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Chapter 18
Harm Reduction or Harm Aggravation? The Impact of the Developed Countries' Drug Policies in the Developing World

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The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the implications of the emerging debate on harm reduction and drug legalization for those countries which are both large producers and traditional consumers of illicit drug plants. The three major illicit drug crops are each analysed in a specific geographical setting: cannabis in Brazil, coca in the Andean countries, and opium in the Golden Triangle.

In Defence of Extremism

There can be little doubt that the policies fostered on developing countries as the result of drug prohibition in the developed industrial states have been almost uniformly negative in their effects. To ignore the accumulating cost of such policies, although expedient for certain governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations, only lends credibility to the latent authoritarianism of drug prohibition. More importantly, it also fails to address the real social and economic problems facing the developing world which include indebtedness, resource depletion and inequitable world trading patterns. In this context, drug use and production appear much more as a symptom than as a cause.

Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to describe most current official policies in the developing countries as a conscious or unconscious process of harm aggravation. Though proposals for reform may appear 'extremist' in their opposition to the current orthodoxy of the War on Drugs, a clear demand for policy change towards harm-reduction, and ultimately full drug legalization, therefore offers the principal means for developing countries to transcend their present powerlessness. By recognising the proven effectiveness of 'traditional', informal controls over the use of drugs – controls that depend on a wide social consensus rather than on the use of force – developing countries can both

encourage respect for their own indigenous cultural practices and contribute positive examples to the wider international community.

Cannabis in Brazil

Though it has become commonplace to lament the growth of social marginality and violent crime in Brazil's major cities, it is seldom pointed out that much of the underlying racism and class discrimination has historically found its symbolic expression in the denigration of cannabis smoking. Brought over from Angola by the eighteenth century, *diamba* was already sufficiently common in Rio de Janeiro in the 1830s to warrant a formal interdiction, probably the first in the New World, directed specifically at the public use of the cannabis water pipes introduced from Africa (Henman and Pessoa, 1986).

By 1916, scientific accounts of cannabis smoking in Brazil began to reproduce the opium-based demonology of the period with only the most cursory attention to local social realities. Since the majority of cannabis users in this period consisted of the descendants of black slaves, campaigns against the killer-weed had a useful function in disciplining an unruly and increasingly urbanized population. Through the insistent broadcasting of negative stereotypes, attitudes among the consumers themselves gradually shifted focus from enthusiastic advocacy to ambiguity and ambivalence, and finally to an identification of cannabis smoking with a life of *malandragem* – hustling, pimping, living off one's wits and petty crime.

Continuing police repression, undertaken with uncontrolled ferocity during the military regime of 1964–1985, led even to remote tribes of Amazonian Indians being subjected to torture for their cultivation of cannabis (Henman, 1980). Though middle-class youths and intellectuals also suffered beatings, electric shocks and extortion as a regular feature of any drugs arrest, the rhetoric of the local War on Drugs found its principal vocation in justifying the physical elimination of gangs of small-scale drug dealers. Death-squad victims – often numbering over fifty in a single week in the slums of Rio de Janeiro – are still, in the new democratic era, predominantly young, black and poor, even if routinely described by the authorities as 'major drug traffickers' (America's Watch, 1987).

Increasingly, however, campaigns against cannabis have created a notable scarcity of this once-common substance in Brazil, thus shifting consumption towards more dangerous forms of drug taking. The intravenous use of amphetamines and cocaine, in particular, has recently been implicated in the rapid spread of HIV. Public health surveys describe the huge increase in the number of cases presenting to medical authorities with problems resulting from the use of solvents, pharmaceutical drugs, alcohol and cigarettes. In short, the offensive against

cannabis in Brazil – after decades of consistent harm aggravation – has finally succeeded in producing a thoroughly 'modern' drug problem.

Coca in the Andes

It is important to remember that the early and mid twentieth century campaigns against coca were only very remotely justified by the dangers represented by cocaine. Indeed, the major manifestation of this approach in Peru – the 1950 UN Commission of Inquiry into the Problem of Coca-Leaf Chewing (summarized in Comisión de Estudio de las Hojas de Coca, 1978) – coincided with a period in which cocaine was virtually absent on the world illicit market. It is hard, therefore, to avoid the conclusion that the roots of the West's unhealthy obsession with coca lie in a particularly arrogant form of technocratic intolerance, a modern inquisition governed by the horror of foreign drug plants (Antonil, 1978).

The essentially religious – that is to say, anti-rational – nature of this obsession is amply documented by the total indifference shown towards the considerable scientific output which has sought to situate the use of coca in a more realistic pharmacological, social and cultural context. This has been true even of studies commissioned directly by the United States Government, such as Carter et al. (1980), which were ignored when they reported back favourably on coca. Governed by a peculiar ideal of abstinence, and constrained by the idea that the only way to control the use of a drug is to 'cut it off at source', successive US administrations and international bureaucracies have spent enormous sums on attempts to eliminate coca in the producing areas.

Whether through the 'softly, softly' approach of crop-substitution and alternative development, or by means of more aggressive military operations of forcible eradication, the net result has been predictable: a temporary disruption of the peasant economy, an eventual rise in coca prices brought about by the resulting shortages, and a subsequent incentive to plant coca on new sites (Henman, 1985). This economic logic, as unmysterious and unrelenting as the corresponding falls in coca prices occasioned through cycles of over-production, has nevertheless had a series of deleterious knock-on effects. In the social field, the disarticulation of peasant leadership – split between 'good' farmers who cooperate with crop-substitution and 'bad' farmers who do not – as well as the growing discredit of national institutions, seen as willing servants of outside intervention, have provided legitimacy and fresh recruits for both organized crime and armed political insurgency (Henman, 1990). In the environmental context, coca eradication in one area has only favoured the clearing of new land elsewhere, and thus a growing depletion of primary rainforest in the sensitive sub-montane fringes of the Amazon basin.

Additional problems have been associated with the different specific attempts to find a technical 'fix' that could interrupt the flow of cocaine into the United States. In the late 1980s, trials with the chemical herbicide Spike, a tebuthiuron manufactured by Eli Lilly Co., had to be halted in the face of vocal and effective opposition from the environmental lobby in Peru and the United States of America. Subsequent experiments with the malumbia butterfly, *Eloria noyesi*, were fraught with technical difficulties. Though in its caterpillar stage this pest will strip a coca bush of leaves, it does not actually kill the bush. Given that the caterpillar has many natural predators, it was found that effective crop eradication required repeated reinfestation of a single locality. This in turn necessitated the propagation and dissemination of malumbia butterflies on a truly industrial scale, and spiralling costs which could not be justified in view of the programme's uncertain outcome.

It is in this context that must be situated the 1991 outbreak of a new strain of the root-mould, *Fusarium oxysporum*, first reported in the district surrounding the town of Uchiza in the centre of the Upper Huallaga valley, reputed source of 60% of the world's cocaine. Agronomists at Peru's school of tropical agriculture in Tingo Maria describe this fungus as endemic in coca plantations where it has traditionally occasioned small losses, mainly among old bushes growing on poor or marginal soils. The appearance of a far more virulent strain of the mould, however, is unanimously ascribed by local sources to the spreading of a 'white powder' by UMOPAR and CORAH, the Peruvian anti-narcotic and crop-eradication forces financed by the United States of America.

Ironically, United Nations' personnel at sites of the local crop-substitution projects claim that the new strain of *Fusarium* is decimating food crops and their experimental plots of avocado and citrus fruit, while encouraging the development of new coca plantations in the virgin forests to the north and south. Sceptics point out that extensive coca monoculture in the Upper Huallaga offered ideal conditions for the development of such a pest as *Fusarium*, which may have mutated spontaneously. However, the previous record of the US Drug Enforcement Administration in the area – their experiments with Spike and the malumbia butterfly – together with the undeniable existence of a large item in the US Department of Agriculture budget clearly earmarked for the development of 'coca-specific pathogens' suggests caution in assigning the fungus outbreak entirely to natural causes.

Furthermore, biological warfare against coca makes a degree of opportunistic sense in any strictly military assessment of the threat of armed insurgency in Peru. Depriving the local guerrilla movements of their economic base would seem a desirable move from this narrow perspective, at least in the short term. This should, of course, be weighed against the probability of increased guerrilla recruitment

among destitute peasants and the likely spread of guerrilla influence into new coca-growing areas north and south of the main production centres in the Upper Huallaga. As a technique of political and environmental harm-aggravation, then, the ill-considered attempts to wipe out coca will continue to bear their recurrent harvest of poisoned fruit.

Opium in the Golden Triangle

If the Brazilian and Peruvian cases provide illustrations of the impact of vigorous anti-drug policies on drug consumption and production in the developing countries, it is nevertheless in the Golden Triangle, and principally in the West's 'good example' client state, Thailand, that the full implications of such policies are most glaringly apparent. Thailand is repeatedly cited as the only known case of 'successful' crop substitution, and indeed the opium harvest in that country has diminished considerably from the high point reached in the late 1960s. Concurrent prevention and education programmes, lavishly funded by the United States of America, the UN drug bureaucracies, the European powers and Japan, have poured anti-opium propaganda into even the most remote hill-tribe villages. Actively encouraging the young to mock and ridicule their opium-smoking elders, such campaigns have clearly undermined native social structures and with them the mutual respect between sexes and generations which acted in the past as a constraint on problematic opium consumption.

The most visible effect of such policies, other than the hundreds of opium users languishing in Thai gaols, has been to encourage the diffusion of heroin use among young people, and with it the spread of the practice of injecting drugs – resulting in subsequent dissemination of the HIV virus due to sharing of needles and syringes. The switch from opium to heroin was documented as an unintended effect of anti-opium campaigns as early as the 1930s in China (Bensussan, 1946), and formed the substance of a major study carried out on opium by the American psychiatrist, Joseph Westermeyer (1982), in Laos during the Vietnam War. Indeed, one positive advantage of the relative isolation and economic backwardness of Laos in the subsequent period of Communist government (1975–1990) has been the virtual disappearance of the earlier heroin epidemic in that country, arguably as the result of a renewed tolerance of opium-smoking. At present, the advent of heroin injecting and AIDS looks set to accompany the opening up of Laos to external influences; ironically it will be from the 'model' anti-drug state, Thailand, that the threat will come.

Many other, less obvious negative effects of the campaigns against opium become apparent if one scratches below the surface, and numerous studies have attempted to bring these to light (for example, Tapp (1989) and various articles in McKinnon and Vierre (1989)). The

destruction of peasant livelihoods which has resulted from the wholesale disruption of the opium economy is apparent in a widespread drift into prostitution, casual labour and tourism-related service jobs by many members of Thailand's hill-tribe minorities. The Yunnanese traders who traditionally provided credit and retail goods in exchange for a share of the opium harvest have largely abandoned the countryside, causing real hardship and distress, for their role was vital as intermediaries and informal bankers in the regional economy.

Nor is this the only form of economic dislocation. The opium-for-rice exchanges between highlands and lowlands have also been disrupted, with the result that hill-tribe villages, never self-sufficient in basic foodstuffs, are now facing acute shortages and actual famine. Even the widely-trumpeted introduction of 'alternative crops' has proved a mixed blessing; most of them require more land, more water and greater capital inputs, and in the medium term have exacerbated social conflicts over access to local natural resources. In the final analysis, debt-bondage to international aid agencies must seem a distinctly worse arrangement than having to deal with supposedly sanguinary opium warlords.

More subtle social changes are apparent to the careful eye of the ethnographer. In Lisu society, where women traditionally had a major say in both the production and commercialisation of opium, the introduction of alternative crops, negotiated directly with the male leadership, has resulted in a distinct deterioration of female status. Exchanges of silver jewellery, of great symbolic importance in the negotiation of marriage vows, have been rendered financially unviable by the absence of opium sales. In such a context, it is hardly surprising if the status of wives has deteriorated markedly (Hutheesing, 1990).

Finally, one should also consider the close parallels between the South-east Asian and the Latin American experiences in terms of the use of the drugs pretext as a cover for human rights abuses. Successive military governements in Thailand have received generous funding from the USA, supposedly to stem the flow of heroin, but in fact to prop up the country's overall security apparatus. Even after the Bangkok massacres of May 1992, anti-narcotics assistance continued to flow from Washington to the Thai Armed Forces with total impunity, repeating a pattern which was widely denounced in the US Congress in Washington in the case of the Argentine military regime of the mid 1970s.

More alarming still is the involvement of United Nations agencies in providing legitimacy for the corrupt, repressive and genocidal regime in Myanmar (Burma). In early 1992, the United Nations Drug Control Programme announced with considerable fanfare that it was supporting moves to set up a trilateral anti-narcotics agreement between Thailand, Laos and Myanmar, and the ministers of these countries met

in Bangkok to discuss technical arrangements even while the Myanmarese Army was attempting to exterminate the country's democratic opposition and its Muslim, Shan and Karen minorities. No doubt the UNDCP was little concerned that a renewed anti-opium drive in the Golden Triangle could ultimately result in a refugee crisis of truly Cambodian proportions, and thus to further strains on the UN's already overstretched resources in the region. Taking a totally cynical view, one might even suspect that 'harm aggravation' in the drug field finds its strategic complement in a process of deliberate problem creation in areas of potential military conflict.

Empower the Powerless: A Modest Solution to the Drug Question

The characteristic response to the barrage of malign disinformation designed to discourage the consumption of three of the world's oldest, most useful and most interesting drug plants – cannabis, coca and opium – has been what one could describe as ironic inversion. The Brazilian *malandro* of the 1920s and the Jamaican *rude boy* of the 1950s, whether inserting sly references to cannabis-smoking in the lyrics of a samba, or actively championing the use of ganja during the gin-soaked sunset of the British Empire, provided models of the type of social non-conformism which have subsequently become almost normative among minority illicit drug users. Both in the developing world and in the ghettos of the world's major industrial states, a process has occurred which can only be described as 'ruding up' – a positive identification with negative societal images.

The logic underlying such a development – 'if you think we're fucked up now, wait 'till you see *this*' – has two characteristic effects on drug consumption: a potentially positive one, in which considerable symbolic investment is made in ensuring a respectful and enthusiastic relationship with drugs, and an almost certainly negative one, in which the maladjusted are encouraged to signal their unhappiness through ever more problematic patterns of drug misuse. Ironic inversion of the prevailing anti-drugs discourse thus encompasses not only an affirmative defence of the more benign forms of drug use – such as cannabis legalization campaigns, and the strident pro-coca campaigning of Andean indigenous groups – but also the type of ambivalence and ambiguity, indeed the veritable honesty, which characterises many long-term opium smokers, who are often explicitly aware of both the benefits and the drawbacks of their habit.

In a sense, the various forms of ironic discourse tend to offer extremely accurate messages of prevention and education to potential drug users in their own society: almost unrestricted enthusiasm for the

beneficial qualities of the coca leaf, a more qualified enthusiasm for the mildly stupefying effects of cannabis, and enthusiasm tempered by some caution for the potentially addictive enchantment of opium. Nor are these attitudes restricted to the herbal forms of the major drugs; similar approaches, such as warnings to inexperienced users as to the dangers of refined cocaine and opiates, are very much a part of the subculture of these drugs, in the developing world as elsewhere. On occasion, such a posture flies in the face of economic rationality; Andrade's (1989) study of small-scale cocaine base dealers in Ecuador, for example, demonstrated that the individuals who stayed in business were very reluctant to expand their regular clientele, and positively avoided selling their product (*basuco*) to novices and problematic users.

In every way these positions, based as they are on a healthy instinct of survival and on considerable collective experience of the drugs in question, are markedly preferable to the hypocrisy and obscurantism of most official authorities in the developing countries. In the corridors of power, the slavish reproduction of internationally approved anti-drug rhetoric combines, not infrequently, with direct or incidental profiteering from the illicit market. Where double standards are all, the morality play of 'going after the drug traffickers' is not just an inquisition and a class war; it is also the Great Lie raised to the level of national policy. In the long term, such mendacity will undoubtably corrode the legitimacy of the state and usher in new forms of political instability, as the Andean and Golden Triangle states have so graphically illustrated in recent decades.

The only positive alternative to a never-ending drug war, then, must be to begin with the process of what I have called ironic inversion itself, and recognise in it a response of attempted re-legitimation by the powerless, the marginalised and the disinherited. Such voices – those of drug users and, indeed, drug producers and traffickers as well – express the need for a grass-roots form of drugs education which respects the opinions of the direct participants. It is possible, for instance, to think of the manager of an opium den not only as a drug trafficker, but also as an outreach worker in the field of AIDS and opiate-dependency prevention. To do so, however, requires a rather radical reversal of the perspectives adopted by the authorities hitherto. And above all, it demands a formal and unqualified recognition of the human rights of drug users, and of drug dealers and drug producers as well.

Such an extension of the human rights logic to groups normally excluded by virtue of their criminal status has important implications in recognising drug users, producers and dealers as persons able to control their own destiny, and therefore as citizens both responsible for their actions and, in the absence of any direct or active prejudice to third parties, worthy of social recognition and respect before the law.

Prisons worldwide are begging to be freed of the enormous overcrowding caused by the 'prisoners of war' locked up by current anti-drug offensives, a large proportion of whom are not even drug users themselves but 'mules' and other small-scale intermediaries enticed into the drug trade by the lack of any other economic options.

The producers of drug crops, too, have long been due recognition as legitimate farmers and it is high time the crop substitution programmes imposed on them in the name of progress be clearly denounced for what they are: crude and colonial attempts at political manipulation. For, even more than a war targeted on groups of particular populations, the current campaigns are felt in the developing countries as a form of strictly economic warfare. Shorn of its rhetorical justification, its self-appointed Divine Right in the banishment of Evil, the War on Drugs is perceived quite simply, and correctly, as the symbolic denial of markets for the products of certain defenceless and impoverished countries. This is all the more galling in that the prohibition of their exports is being enforced by the representatives of those very same countries whose drugs (tobacco, alcohol, pharmaceuticals) are provided with subsidies and incentives, and actively 'pushed' by a system of world-wide marketing.

The time is ripe for challenging this institutionalised double standard. The current President of Bolivia wants to free up coca leaf exports, and in 1992 he has made representations along these lines to the UN, the WHO, and the Organisation of American States. One can confidently predict that he will be followed and emulated by other nations. Once freed of the need to reproduce the prevailing international orthodoxy, developing countries will come to recognise that they possess considerable, unsuspected skills in dealing with their own genuine drug problems. A society is not exposed to the use of coca, opium or cannabis for hundreds of years without developing some collective understanding of the risks and benefits of different forms and contexts of drug consumption.

Perhaps the single, most succint message of 'traditional' drug use lies here: in its recognition of the need for societies to provide positive orientation in the use of drugs, to domesticate drugs by offering a supportive social context for their consumption and to promote a symbolic system which matches the expectations of their eventual users. To this extent, it would be no exaggeration to say that harm reduction may eventually have more to learn from the developing world than it has to teach.

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