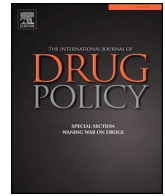


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

International Journal of Drug Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo

“Chicken or eggs?: Rethinking illicit drugs and ‘Development’”

Paul Gootenberg*

Stony Brook University (Revised Sept. 2020)

Official and NGO-style thinking about “drugs and development” usually follows a conventional logic: “Lack of development” (poverty and statelessness) fosters illicit activities (such as peasant drug crops) which can only be alleviated by interventionist economic development and sustained state-building projects (“alternative development,” crop substitution, full integration of illicit actors into public services). However, emerging research by historians and other social scientists suggests in many cases the reverse is just as true. Post-war modernization projects in the Global South set the stage for the takeoff of dynamic new 1970s-90s illicit economies in coca/cocaine, poppy/heroin, and other drugs (Smith, 1992). These became, in effect, its own form of autonomous grassroots development. Like the growing consensus that the half-century “drug war” is a failed crusade, we must question the teleology around “development” in drug studies—a concept long under duress, by both academic right and left, in other fields.

My own role in this debate is a 2018 volume (co-edited with my colleague, Colombian ecologist Liliana Dávalos), *The Origins of Cocaine: Colonization and Failed Development in the Amazon Andes* (Gootenberg and Dávalos, 2018). Mixing archival case studies with quantitative and historical mapping techniques, our research found that the original three core birthing sites of modern illicit coca—Peru’s Upper Huallaga Valley, Bolivia’s Chapare region, and the Ariari zone of Meta Department in Colombia—bore striking historical resemblances. Each area had been, starting in the 1950s and 1960s, a key state-supported site of roadbuilding and peasant colonization agricultural projects in the Amazonian frontiers of the eastern Andes. These projects arose within a larger Cold-war vision of integrating the lowland tropics via a vast continental “Marginal Highway of the Amazon.” The twin goal was to quell upland agrarian discontent and unlock the region’s untapped agrarian riches, in retrospect an ecological pipedream (or nightmare, given the eventual deforestation and biodiversity impacts). It was an ideal avidly supported in the 1960s by national elites and reformers in Washington and multilateral institutions like the IDB and World Bank. Despite distinctive national contexts, each site drew in tens of thousands of impoverished or oppressed campesinos seeking to build fresh livelihoods. Rather than isolated backward pockets, these zones, at least for a while, represented some of the most concentrated state activities and services (such as credit or marketing offices) of the greater Amazon. And in each case, by the mid-1970s, the failures or abandonment of

these original developmentalist promises and processes (a long complex story itself of shrinking, debt-ridden, or rising neoliberal states), swiftly led peasants into illicit coca cropping. Orphaned by their states, such “refugees of development” turned en masse to drug crops for survival (explored in older ethnographies like Molano Bravo, 1987 or Sanabria, 1993), which in turn feed spiraling 1980s international trafficking networks. Even decades beyond into the 1990s, these same initial sites remained epicenters of the global cocaine trades.

This is a specific origins story for illicit coca-cocaine—greatly complicated by 1980s drug war interventions and escalating drug-war violence—but Dávalos and I also detect parallels elsewhere. The maconha (South American cannabis) belt of Paraguay’s borderlands was a byproduct of failed post-war export promotion, and Mexico’s remote village poppy and marijuana plots across the states of Sinaloa, Sonora, Chihuahua, and Guerrero popped up in the wake of the post-war retreat of the statist modernizing agrarian reform. State irrigation and settlement projects in Michoacán fertilized drug trades (Maldonado, 2013). Cocaine export hub cities like Medellín or Santa Cruz in Bolivia were regional development poles, not backwaters.

The most dramatic parallel, however, is found halfway around the Global South in the now infamous global heroin hotspot of Helmand province, Afghanistan—brightly illuminated in a new book by James T. Bradford, *Poppies, Politics, and Power: Afghanistan and the Global History of Drugs and Diplomacy* (Bradford, 2019). Long before the Taliban regime and opiates, only a handful of area specialists knew Helmand as the site of Asia’s longest (1946-79) and most strategic U.S.-assisted development project: the Helmand Valley Development Project (HVDP), a massive dam and development zone modelled after the New Deal TVA. Intensive irrigation, roads, planned cities and villages, American designs, and schools would make this backwards “tribal” region the model Afghan “breadbasket,” later redirected into commercial cotton farming (Cullather, 2002). A secularizing leftist government of the 1970s (much like Peru’s statist Velasco regime of the same era) redoubled the mega-project. But to no avail as inapt ecological conditions (similar to the Amazonian story), plus local resistance, led to its breakdown and an erosion of state legitimacy, as well as opium planting among the many thousands of peasants lured to the valley. The HVDP became dubbed Afghanistan’s “unfinished symphony.” A striking coincidence of timing and politics thus marks the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: paul.gootenberg@stonybrook.edu.<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.102985>

1970s birth of global illicit cocaine networks (in the post-Velasco Huallaga) and heroin (in post-Daud Helmand). Bradford also deftly draws how the subsequent “drug war”—another U.S.-promoted ideology of the 1970s and beyond—became a new tool in building up the authority of the Afghan state. By the 1979 coup, Helmand province was transforming Afghanistan into a narcotics state, and it continues to supply about half the world’s ever-growing heroin markets.

Closer to my expertise in the Americas, a series of fine studies from Colombia affirm this shift in the drugs, states, and development triangle. Colombia leads the Andes in sophisticated drug and violence research. A long debate surrounds how the country’s fragmented geography of “stateless” frontiers ignited the fires of illicit drugs and guerrilla strife in the late 20th century. At the peak of its cocaine boom and bloodletting, one of Colombia’s top drug specialists, economist Francisco (Thoumi 1992), identified Colombia’s real “comparative advantage” in “the Illegal Psychoactive Drugs Industry”: a weak, vulnerable, illegitimate state, an idea amplified in policymaking circles. Colombia surely enjoyed thinner public infrastructure than its Latin American counterparts, but as anthropologist Margarita Serje noted (2012) that “absence of the state” has also served as a convenient ideology to rationalize and racialize violence and poverty in “empty” “peripheral” regions beyond Bogotá’s highlands. Moreover, as numerous scholars now confirm (i.e. Duncan, 2014) the last four decades of capitalizing trafficking enterprises and the militarized build-up of Colombia’s drug-war apparatus have not only populated or “developed” these peripheries, but lead to a now far stronger and coercive state structure. A lucid new book by anthropologist Teo (Ballvé 2020) on lowland Urubá near Panama dubs this “The Frontier Effect.” Parastatal violence, mobilization, and illicit business perversely expanded the geographic reach of the state and coopted even imported ideologies of “alternative development” into their capitalist project. Many paradoxes disrupt the once simple drugs, state, development equation.

Another Colombian frontier, the Guajira peninsula of the northern Caribbean coast, is analyzed in a new book by historian Lina Britto, *Marijuana Boom: The Rise and Fall of Colombia’s First Drug Paradise* (Britto, 2020). Britto broadly and meticulously locates the rise and fall of the iconic mid-1970s Santa Marta “Colombian Gold” (or marimba) export bonanza as a legacy of earlier waves of elite export promotion and modernization hopes in the peninsula: bananas, cattle, post-war cotton and coffee smuggling. Modernizations gave life to marijuana: as a local proletarian consumption practice, in its commercial and cash crop geographies, as grassroots dissent from exclusionary development, the allures of city life, and even a “revolutionary technology” in breeding cannabis varieties. The shadow if not substance of the Colombian state was always present. For Britto, the entire boom, rather than geographically or economically isolated, represented “the bastard

creature of the discontents of a series of reforms in pursuit of agrarian development, a creative response to modernization on its very own terms” (218).

This Viewpoint brings new literature and evidence to dispute the long-standing narrative that illicitness originates in historically and ecologically pristine spaces bypassed by modern development and modern states (or in a variant largely from “stateless” conflict-riven smuggler borderlands: Van Schendel and Abraham, 2005). It joins a scholarly shift that views illicit and legal economies as intimately and integrally interconnected (Andreas, 2013; Nordstrom, 2007), rather than opposed spheres, and it links the rise and timing of global illicit economies to revisionist views of the Cold-war “modernization” era (Weimer, 2011). If collapsing “modernization” poles helped launch today’s global illicit drug circuits, reviving enhanced development and state-building as a new “post-drug war” recipe sounds both naïve and risky. Historicizing the Illicit chicken or egg matters for a more nuanced political economy of illicit goods.

References

- Andreas, Peter (2013). *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ballvé, Teo (2020). *The Frontier Effect: State Formation and Violence in Colombia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bradford, James T. (2019). *Poppies, Politics, and Power: Afghanistan and the Global History of Drugs and Diplomacy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Britto, Lina (2020). *Marijuana Boom: The Rise and Fall of Colombia’s First Drug Paradise*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Cullather, Nick (2002). Damming afghanistan: modernization in a buffer State. *Journal of American History*, 89(3), 512–537.
- Duncan, Gustavo (2014). *Más que plata o plomo: El poder político del Narcotráfico en Colombia y México*. Bogotá: Random House-Debate.
- Gootenberg, Paul, & Dávalos, Liliana (2018). *The Origins of Cocaine: Colonization and Failed Development in the Amazon Andes*. London: Routledge.
- Maldonado A, Salvador (2013). “Stories of drug trafficking in rural Mexico: Territories, drugs, and cartels in michoacán. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 94, 43–66.
- Bravo, Molano Alfredo. (1987). *Selva adentro: Una historia oral de la colonización del Guaviare*. Bogotá: Ancora Eds.
- Nordstrom, Carolyn (2007). *Global Outlaws: Crime, Money, and Power in the Contemporary World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sanabria, Harry (1993). *The Coca Boom and Rural Social Change in Bolivia*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Serje, Margarita (2012). El mito de la ausencia del Estado: La incorporación económica de las zonas de frontera en Colombia. *Cahiers des Amériques latines*, 71.
- Smith, Michael L. (1992). *Why People Grow Drugs: Narcotics and Development in the Third World*. London: Panos Institute.
- Thoumi, Francisco (1992). Why the illegal psychoactive drugs industry grew in Colombia. *Journal of InterAmerican Studies and World Affairs*, 34(3), 37–63.
- Van Schendel, Willem, & Abraham, Itty (2005). *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalization*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Weimer, Daniel (2011). *Seeing Drugs: Modernization, Counterinsurgency, and U.S. Narcotics Control in the Third World, 1969-1976*. Kent OH: Kent State university Press.