

Review - Cooperation and Drug Policies in the Americas

Written by Juan Carlos Garzón-Vergara

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Cooperation and Drug Policies in the Americas

Edited by Roberto Zepeda and Jonathan D. Rosen

Lexington Books, 2015

Richard Nixon declared a war on drugs in 1971, arguing that the consumption of illicit drugs was one of the main reasons for insecurity in the United States. Ten years later, Ronald Reagan declared drug trafficking to be a national security threat. Military campaigns were deployed in Latin America, the center of the drug production and trafficking chain. In the post-Cold War geopolitical era, international drug regulation became the new language of subordination imposed by the U.S. With acquiescence, and also conviction, the governments of the region followed the prohibition model as designed and enforced by the United States.

Thirty-five years later, in April 2016, the United Nations will dedicate a Special Session of the General Assembly (UNGASS 2016) to evaluate the performance of the UN drug control system. Several Latin American countries have emerged as leading voices in the international debate, questioning the underlying premises of the current regime. In fact, UNGASS 2016 is the result of pressure brought by high level Latin American officials, who have advocated changes to the drug control paradigm.

How did this “soft defection”—using the term proposed by David R. Bewley-Taylor[1]—emerge in the “backyard” of the U.S.? Is it a signal of the decline of US influence in the region? Or might one argue that this is the new face of cooperation with more autonomy and flexibility?

Cooperation and Drug Policies in the Americas edited by Roberto Zepeda and Jonathan D. Rosen is an important contribution to understand the relationship between the United States and the Latin American and Caribbean countries, in a phase of transition in the drug control regime. The book captures this remarkable moment, exploring the complex interaction between local and external dimensions and pointing out challenges and obstacles of one of the most contentious issues of the foreign affairs.

Judged by the editors’ goal – “analyze the role of cooperation and the war on drugs in the twenty-first century” – the book succeeds thanks to the contributions of some seventeen authors, ranging from senior and established scholars and experts to younger academics. Despite the lack of theoretical ambition, the well-chosen questions posed by the editors give coherence to this publication.

A central idea of the book is that “...countries must work together through multilateral frameworks to resolve drug trafficking and organized crime, which by definition are an international problem” (p. xvi). As so often happens with edited volumes, *Cooperation and Drug Policies in the Americas* contains solid contributions, but also descriptive ones.

In Chapter 1, Ted Galen Carpenter analyzes the prohibition paradigm and what he calls “the rise of counter paradigm,” an optimistic view based on dissenting positions in the international scenario, and the “potential exists for the adoption of more realistic and humane policies” (p.2). Coletta Youngers, in Chapter 2, recognizes the leadership of Latin America in the current drug policy debate, which has been stimulated by frustration with the results and the

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high costs for some countries. She states that “a slow but steady paradigm shift is underway” (p.19), without losing sight of the powerful opposition from conservative sectors.

The book contains eight case studies, without a clear statement of the selection criteria. An obvious question is why the editors did not include countries like Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela that have, as C. Youngers states, “challenged Washington’s historic patterns of unilateralism and interventionism” (p. 21). For example in 2008, Bolivia’s president Evo Morales expelled the DEA from the country and proposed his own strategy to combat drug trafficking, one that recognizes the traditional uses of coca. Ecuador’s president Rafael Correa adopted a confrontational stance towards U.S. policies, accusing Washington of imperialism and shutting down U.S. counterdrug operations in Manta, a military base on its Pacific coast. To have a complete picture of the recent changes in Latin America we need to consider what has happened in these countries.

Chapter 3, on Colombia and written by the editors, focuses on Plan Colombia, an initiative that evolved over time in accordance to the U.S. priorities, first targeting drug trafficking, then terrorism. J. Rosen and R. Zepeda also contribute a chapter (6) about Mexico and the Merida Initiative, which changed its emphasis from a militarized approach to one focused more on institutional development. One of their main arguments is that “corrupt governments cannot combat and reduce criminal organizations” (p.111).

The contribution about Peru (Ch. 4), by S. Koven and C. McClintock, demonstrated that despite the tensions around the disparity of US financial support—compared to Colombia—and the disagreements about some elements of the counterdrug strategy, the two countries are close partners. M. Kirton and M. Anatol focus on Guyana (Ch. 5), with a descriptive text that mentions but fails to delve into weak institutional capabilities and the influence of the drug trafficking in all levels of society.

The core of the book and the richest contributions from the local perspective come from the cases of Honduras (Ch. 7), by B. Fonseca and R. Pastrana, the Dominican Republic (Ch.8), by Lilian Bobea, and Haiti, by L. Remington and J.C Garcia-Zamor (Ch. 9). The authors provide in-depth analyses of the limits of cooperation in a context of asymmetrical institutional capabilities, fragile states, weak rule of law and powerful alliances between authorities and criminal groups. Under these circumstances, the support offered by the U.S is very important, especially when it targets such underlying problems as unemployment, poverty, urbanization, corruption, impunity, and ineffective judicial and security institutions, among others (p. 122).

Chapter 10, by A. Arrarás and D. Bello-Pardo, “Intentando caminos: Cannabis regulation in Uruguay” requires a special reference for two reasons: Uruguay is the first country to regulate the marijuana market, and there has not been significant cooperation with the U.S. The chapter offers an extensive analysis about this unique case, highlighting the impact of Uruguay’s decision for the international drug regime. The authors provide interesting details about the internal debate and open some questions regarding the future following this path.

An informative, but bland, chapter by B. Horwitz (Ch. 11), is interesting because it brings into discussion the traditional U.S. perspective on Latin America, one that externalizes the problem of drugs, and points out the corruption and weak capacity of Latin American states. However, Horwitz fails to recognize that in many cases, the counter narcotic support by the U.S expanded and trained corrupt law-enforcement forces, in effect worsening the institutional fragility.

The last chapter (12), by P. Watt and R. Zepeda, analyzes decriminalization and legalization as “potential solutions to the problems of violence, insecurity, and corruption often closely linked to the drug trafficking” (p. 223). The authors offer a skeptical view regarding this path, arguing that structural problems, such as the climate of impunity, corruption, and the extreme inequality in the distribution of wealth, create a favorable environment for the reproduction of organized crime.

Overall, *Cooperation and Drug Policies in the Americas* offers valuable lessons for scholars and practitioners, challenging the traditional views about U.S. cooperation. Without overlooking the importance of multilateral efforts, the book touches on critical issues that make it really difficult to tackle organized crime. These include asymmetrical

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capabilities between the U.S. and Latin American and Caribbean countries, the underlying problems of fragile states, the lack of resources, the historical animosity between some countries, and the tendency to homogenize quite complex realities. These factors, combined with the inertia of the current paradigm, cast serious doubts about a fundamental change in the coming years.

That said, the book opens a window for a positive path in the international arena. Different authors recognize that recently, with the Obama administration, the United States has altered its approach. As L. Bobea states “something has been learned about the complex regional and internal dynamics created by organized crime, as the United States moves toward a more holistic approach, both in geographical and strategic terms” (p. 149). The challenge for cooperation is to face the underlying causes, not just the symptoms, and to move from rhetoric to reality. The legalization of recreational marijuana in Colorado and Washington has left the guardian of the conventions half-naked, and the Uruguay experiment opens an alternative path to deal with that particular drug market. But in Latin America and the Caribbean, as the old saying goes, “The more things change, the more they remain the same” (p. 136).

[1] David R. Bewley-Taylor in his book *International Drug Control: Consensus Fractured* (2012, Cambridge University Press), proposed the term “soft defection” that refers to a “low level deviance” by states regarding the Drug Conventions.

About the author:

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