other extra legal group, insurgent group, started off thinking like: we are going to have a revolution or we are going to just be bandits. They may start off by saying we would just like to be rich, and powerful, and live the way that the rich and powerful people do. And then they choose between just simple banditry and banditry that leads to revolution.

W.P: And what that choice depends on.

H.G: That's the question, that's the big question! Why wasn't Castro, for example, content just to establish a base in parts of Cuba, which he would control, the way FARC controls some parts of Colombia? Why did he march on to Havana? The FARC has never tried to attack Bogotá, the way Castro attacked Havana.

In short: I don't know, I don't know the answer to that, but it's on my plate at the moment.

It's the kind of issue I think it's really important. Another example involves the so called "blood diamonds". These horrible conflicts in Africa, where it is not clear from the outside whether taking control of the diamonds is the end or simply a means to a bigger end of revolution; i.e. taking control of the state.

W.P: And what about the role of institutions in preventing conflicts. Some people argue that institutions are a key for the existence of conflicts.

H.G: Institutions are endogenous. I'm going to ask you back. You're going to have to define institutions for me. Are institutions given or are institutions something that we create?

W.P: Let say for example, the political system that can lead to a peaceful settlement of opposing groups, or the constitution, an issue you have worked recently on.

H.G: Every society would like to be able to resolve their disputes peacefully, if it could. War is a bad equilibrium. The question is whether you're able, given the underlying factors, which we could argue about, to escape that bad equilibrium and attain a peaceful equilibrium, a way to settle disputes.

W.P: The conflict is necessarily a failure of institutions.

H.G: You could say that. But I don't know if you're adding too much content. Take the case of a family. We know some families are able to resolve family disputes peacefully and some have conflict all the time. We don't say that families that have conflict or don't have the right institution. They all have the same institution, they all have a contract of marriage, are responsible for the children, whatever it is. But for some deeper reasons some families are peaceful with themselves and some families are always arguing, fighting, disputing, whatever. And then there are dysfunctional families, we talk in terms of psychology some families are functional and some families are dysfunctional. Well, if we ask the psychologist about it they have varied answers but that wouldn't be considered that they have better institutions! Whatever the arrangements that the family has in place (for example the family has the arrangement that the wife cooks the meals and the husband cleans up afterwards) that's not a given institution. That's an arrangement they have come to in order to have a peaceful resolution of the question how is labor divided within the family.

W.P: Is it possible from your work on the political economy of conflicts, to get practical lessons for a society like the Colombian one?

H.G: Yes, but we have to do more empirical work if we want to give policy prescriptions. In trying apply econometrics to the study of conflict the absence of data is a particularly severe problem. We don't have data like we have in financial economics, where you can actually collect data transaction by transaction on prices and quantities, and where you can hope to use econometrics to identify supply and demand schedules. In conflict we have only scattered bits of data of this sort and that sort.

W.P: And what are the most practical lessons from just theory.

H.G: Well, let's take a lesson that we were talking a while ago. If you were in a position to design a political system for a country, one question that you have to address is how much the survival of the existing political regime should depend on the policies of that regime.

In that particular model, the parameter that measures that dependence is called q . And one of the things that come out of the analysis is the following: that you would like q not to be zero, you would like it to be positive number. In other words you like a system in which the subjects have some power to depose a bad ruler. But you don't want that parameter q to be too large. If it is too large the ruler is highly insecure and will pursue short sighted policy as he knows that with high probability if it displeases somebody a little bit, then he'll be gone. So you want to have a political system, if you can design one, in which the ruler is accountable but not so accountable that he is exceptionally insecure.

And we see this happening everyday, I know many people go to work in Washington as economic advisors and always come back and complain that the economic policies are not based in economic analysis, that they are based on political considerations. Now, you want them to be based on political considerations! Because you want the politicians to be accountable, you don't want the politician to be able to do whatever they want, whatever they think is in their own interests! We want to pass judgment and say, for example. we don't like free trade even though economists say that it's good. And we should be able to depose a politician who insists on pursuing a free trade policy that we don't like. But if all that the politician worries about is his immediate popularity, then that's also bad. If a politician cannot say: "Look. I understand in the case of free trade that there's just going to be some costs in the short run, but in the long run free trade is beneficial. And I would like to take that long view". We want the politician to be able to do that.

This is a critical trade-off. I think the value in economic analysis is that it can model and pin down that trade-off, making it clear. It is intuitive or implicit in casual every day thinking, but it is not seen clearly. And we also show the underlining logic of it, so we can be confident that we really have the shown a central issue.

W.P: And this also links very well with a vivid debate on Colombia. As you may know, the current president is actively looking to being reelected and wants to change the constitution that forbids his reelection.

H.G: I guess the question is why would you write into a Constitution term limits on the president? We have them in the United States Constitution, for the president, but not for

congressmen. In fact, in many cases we deliberately look for longevity: Members of our Federal Reserve board have fourteen year terms, members of our Supreme Court have lifetime terms. And, by the way, in the American system, the Federal Reserve and the Supreme Court are extremely powerful policymaker groups. The Supreme Court members don't officially call themselves a policymaking group, but almost in all the really important controversial issues in American society, especially the non-economic ones, the Supreme Court has in fact made the policy. So, I think the prior question, to which I don't know the answer, is: What is the optimal structure of the Constitution in terms of terms? And also, what is the optimal structure if there is the possibility of having multiple finite terms. I don't know the answer to that question. I have really never thought about it in a systematic way. However, it does seem a mistake to change the constitution, because you just happen to have a popular president at the moment. But, it also seems to be a mistake to impose a limit in the first place, because if you have a popular effective president, why fire it? Why can't he continue in office?

W.P: Or maybe find a mechanism to take him out of office if he is not popular and effective.

H.G: That could be. But a better idea might be to have a system in which the president can be reelected but that requires a super majority. In this way, you can't just be reelected if only 50% of voters support you. Maybe you need 2/3 of the voters to be reelected. Only the exceptionally popular politician gets to be reelected.

W.P: But that is something that an exceptionally powerful person could manage.

H.G: Yes, that's right. Also you need to take into account the context in which your elections are organized and run. If there is a sufficient number of people who can vote in an intelligent way, or whether you view most of the voters as just uninformed people who are shepherded to the polls and told to vote in certain way, and so forth. And in a country like Colombia, where you have problems of education and low literacy, I think there might be different considerations than in a country where almost everybody is highly literate and expected to understand economics issues.

W.P: You also have strong opinions regarding the assassination policy pursued by the Israelis.

H.G: Well, I think there are two issues here. There's a moral issue that I would like to put aside. And there's a strategic question: the interest that the Israelis pursue is security, and my view is they don't have a choice. Is there any other way to establish some security for themselves?

W.P: Must Colombia develop a similar policy against the leaders of the illegal armed groups?

H.G: That depends on the situation. You don't have people blowing up buses here in Bogotá, but if you did you would have to rethink your strategy. Maybe a strategy of

containment like the one I perceive here is the optimal strategy given the situation that you face. I'm not saying that in every situation of insurgency the optimal response to insurgency is war with no constraints to completely eliminate the insurgency. But certainly that seems to be the Israeli case: there's no alternative strategy when you're confronted by people whose objective is to destroy you and who are willing to use any means to do that including this horrible suicide bombing strategy. Then, you have to use anything that will work. That means killing their leaders if you can. No one would object to killing Hitler if the opportunity had presented itself.

W.P: But in the case of Perú with Guzmán and in Turkey with Ocalan, the detention of both leaders was followed by a substantial reduction in the intensity of the conflict.

H.G: I was surprised when in Peru the capture of Guzmán ended the conflict. Maybe Guzmán was captured only because the Sendero Luminoso movement already was weakened. Maybe that conflict will flare up again. The Israelis can hope destroying the leadership of Hamas is going to work. But I don't know, we'll wait and see. Hamas is making a lot of noise now, but noise is ok. Marching in the streets is harmless. The question is what aggressive strategy they will follow.

W.P: Then, military increases from the side of the government can lead to defeat of insurgencies?

H.G: Maybe defeat of the insurgents is not cost effective, maybe just containing them, maintaining a low level conflict would be better. In the United States we never completely eliminated the mafia. There's a continuous struggle between the government and organized crime. But mafia is still there. The solution can be to contain it, in a way it doesn't cost too much.

W.P: Let us move to more personal questions that we always ask. Who has been the most influential person in your academic carrier?

H.G: Oh! That's a good question. Well, there have been quite a few. Some of them were my undergraduate professors at the University of Virginia, where I studied. I did my PhD at Johns Hopkins; my advisor, Carl Christ, was quite influential, as were some other professors that I had at Johns Hopkins --- Edwin Mills and Kelvin Lancaster. Some of my colleagues at Brown, after I joined the Brown faculty, were also quite influential. But I don't consider myself to be a disciple of any particular economist.

W.P: If you were to single out one?

H.G: I wouldn't single out one person, certainly not. And I think perhaps there are some advantages to that, I never felt that there was somebody to look over my shoulder, that I have to consider, "What would he think of this?".

W.P: What about your favorite economic book?

H.G: Book? Well I think the book that had the biggest influence on me when I was starting my career working in macroeconomics was *Money, Interest, and Prices* by Don Patinkin.

W.P: If you were given the chance, who do you think should be given the next Nobel prize in economics

H.G: That's going to be pretty obvious: Jack Hirshleifer. There's no question about that. Certainly Jack Hirshleifer. Let me tell you something, every year there's a pool run by some graduate students at Harvard, where you pay a dollar and you get to pick a candidate and then when the prize is awarded, the pool gets divided up among all those who picked that winner. And I actually won with Vernon Smith! Somebody that I think should get it and will get it is Robert Gordon, at Northwestern, because he has actually revolutionized the way in which macroeconomic data is collected and analyzed. That probably strikes you as strange person for me to suggest, because his work is totally unrelated to mine, I've never done empirical work in any serious way, and I have not interacted in any way with him, but I think his work is exceptionally important.

W.P: Any opinion about Bogotá?

H.G: I love Bogotá, it's beautiful and pleasantly surprising. I really had diffuse priors about Bogotá. I've been told that what I've seen in Bogotá is just a small sample, a small slice not representative of either Bogotá or Colombia. But certainly the sophistication, the beauty of the architecture, the interior design is great. Our hosts here have taken us to several different restaurants, and each one has had impressive interior design and excellent food. How innovative and creative the architects and designers are here.

W.P: What about the road restrictions, we heard you found interesting.

H.G: Oh! I don't know a lot about it, the only think I know is in London where they have been successful with a pricing scheme. I think they have the technology to do it, they apparently are able to do it and maybe that's a good way to do it. Although the idea here, which I understand is that in certain time and certain days you can't use your car if it has the wrong number on it, sounds like a good system too; I'm not one of these people that say if it's not done by prices, it can't be done right!

W.P: Do you have an opinion with respect to drugs legalization

H.G: That's a really tough question. First of all, I think, the burden of proof is on the people who want to have social control over the use of drugs. I think the starting point should be having individuals to do what they want. But, clearly drug use has negative externalities. The question is who big are these externalities? In the United States we had a period in the 1920's and early 1930's, when alcohol production and consumption was illegal. That turned out to be a disaster. The cost of enforcing that policy was much larger than the benefit. And one can argue that it's also true of the so called war on drugs, that the cost of enforcing the law is much greater than the benefits. Sometimes people who

favor legalization the use of drugs make the analogy between the use of drugs and the use of alcohol, but that's an imperfect analogy. Because in some respect they're similar but in important respects they're different. It's much easier to control trade in alcohol and in particular for example to keep children from consuming alcohol even though alcohol is legal, because you can't just put it in your pocket in small pills. If we legalize all drugs, then we'd have children in schools buying and selling little bits of crack cocaine which they can then sneak behind the school and smoke. That would be pretty horrendous. So I don't think is an easy question to answer.

For legalization to work, first of all, we would have to keep drugs out of the hands of children. That would be the most important thing. The other sort of problem that they had in Amsterdam as well as in Zurich and other European cities when they were pretty lax or liberal about the use of drugs is the negative effects on the communities. You walk out the streets and you see people using drugs, and so forth. They have tried to solve this problem by confining the area where drug use is legal to certain sections of the city or certain parks that is marked off as the place where drugs can be used. If you've seen this, it's disgusting. I think that's an understatement.

But what is the alternative? I don't know an alternative that works. I'm far from being an expert. I don't know anything more about this than what I read in the newspaper, which is what you read. So I really think you have to ask people who have hands-on experience. Unfortunately, in the United States there is no opportunity to have a public debate about it. So policy simply evolves without any public debate. The consumption of all drugs is technically illegal, but the possession of drugs is enforced sporadically when the police are not busy with something else. That can't be a good situation. At least there should be an open discussion of the issues and decision on what is going to be the policy. But Americans simply are not being able to discuss this issue.