GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

The Global War on Drugs

By Fernando Esquivel-Suárez | August 23, 2018

The U.S.-led global War on Drugs (WoD) refers to the conflict and violence produced by the enforcement of prohibitionist policies on the manufacture, distribution, and consumption of banned substances commonly known as "illegal drugs."[1] After forty years of a militaristic approach to a public health problem, studies continue to report higher records of narcotics production in so-called southern nations, and rising rates of consumption particularly in northern economies.[2] It is thus common for institutional reports, journalistic articles, and academic studies to declare the complete "failure" of the WoD.[3] However, despite the lack of results and the human cost of still-increasing incarceration and violence, governments and intergovernmental organizations around the world continue to invest in a global war on the production and distribution of illegal narcotics.

Shifting the focus on the WoD from its unobtained goals to the actual outcomes of law enforcement, my intent here is to clarify how the WoD has been and continues to be a militaristic and economic success for the United States. This essay presents the drug war as a global mechanism to police, disenfranchise, and displace poor communities of color in areas of capitalist expansion. In this transnational perspective, a description of the cocaine and heroin trades will exemplify how the war successfully legitimizes the militarization and appropriation of territories for political intervention and economic exploitation.

After presenting recent academic research that proposes an analysis of the expansionist objectives of the WoD, this essay briefly presents the cocaine and heroin trades as instances of how the WoD: a) facilitates the militarization and paramilitarization of producing nations where social movements, insurgencies, and armed resistances prevent corporations from freely accessing areas for extraction of resources and b) legitimizes the world-wide criminalization, policing, and mass incarceration of racialized communities. As a conclusion, it proposes that the trafficking routes are not only maps of capitalist expansion but also potential networks of solidarity between Global South communities that endure similar conditions of exploitation.

The War on Drugs as Necropolitical Expansion

Building on early 20th century drug-related xenophobic fears and racist stereotypes,[4] U.S. President Richard Nixon set the legal and militaristic foundations for the modern global WoD.[5] Throughout his presidency, Nixon launched an all-out offensive to fight drug abuse, or what he described as the United States' "public enemy number one." At the dusk of the Cold War, Ronald Reagan expanded the reach and power of this offensive by framing the fight against addiction as a new "war for our freedom" and ordered U.S. citizens to swing into action as "when we were attacked in World War II." Since then, the prohibitionist approach to narcotics has unsuccessfully attempted to reduce rates of consumption by seizing supply

sources and dismantling distribution routes, within and outside the nation's borders.

To address the persistence of WoD methods and rhetoric, recent research focuses on a comprehensive analysis of the outcomes of anti-drug policy. Offering concepts such as "narco-colonialism" (Villar and Cottle 2011), "drug war capitalism" (Paley 2014), and "gore capitalism" (Valencia 2016), this research understands drug war rhetoric, legislation, and militarization as a mechanism of necropolitical expansion into the Global South.[6] In other words, the White House's rhetoric that frames drug consumption as a bellic conflict justifies the increase of military resources, and legitimizes exceptional legislation to curtail civil rights as well as international law in the name of national security.[7] As the history of the drug trade exhibits, these wartime discourses and policies against a "foreign menace" produce a racialized enemy: throughout the Global South, the outcome of enforcing anti-drug laws transforms the policing, incarceration, displacement, and killing of black and brown bodies into profit for the security industry and the world-wide expansion of corporate capitalism.

As demonstrated in the examples analyzed below, the privatized military industry (PMI) profits from seizing these particular commodities and fighting the illegal corporations that produce and distribute them.[8] Focusing on the lower links of the production and distribution chain, private and state actors inefficiently enforce the law by preventing growers from supplying raw material, disrupting manufacturing, and interdicting transnational and local couriers. Regardless of the low success of this militaristic approach, security corporations continue profiting from running incarceration facilities, performing aerial fumigation, and providing military support and training to combat cartels' private security forces or militias.[9]

In addition to being a major contributor in the security industry — as in the cases of Mexico and Colombia — the WoD finances paramilitary structures whose purpose is to disenfranchise workers and communities to foster a favorable environment for the investment of capital. Funded through legitimate law enforcement agencies or paid by private corporations, these private armies displace communities for land appropriation and carry out a dirty war on union and social leaders, environmental activists, and human rights advocates who oppose exploitative practices.[10] The necropolitical outcomes of these anti-drug policies are measured in the violence that makes possible low-cost labor and emptied lands for extracting industries.

As mentioned before, this framework also exhibits how the WoD deepens the global color line. Responding to transnational racist discourses, the mechanisms of the WoD — including increased policing and prosecution of producers and street distributors — are disproportionately applied to minorities and people of color in producing, transporting, and consuming nations.[11] In the United States, for example, anti-narcotics war rhetoric adds drug-related crimes to already existing stereotypes of criminality among African American communities. As Michelle Alexander demonstrates in her seminal book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), skyrocketing drug convictions gave rise to the U.S. prison industrial complex, a system of private prisons that generates immense profit from the incarceration of black and brown bodies.[12]

History offers multiple examples of the imperial objectives behind the racialized WoD. The

most documented case is perhaps the Iran-Contra affair. In congressional hearings from May-August 1986, Reagan's CIA admitted its role in providing funding for the right-wing paramilitary group known as Contras to support their campaign against the Sandinista Revolutionary government in Nicaragua. Looking for ways to bypass a congressional refusal to fund this army, the CIA prevented law enforcement from investigating the Contras' drug networks, allowing them to finance their counterinsurgency while cocaine flooded the United States, particularly urban black neighborhoods in the form of crack cocaine.[13] This instance exhibits a U.S.-orchestrated effort to paramilitarize a foreign nation while disregarding the use of addictive substances in the United States for the achievement of political goals. It is one example of how the WoD has been used as a justification of expense budgets for the militarization and paramilitarization of narcotics-producing nations to guarantee access to natural resources and unjust labor practices. Perpetuating the logic of racial oppression, the violent enforcement of drug war policy disproportionately focuses on people of color producing their transnational overrepresentation in casualty and incarceration rates.

The War on Drugs and Neocolonial Expansion in the Global South

The long history of the heroine trade provides extensive illustration of the WoD as the implementation of imperial objectives rather than an effort to protect consumers. Since the Opium Wars (1839-1860), growing poppy and distributing its derivatives — heroin and morphine — has been linked to violent colonial projects. In its expansion, the United States has collaborated or coexisted with heroin trafficking for geopolitical positioning of American power. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. government forged alliances with drug warlords in the so-called "Golden Triangle"— Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. According to Alfred W. McCoy, the CIA allowed them to commercialize their product in exchange for their private armies to act as an anti-insurgency force in the region.[14]

The defeat in Vietnam shifted U.S. efforts to Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, an area known as the "Golden Crescent." The U.S. wars on drugs and terror overlap in this oil-rich region, a key area for geopolitical dominance. In 1979, during Jimmy Carter's presidency, the CIA backed opium smugglers in Afghanistan, the anti-communist Mujahedin army, in their drug-funded war against the government of the Marxist People's Democratic Party (Villar and Cottle 2011, 36-40). After taking power from the Mujahedin in 1996, the religious and military organization called the Taliban made taxation on opium exports its largest source of revenue. In the first year of the post-9/11 invasion in 2001, U.S. forces once again sought support from heroin-trafficking organizations as allies against the ruling Taliban. In return, the drug enforcement agencies would overlook opium trafficking, producing a record spike in the cultivation of poppy and the production of its derivatives.[15]

When considering the expansionist goals of the WoD in the Golden Crescent alongside the lack of regulations on legal drug-distributing companies in the United States, it becomes clear that addiction prevention is not a principal concern of the American legal system. Journalistic investigations have repeatedly exposed how heavy lobbying from pharmaceutical companies "influenced" lawmakers to weaken the DEA regulations on the commercialization of opioids. The permissiveness of this legislation, as well as the over-prescription of painkillers in mostly white, working class communities, are the major causes of what is currently known as the opioid epidemic.[16] In contrast to the so-called crack epidemic in black communities during

the 1980s, increasing death rates in these communities has generated a wealth of research on the issue as well as sympathetic coverage by the media. As a result, social pressure has propelled scrutiny into the industry-friendly legislation that fostered the epidemic. However, as legal supplies of opioids become increasingly restricted, the dependent populations left behind turn toward illegal providers of heroin from Mexico. The demand fuels the supply chain increasing the cycle of violence on the South-North routes, and ultimately justifying the militarization of heroin trafficking and producing areas under cartel control.

Similarly to heroine commercialization, the cocaine trade does not appear as a force against — or even parallel — to the capitalist system but an integral part of it. The boom in demand for cocaine in Europe and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s spurred the rise of corporate-like trafficking organizations that began supplying these markets using old colonial contraband routes.[17] As they expanded, these organizations required a large labor force of farm workers known as *cocaleros*, and an extensive network of couriers. This new illegal business provided jobs for those marginalized from the production system by the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s in Mexico and Colombia.[18] These organizations also forged an alliance with traditional upper classes in both countries; local elites laundered immense fortunes through the legal financial system and received exorbitant donations for political campaigns.[19]

The underground economy produced by drug trafficking is not just an “anomaly” of the Global South. The bulk of the cocaine trade profits remains in the consuming northern financial systems. According to Villar and Cottle, approximately 80 percent of the profits from global drug-trafficking are laundered by banks of consuming countries rather than in producing and trafficking nations (2011, 16). In an interview with *The Observer*, the head of the UN Office on Drug and Crime, Antonio Maria Costa, denounced the complacency of the legal economy towards the flow of cash from drug transactions. Costa affirms that in the midst of the Great Recession, “drug money worth billions of dollars kept the financial system afloat at the height of the global crisis” (Syal 2009).

With the financial and political systems as accomplices, drug-trafficking organizations expand their power and influence over different territories, substituting the state as the ruling institution. Cartels incorporate into their ranks armies of young men from disenfranchised communities to provide security, intimidate adversaries, settle disputes, and silence uncooperative citizens. In their areas of influence, these private armed structures administrate the use of violence and decide on people’s properties and rights. Incapable of controlling their entire territories and protecting the lives of their citizens within their borders, Mexico and Colombia have been declared in many occasions “failing states.”

The instability caused by these underground corporations legitimizes the militarization of trafficking nations. To regain security in these areas, the United States created the international cooperation agreements Plan Colombia (2000) and Mexico’s Mérida Initiative (2008). Negotiated during Bill Clinton’s and George W. Bush’s presidencies, these two landmark policies in the WoD are based on heavy military investment and involvement of U.S. agencies and private consultants.[20] In both cases, the spread of paramilitary structures began right after the implementation of the agreements. These irregular armies coincidentally operate in areas of drug trafficking, and territories projected for infrastructure

development and/or extractive projects.

The Colombian city of Buenaventura epitomizes the effects of the racist drug war in Global South communities. Located on the Pacific coast, this predominantly Afro-Latinx seaport city is responsible for the transit of about 60 percent of the country's trade. Ironically, while the port generates private fortunes and millions in taxes, the unemployment rate is 64 percent in this city of nearly half a million people. Fueled by inequality, the drug-trafficking parallel economy has flourished, turning Buenaventura into a strategic point in the cocaine shipping route to Asia and the United States via Mexico.

Following the logic of the WoD, the militarization and paramilitarization of the area since 2008 produced a spike in the city's murder rates and the display of gruesome violence, such as torture, massacres, and dismemberment. While drug-trafficking has not substantially decreased in the port city, local organizers and researchers from Colombia's Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica have insisted on the correlation between high rates of performative violence, the long list of murdered social and ethnic leaders, and interests to displace Afro-Colombian communities from their ancestral lands near the port for the development of new infrastructure. As a displaced Colombian social leader describes the WoD, "it's simply a war about land and resources, and people living in these lands happen to be in the way" (Villar and Cottle 2011, 112-13).

Since taking office in early 2017, the Trump administration has set in motion a new wave of global repressive measures to fight production and distribution of illegal substances. Led by Attorney General Jefferson Beauregard Sessions, the constant attempts to impose federal law over states' legislation on the legalization of marijuana seek to maintain drug related incarceration rates both as a profitable business and as a tool for social control.[21] Abroad, this coming cycle of the WoD implements new technology in the militarization of producing nations. In Colombia, Trump's WoD recently introduced drones in the return of aerial fumigation with the toxic chemical known as glyphosate.[22] Trafficking routes around the world, however, not only map the northbound movement of drugs and the expansion of power in the opposite direction, they also draw a potential network of solidarity among populations in the Global South targeted by narco-colonialism. Anti-drug war organizations, academic institutions, and the civil society at large across the Global South must start to interconnect, share experiences, narrate their stories, and organize around an agenda towards the deracialization, decriminalization, and demilitarization of drug commercialization and consumption.[23]

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[1] Signed into law by Richard Nixon in 1970, the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970 includes the Controlled Substances Act (CSA), a list of regulated substances classified into five schedules based upon their medical use, potential for abuse, and dependence liability. For more see: https://www.dea.gov/pr/multimedia-library/publications/drug_of_abuse.pdf

[2] On drug addiction as a public health issue see Brochu, et. al 2018, Jenner 2011.

[3] On the failure of the WoD see for journalistic investigation Aspe and Schultz 2017, Brodzinsky 2016; for academic sources and reports, Woodwiss 2017, Carpenter 2014, Gray 2010.

[4] In the United States, the prohibition of certain substances was a reaction to early 20th century changing economic and political forces, but it has also been argued that it responded to many white Americans' fears of people of color. The Smoking Opium Exclusion Act (1909) and the Harry Anslinger's campaign for the criminalization of marijuana in the 1930s associated black Americans and immigrant populations from China and Mexico to crime, violence, and sexual predation. For more on the connection between racism and the prohibition of certain substances see Boullosa and Wallace 2016.

[5]In 1973 Nixon created the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) by Executive Order. This organization was assigned the mission to “establish a single unified command to combat an all-out global war on the drug menace.” In its outset, the DEA had 1,470 special agents and an annual budget of less than $75 million. Today, it has 5,235 special agents, 227 domestic field offices, foreign offices in 62 countries, and a budget of roughly $2.5 billion (Boullosa and Wallace, 2016, 28).

[6]In their eponymous essay (2003), Achille Mbembe and Libby Meintjes define “Necropolitics” as the expression of sovereignty that resides “in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (11).

[7]On the impact of the war rhetoric see Elkins 2010. On WoD legislation and Civil Rights see Cooper 2015. On foreign policy and the WoD see Storrs 2003.

[8]On cocaine as a commodity see Wilson and Zambrano 1994, Joseph and Rosenberg 2006.

[9]On the privatized military industrial complex see Shepard 2017 (opens in a new tab), Singer 2003.

[10]On the links between Colombia’s military and paramilitary groups see Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2018, Scott 2004. On the relationship between Colombian paramilitary groups and U.S. corporations see Schotter and Teagarden 2010, Gill 2010.

[11]The forthcoming volume entitled The War on Drugs and the Global Colour Line (2019), edited by Kojo Koram, addresses the racist impact of the drug war throughout the Global South.

[12]On mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex in the United States see Van Gundy 2016, DuVernay 2016, Conyers 2013.

[13]On the Iran-Contra Affair and the so-called crack epidemic see Alexander 2012, Boullosa and Wallace 2016, Villar and Cottle 2011, Webb 2011.

[14]On the formation of the Golden Triangle see Chin 2016, Meehan 2011, McCoy 2003.

[15]According to the 2016 Opium Survey by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), starting in 2002, poppy crops tripled in Afghanistan from 76,000 to 209,000 hectares.

[16]On journalistic investigation of the current opioid crisis see Higham and Bernstein 2017, Whitaker 2017.

[17]On the beginnings of Colombia’s cocaine trafficking networks see Betancourt and García Bustos 1994, Molano 1997, Krauthausen and Sarmiento 1991.

[18]The neoliberal expansion embodied in NAFTA demanded that Mexico undo the communal-

land based agrarian reform embedded in the Constitution by the 1910 Revolution. Tariffs and quotas were removed enabling U.S. subsidized agricultural industry to import below cost. Unable to sustain themselves, farmers found in the burgeoning market for marijuana and poppies their only avenue to surviving on the land (Boullosa and Wallace, 2016, 52-4).

[19]On the relationship between local elites and drug cartels see Astorga 2004, Grosse 2001,Thoumi 2003.

[20]On Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative see Woodiwiss 2017, García Pinzón 2015, Rosen 2014, Bailey 2010, Mercille 2011, Delgado-Ramos and Romano 2011.

[21]On the Trump administration and the WoD see Rhodan 2018, Drug Policy Alliance 2018.

[22]During its previous use from 1978 to 2015, aerial fumigation with glyphosate was responsible for the physical harm to those exposed, ecological devastation, and the displacement of thousands of Colombian families who left their lands to avoid these consequences. On the use of glyphosate in the WoD and its effects on people and the environment see Rincón-Ruizand Kallis 2013, Mugge 2004, Luciano 2010, Bigwood 2002.

[23]Many of these communities already belong to emerging digital diasporas: the residents of Buenaventura repudiated the police killings of Eric Garner and the many other African-American victims of police brutality by posting on Twitter a picture of a local activist holding a sign reading “Buenaventura=Ferguson=NYC” and using the hashtag #Blacklivesmatter. In a powerful gesture, journalist, advocates, and activists across the diaspora placed the assassination of Afro-Brazilian councilwoman Marielle Franco on the forefront of the news cycle forcing international pressure on Brazil’s government and law enforcement.

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