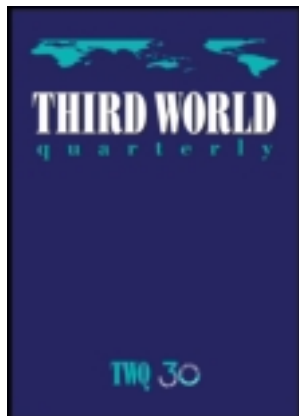


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Publisher: Routledge

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Third World Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ctwq20>

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Available online: 31 Oct 2011

To cite this article: Julien Mercille (2011): Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony? The political economy of the 'war on drugs' in Mexico, Third World Quarterly, 32:9, 1637-1653

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.619881>

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Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony? The political economy of the ‘war on drugs’ in Mexico

JULIEN MERCILLE

ABSTRACT Mainstream analysis and commentary on drug trafficking and related violence in Mexico focuses overwhelmingly on the narco-cartels as sources of the problem and presents the US as a well intentioned player helping to conduct a ‘war on drugs’ out of concern for addiction, crime and violence. This article offers an alternative interpretation, grounded in critical political economy, showing that in addition to fuelling the narcotics industry in Mexico thanks to its large drug consumption and loose firearms regulations, the US shares much responsibility for its expansion thanks to its record of support for some of the main players in the drugs trade, such as the Mexican government and military, and by implementing neoliberal reforms that have increased the size of the narcotics industry. The war on drugs has served as a pretext to intervene in Mexican affairs and to protect US hegemonic projects such as NAFTA, rather than as a genuine attack on drug problems. In particular, the drugs war has been used repeatedly to repress dissent and popular opposition to neoliberal policies in Mexico. Finally, US banks have increased their profits by laundering drug money from Mexico and elsewhere; the failure to implement tighter regulations testifies to the power of the financial community in the US.

Mexico has become one of the most explosive countries in the world, in large part as a result of drug-related violence. Since December 2006, when President Felipe Calderón militarised the ‘war on drugs’ to its highest level yet, some 40 000 people have been killed in counter-narcotics operations and intra-cartel fighting. Mexico’s drug industry accounts for between \$11 and \$39 billion in profits annually, or between one per cent and three per cent of its \$1.4 trillion GDP, while about 450 000 Mexicans earn a substantial portion of their income from drug trafficking.¹ Mexico is both an important transit country and a producer of drugs, the bulk of which is destined for the large US market. It is estimated that 95 per cent of US cocaine consumption transits through Mexico from South America, where it originates. In

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ISSN 0143-6597 print/ISSN 1360-2241 online/11/091637-17

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.619881>

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addition, Mexico produces large amounts of cannabis, heroin and methamphetamine. The crops are concentrated in the Sierra Madre mountains in the northwestern states of Sinaloa and Chihuahua and in the south in Guerrero, all of which are poor, rural provinces.²

Despite Calderón's war on drugs and the Mérida Initiative—the US anti-drugs plan for Mexico launched in 2008—the industry has increased significantly in recent years. For example, opium production jumped from 71 tons in 2005 to 425 tons in 2009, and Mexico surpassed Burma as the world's second largest producer in 2009 (Afghanistan is first); cannabis cultivation has increased from 5600 hectares in 2005 to 17 500 hectares in 2009; and methamphetamine production also appears to be rising. Decreases in cocaine usage in the US could indicate reductions in trafficking, but the trend goes back to the late 1980s (thus well before the current drugs war was launched), and other markets have partly made up for the loss in demand, eg Europe, where consumption has doubled in the past decade.³

What are the causes of Mexico's drug trafficking and violence? What is the meaning and purpose of the war on drugs in Mexico? The conventional answers to such questions have been presented by a number of government officials, journalists and scholars.⁴ While there exist a variety of theoretical, methodological and empirical emphases, such approaches have all neglected the central role of political economy in their analyses. For example, some have provided ethnographic accounts of US–Mexico drug trafficking,⁵ others have interpreted the drugs war at the border as fulfilling a symbolic political function allowing US government leaders to show resolve to voters and Congress,⁶ or have studied the role of the drugs war in militarising the US–Mexico border,⁷ and have compared and contrasted the war on narcotics with the war on immigration and homeland security waged by the US government.⁸ Despite these differences, the mainstream interpretation shares the following components:

- Overwhelming attention is directed to the drug cartels, seen as the main—or even only—source of the problem of drug trafficking and violence.
- The US, concerned with drug use and violence, collaborates with the Mexican authorities to reduce the cartels' power by waging a war on drugs in Mexico. If lawlessness prevails, the cartels could take over parts of the state and refugees could flood the US.
- A key obstacle to US plans is corruption among Mexican officials, fuelled by the cartels, which makes it difficult to win the drugs war.
- Thus, solutions include cleaning Mexican institutions of corruption, interdiction and arrests of drug kingpins, increasing military aid, and promoting NAFTA-type free trade agreements to achieve economic development.
- Some researchers recognise that US drug consumption and firearms smuggling to Mexico are part of the problem and call for reducing US demand for drugs and regulating gun sales and trafficking.

The conventional view thus focuses on the drug cartels' role in causing mayhem in Mexico and corrupting its governmental institutions. In the

words of General (ret) Barry McCaffrey, US drug czar under Bill Clinton, Mexico 'is fighting for survival against narco-terrorism' and we need to support 'the courageous Mexican leadership of the Calderón Administration' because 'the violent, warring collection of criminal drug cartels could overwhelm the institutions of the state' and we could be faced with 'a surge of millions of refugees crossing the US border to escape the domestic misery of violence'.⁹ Robert Bonner, former director of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and chief of US Customs and Border Protection, comments approvingly on Calderón's militarised drug war because he thinks the Mexican military is 'one of the country's few reliable institutions'. True, it has led to 40 000 deaths since 2006, but 'the increase in the number of drug-related homicides, although unfortunate, is a sign of progress', because it shows the government is finally destabilising the cartels. The US is depicted as a well intentioned leader fighting the scourge of drugs and corruption for which the cartels are responsible. For example, Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, comments that 'American efforts to ... shore up the [Mexican] justice system have been substantial'.¹⁰ Some analysts add that the large US consumption of drugs and smuggling of firearms into Mexico must also be taken into account and rightly call for a reduction in demand in the US and better regulation of the flow of guns southward. However, they remain blind to, and even support, US hegemony over Mexico (political, economic and military). For example, David Shirk, in a Council on Foreign Relations report, asserts that 'US authorities should make greater efforts to encourage NAFTA trade by facilitating legitimate cross-border flows' to develop the Mexican economy.¹¹

There is also a right-wing libertarian view that opposes drug prohibition and Washington's war on drugs in Mexico and elsewhere while calling for the legalisation of drugs as a solution. In some respects this position goes against the mainstream interpretation, but it still focuses on corruption and narco-cartels, and neglects the crucial political economic dimension. For example, it fails to consider the detrimental impact of neoliberal 'free trade' agreements on drug problems. On the contrary, it advocates more economic deregulation: 'Latin American governments should move more aggressively to deregulate their economies and spur economic growth, thereby creating new opportunities for those people who are now involved in the lower echelons of the drug trade ... The adoption of the North American Free Trade Agreement provided important new economic opportunities for Mexico.'¹²

This article presents an alternative interpretation that focuses on US hegemony over Mexico and in particular the neoliberal reforms like NAFTA that it has promoted since the early 1980s. Although the article's emphasis is on drug issues, it is framed within a critical political economic analysis of US foreign policy and neoliberalism. In outline, and as will be illustrated throughout, it is maintained that post-World War II US foreign policy has been shaped by the following key factors. First and foremost is the corporate sector's need to maintain a favourable investment climate and markets in Latin America and elsewhere. Second is geopolitics and military strategy, which in Latin America has meant trying to keep the region as a US

‘backyard’ free of European, and later Chinese, influences, in addition to supporting allied military and militaristic regimes in power to prevent internal opposition from steering the region on a path independent of US hegemony. Ideology also plays a role in co-opting and making acceptable US policies to elites and segments of the population in Latin America.¹³

The article first shows that neoliberal policies have increased the size of the drugs industry, for example by forcing millions of peasants into the drugs trade in search of work. Second, it demonstrates how US hegemonic projects like NAFTA have been protected and policed partly under the pretext of the war on drugs, which is used discursively to promote closer bilateral relations between the US and Mexican militaries. This allows the latter to contain popular opposition to neoliberal policies in general, but also to use drugs control directly as a pretext to arrest individuals and groups who resist such projects. Washington’s support for institutions and officials corrupted by the Mexican narcotics industry and associated with human rights abuses—the Mexican government, military and security forces, and perhaps even some cartel leaders—will be highlighted. Third, drugs money laundering by US banks will be discussed with reference to Mexican cases to show that the financial sector’s involvement in narcotics has never been tightly regulated because it provides significant liquidity to a powerful segment of US society. The article concludes by pointing to the large US drug consumption that fuels trafficking and to Washington’s failure to invest more in treatment of addicts and prevention, the two solutions proven by research to be the most effective in reducing consumption, as opposed to the relatively ineffective arrests of drug kingpins and seizures of narcotics shipments.¹⁴ The US failure to stop the smuggling of firearms south of the border will also be briefly discussed. Overall, and contrary to the mainstream interpretation, the article emphasises the significant responsibility of the US in Mexico’s drug traffic and its discursive manipulation of the war on drugs, none of which, however, negates the responsibility of Mexican drug cartels as generators of violence. The next section provides historical background showing the continuities between the past and more recent situation.

US hegemony and drugs in Mexico: historical background

As outlined early on by now declassified national security planning documents, US objectives in Latin America throughout the post-World War II period have revolved around ensuring ‘Adequate production in Latin America of, and access by the United States to, raw materials essential to US security’, which in Mexico’s case applies particularly to its vast oil reserves. Another goal is the ‘standardization of Latin American military organization, training, doctrine and equipment along US lines’, which has been accomplished through numerous training and security assistance programs with Mexico. Moreover, Latin American countries should be encouraged ‘to base their economies on a system of private enterprise and, as essential thereto, to create a political and economic climate conducive to private investment, of both domestic and foreign capital, including ... opportunity

to earn and in the case of foreign capital to repatriate a reasonable return'.¹⁵ It is argued that it is these objectives which have shaped US policy towards Mexico, not a desire to address drug problems. Conversely, the drugs war has repeatedly been used as a pretext for intervention in support of these fundamental goals.

Whereas mainstream analyses depict a Mexican state infiltrated by drug traffickers, in fact the Mexican state has historically set the rules of the game in drug trafficking, while receiving strong support from the US. During its seven decades in power the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), until it lost power to the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) in 2000, oversaw an informal system whereby every relevant actor, from the military, police, traffickers and local and national political officials, took a cut from drug trafficking.¹⁶ Narco-violence was kept to relatively low levels and every group had an incentive to conduct its business in a relatively predictable and stable manner. Mexico's Federal Security Directorate (DFS) was partially responsible for anti-drugs policy, but it was itself involved in the narcotics trade, a fact well known to the US. But Washington closed its eyes on this and to repeated electoral fraud that kept the PRI in power because the Mexican government and DFS were anti-communist allies during the Cold War. Today, as will be seen below, the state does not preside over a smoothly regulated drugs trade anymore—hence the violence—but significant sectors of the Mexican government and security forces are still associated with it.¹⁷

When political groups could not be co-opted by the PRI, it sometimes resorted to violent repression, which it sometimes justified by a purported concern to fight drugs—obviously a pretext since the Mexican state itself was regulating the drugs traffic nationally. For example, from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, the Mexican military, police and intelligence services—backed by the US—waged a 'dirty war' on dissidents and leftist guerrillas. The Mexican military was responsible for the majority of abuses committed during that time, 'including the torture and enforced disappearance of hundreds of civilians'.¹⁸ The 1970s saw increased rural and labour militancy—there were at least 300 strikes in 1977—as a result of deteriorating economic conditions and a budgetary programme of austerity. The agricultural sector was barely growing, pushing many desperate *campesinos* to seize haciendas, execute local *caciques* (strongmen), migrate to the cities or the US, or become drugs entrepreneurs. At the same time Mexico increased the intensity of its war on drugs in 1975, when it decided to eradicate opium and marijuana fields with herbicides and to conduct anti-drugs military operations. Operation Condor, the core of the campaign, sent 7000 soldiers, aided by 226 DEA advisers, to the northern states of Durango, Chihuahua and Sinaloa—a region faced with poverty and which had been the scene of many militant peasant land occupations for two years.¹⁹ Officially operations targeted narcotics, but the fact that not a single big drug trafficker was arrested, while hundreds of peasants were arrested, tortured and jailed, led some contemporary analysts to conclude that Mexico's military and counter-narcotics campaigns in the countryside should have been more accurately described as a war against peasants, marginalised groups and the (real or

imagined) guerrillas of the sierras rather than against drug trafficking—setting a precedent for the current situation.²⁰

US hegemony and drugs in a neoliberal age

Neoliberal reforms increase the size of the drug industry

From the 1980s onwards four developments converged to increase dramatically the size of the drugs industry in Mexico. Not all were related to neoliberal reforms, but the latter nevertheless made a key contribution. First, South American cocaine had until then been smuggled into the US via the Caribbean and Florida, but interdiction efforts in these areas diverted the traffic through Mexico, whose significance as transit country rose drastically. Essentially the Colombian narco-traffickers cut a deal with the Mexican cartels to ensure that their drugs would reach the US through Mexico rather than through the Caribbean and Florida.

Second, the flow of narcotics was further magnified by the neoliberal reforms that increased commerce across the US–Mexico border and facilitated the smuggling of large quantities of drugs. The cartels started putting shipments of heroin, crystal meth, cannabis and cocaine on the many trucks crossing the border.²¹

Third, NAFTA and neoliberal reforms have increased the size of the drugs industry by involving more Mexicans in it for two reasons: in order to find work and out of desperation. The consequences of neoliberalisation for the majority of Mexico's population have largely been negative. The economy grew at an annual per capita rate of 3.5 per cent between 1960 and 1979, before neoliberalisation, but only by 0.1 per cent in the 1980s and by 1.6 per cent between 1992 and 2007. NAFTA has failed to generate job growth and increase wages—the average wage in Juárez, for example, dropped from \$4.50 a day to \$3.70. True, the manufacturing sector has added some 500 000 to 600 000 net jobs since NAFTA went into effect, but this has been offset by a loss of about 2.3 million jobs in the agricultural sector caused by cheaper imports of corn from subsidised US agribusinesses. Farmers were forced to abandon their land and migrate to the US or move to the cities in Mexico along the US border, where they became cheap labour for US manufacturing businesses (*maquiladoras*). Because *maquiladoras* mostly assemble imported components and immediately re-export finished products, few linkages have been generated with the Mexican domestic economy, creating few employment opportunities. A related negative effect has been the rise of the informal economy, which offers worse conditions to workers; it formed 57 per cent of the workforce in 2004, up from 53 per cent in 1992.²² As a result, many in Mexico had little choice other than to resort to participation in drug trafficking to supplement their income, usually acting as low-level dealers. This mass of unemployed or underemployed in Mexico's northern regions constituted a perfect supply of desperate labour for the cartels. The supply increased even more around 2000, when the *maquiladora* industry faced competition from China and India, which could provide lower-cost labour to

make the same goods. Some companies established in Mexico moved their production to Asia, causing further layoffs. Finally, by causing significant social dislocation and lack of employment opportunities, neoliberal reforms increased people's recourse to drugs to alleviate their suffering, enlarging the market within Mexico itself and contributing to the growth of the narcotics industry. Charles Bowden, a veteran analyst of the Mexican drugs trade, observes of Juárez, one of the most affected cities: 'Who in their right mind would turn down a chance to consume drugs in a city of poverty, filth, violence, and despair?'²³

Fourth, as the PRI's political monopoly started losing ground in the late 1980s, culminating in the PAN's 2000 presidential victory, drug-related violence increased. The traditional PRI-backed informal arrangements in which the state regulated the flow of drugs through the country eroded. The result has been a vacuum of power that has increased violence, as the cartels now have to fight for their share of a newly unstable market. Since the 1980s, drug control has been gradually militarised by successive presidents, but the PAN's Calderón took such a strategy to new levels from 2006 onwards. Alliances are now shifting more rapidly, but it is still not difficult to reject the mainstream view presenting the US as intervening to defend human rights and reduce drug trafficking. As will be seen below, Washington strongly supports the PAN government and Mexican military, responsible for countless human rights abuses and corrupted by drugs. Moreover, it has recently been reported that the DEA and FBI might even have paid informants among the leaders of the Mexican cartels, who are the key narcotics traffickers and directly responsible for tens of thousands of deaths. The US is also not immune to drug trafficking itself—there are currently hundreds of ongoing investigations into corruption among US border agents who accept bribes or favours to let drugs across the border.²⁴

Furthermore, it has been estimated that 87 per cent of firearms used by cartels originate in the US but Washington, in deference to the gun lobby, refuses to take concrete action to stop this 'iron river' of weapons fuelling the violence to the south, and even 'lacks a comprehensive strategy to combat arms trafficking to Mexico'. Worse, a scandal has recently emerged in which US agents have followed a policy of 'letting guns walk', reportedly approved by the Justice Department. This consists in not arresting drug cartel members known to be buying firearms in the US—and videotaped doing so—in order to track the guns down to Mexico and try to learn more about the cartels' operations and networks. But the problem is that those firearms kill many in Mexico.²⁵ Finally, although it is difficult to obtain reliable data, it has been reported that the Mexican government and military strike deals with some cartels against others, which would in itself discredit any claim of a disinterested war on drugs. For example, a National Public Radio (NPR) investigation suggests that the Mexican authorities tend to side with the Sinaloa cartel in fights with other cartels, the former having successfully infiltrated state institutions. This analysis is based on records of individuals arrested, prosecuted or sentenced by the government and found that, nationwide, 44 per cent of all cartel defendants are members of the Zetas and

Gulf cartels, while only 12 per cent of the defendants are with the Sinaloa cartel, even though the latter is the largest one in Mexico.²⁶

Armouring NAFTA and repressing dissent

The swelling drug traffic through Mexico from the 1980s onwards left the country, and especially the cartels, awash with drug money. This phenomenon increased corruption, as many in the police, military and government were bought by the drug money permeating the Mexican polity. It explains why up to this day a number of scandals have surfaced implicating officials in narcotics. For example, it was reported in 2005 that, since 1997, three generals had been convicted of drug trafficking and that, between 1995 and 2000, over 150 soldiers and officers were tried on drug-related charges. A recent analysis found 400 public officials ranging from local cops to army officers who have been arrested between 2007 and 2010 for collaborating with the drug cartels.²⁷

But Washington has for decades prioritised the expansion of its hegemony in Latin America—a task which has often involved military force to keep opposition groups under control—over fighting corruption or defending human rights. As a Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) report reviewing trends in US military programmes with the continent concluded: ‘Too often in Latin America, when armies have focused on an internal enemy, the definition of enemies has included political opponents of the regime in power, even those working within the political system such as activists, independent journalists, labor organizers, or opposition political-party leaders’.²⁸ The war on drugs—just like the ‘war on terror’—has served as one pretext to deepen bilateral military relations with Latin American countries and has proved useful to contain popular opposition to neoliberal reforms. The White House’s Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) has stated that one success of the drugs war was that the US and Mexico ‘went from a “virtually non-existent” military-to-military relationship to the formation of a bilateral military working group’. And as two experienced analysts have noted, ‘The US military took advantage of the counterdrug mission to promote closer relations with the Mexican military’.²⁹

As narco-corruption increased from the 1980s onwards, the Pentagon and the CIA often looked the other way and solidified their links with the Mexican military, as in 1986, when President Reagan called for the militarisation of the drugs war in both Mexico and the US. Indeed, between 1981 and 1995, 1488 Mexicans went to US military academies, with over 2000 *Grupos Aeromóviles de Fuerzas Especiales* (air-mobile special forces—GAFES) doing so in 1997–98. The GAFES were supervised by the Pentagon to attack drug traffickers, but eventually some of their members joined the Zetas cartel—an example of the negative unintended consequences of militarising the drug war. The US priority was to assert its hegemony over Mexico, which since the 1980s has meant implementing neoliberal reforms. As such, Phil Jordan, the head of the DEA’s Dallas office from 1984 to 1994, has said that ‘the intelligence on corruption, especially by drug traffickers, has always been

there [but] we were under instructions not to say anything negative about Mexico. It was a no-no since NAFTA was a hot political football.³⁰

Over the past decade the US–Mexico military bilateral relationship has been preserved and upgraded, first through the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP) (discussed by officials from 2005 to 2009 but never formally implemented) and then through the Mérida Initiative, the programme that has been in place since 2008 and has delivered \$1.5 billion to Mexico. The bulk of it is dedicated to training and equipping military and police forces officially involved in counter-drug operations. In March 2010 the US State Department released a ‘Beyond Mérida’ strategy, which essentially continues the Mérida Initiative. For example, 26 armoured vehicles were delivered to Mexico, seven Bell helicopters valued at \$88 million have been provided to the Mexican Army and three UH-60 helicopters valued at \$76.5 million have been delivered to the Federal Police. The fact that much equipment is bought from US weapons makers keeps the military–industrial complex humming, and the Mérida Initiative can be rightly seen as a gift to the US arms industry.³¹ Although often justified as ‘fight[ing] criminal organizations ... disrupt[ing] drug-trafficking ... weapons trafficking, illicit financial activities and currency smuggling, and human trafficking’ these claims do not stand up to scrutiny.³² As will be seen below, the Mexican military has a bleak human rights record, weapons trafficking and money laundering has never been regulated seriously by the US and drug trafficking has actually increased in Mexico over the past three decades, just like migratory flows across the border. Rather, following a historical pattern, Washington has built links with the Mexican military to protect its hegemonic projects, most recently NAFTA and neoliberal reforms. This was in fact candidly stated by Thomas Shannon, the US assistant secretary of state for western hemisphere affairs, in a 2008 speech explaining the importance of the Mérida Initiative. He said NAFTA needed to be implemented in a way that ‘creates a space for economic reform to take root’ over ‘this \$15 trillion economy’ comprised of Mexico, the US and Canada, and he specified that the SPP, on which the Mérida Initiative builds, ‘understands North America as a shared economic space and that as a shared economic space we need to protect it ... To a certain extent, we’re arming NAFTA’.³³

More recently, the *New York Times* reported that US intervention in Mexico is not letting up: ‘American Predator and Global Hawk drones now fly deep over Mexico to capture video of drug production facilities and smuggling routes. Manned American aircraft fly over Mexican targets to eavesdrop on cellphone communications. And the DEA has set up an intelligence outpost—staffed by Central Intelligence Agency operatives and retired American military personnel—on a Mexican military base.’³⁴

It is understandable that NAFTA and neoliberal reforms need to be protected by force if necessary, because they have caused much popular resentment, being geared towards meeting elites’ interests. As Jorge Castañeda wrote in 1995, shortly before he was to become Mexico’s foreign secretary under Vicente Fox, NAFTA was ‘an accord among magnates and potentates: an agreement for the rich and powerful in the United States,

Mexico and Canada, an agreement effectively excluding ordinary people in all three societies'.³⁵ NAFTA was a business project opposed by labour unions and environmental groups, and popular majorities in Canada, Mexico and the US were opposed to the deal. For instance, in the US, a July 1993 Gallup poll revealed that Americans opposed NAFTA by 65% to 28 per cent, contrary to the elites and the media which were overwhelmingly in favour. Jeffrey Garten, President Clinton's undersecretary of commerce, stated that US firms had become 'de facto agents of foreign policy'.³⁶ Indeed, neoliberal reforms were implemented in the early 1980s when the debt crisis allowed a new brand of politicians, calling themselves 'technocrats', to take power, led by Carlos Salinas under de la Madrid's administration. They privatised state assets, deregulated business and weakened labour, broke down collective landholdings in rural communities, and joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1986. Salinas became Washington's and Wall Street's favourite leader in the developing world, but his reforms did not benefit the majority of the population: poverty rose and inequality worsened, while the annual rate of GDP growth per capita fell from 3.3 per cent in the 1970s to 0.1 per cent in the 1980s, meaning that the decade saw virtually no growth. Mexicans were not pleased and in the 1988 elections were about to vote out Salinas, the PRI candidate for president, and elect Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, when the PRI government stopped counting the votes, collected the ballots, hid them in a government building and burned them. Salinas won the presidency, and the US looked the other way.³⁷

In the mid-1990s, financial liberalisation led to foreign 'hot' money pouring into the country as international investors hoped to make large profits with the passage of NAFTA. But when they pulled out, Mexico borrowed more money to try to keep up the peso's value, although it eventually collapsed—losing 50 per cent of its value relative to the dollar in a few weeks—and the ensuing economic crisis led to another Washington-led bailout. The latter was not used to create jobs, improve welfare and the health care system, nor to bring relief to small businesses. On the contrary, it was used to pay Wall Street investors who held *tesobonos*, dollar-denominated bonds that had earlier been issued by Mexico. And because Mexico would have to repay the bailout money, this meant in practice that Mexican people bailed out Wall Street bondholders. The new loans came with the condition of further neoliberal economic reforms, including an austerity budget and the opening up of Mexican banks to foreign ownership. A severe recession ensued, unemployment doubled, funding for social welfare, education and health care was slashed, GDP per capita dropped by nine per cent and wages went down by 16 per cent in 1995, half the population fell more deeply into poverty, and the ownership of nearly 90 per cent of Mexico's banking system was taken up by foreigners. However, some of Mexico's elites became instant millionaires by buying government-owned assets sold in privatisation schemes.³⁸

Popular opposition to the reforms emerged and the military and police forces moved to repress it. For example, on 1 January 1994, the same day NAFTA came into effect, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) began armed actions in opposition to neoliberal reforms. The Mexican

government orchestrated several counterinsurgency campaigns in Chiapas against the rebels. US corporations were also concerned that this could set a precedent and potentially threaten investment opportunities in Mexico: an infamous leaked memo by a Chase Manhattan Bank analyst advised that the Mexican government 'will need to eliminate the Zapatistas to demonstrate their effective control of their national territory and of security policy'.³⁹ GAFE members, trained for counter-narcotics campaigns by the US military, took part in some of the missions against the EZLN, showing again the blurring of counter-narcotics and counterinsurgency operations and the US support in the background.⁴⁰ Abuses by the military in Chiapas have been widely documented, as when in '1994, approximately 10 members of the military arbitrarily detained Ana, Beatriz, and Celia Pérez [who] were taken to a windowless one-room house where soldiers beat and repeatedly raped them while attempting to force them to confess they were members of the EZLN.'⁴¹ The pattern persists to this day. In June 2008 more than 200 soldiers and police went to the villages of Hermenegildo Galeana and San Alejandro under the pretext of searching for drugs, even though Zapatista communities strictly ban drugs and alcohol. Predictably the soldiers did not find such substances. Laura Carlsen reports that most targeted have been 'areas like ecotourism sites, water sources, and zones believed to contain important biodiversity resources, all of which are of interest to developers', showing that counter-narcotics and counterinsurgency operations are linked to a variety of investment opportunities.⁴²

The militarisation of internal repression has been accentuated in recent years. Calderón has sent 40 000 soldiers and police throughout the country, which have sometimes used the pretext of anti-drug operations to arrest and harass groups and individuals who oppose government policies. A recent Human Rights Watch report documents some of the many abuses by the military during counternarcotics, counterinsurgency and public security operations and shows that those targeted are often members of vulnerable or dissident groups calling for a more democratic polity, but are not involved in drugs or terrorism. It states:

The abuses detailed in this report include an enforced disappearance, the rape of indigenous women during counterinsurgency and counternarcotics operations in Southern Mexico, the torture and arbitrary detention of environmental activists during counternarcotics operations . . . Many victims of the abuses documented in this report had no connection to the drug trade or insurgencies.⁴³

In fact, a 2000 document from the Mexican Defense Ministry confirmed that it is explicit policy to use drugs war operations to suppress dissent. The document outlined a plan to establish counter-drug working groups that:

. . . will adopt the measures necessary to obtain information on the existence of armed groups, subversive activities, unjustifiable presence of foreigners, organizations, proselytizing by priests or leaders of religious sects, ecological groups, political propaganda, [and] the presence and activities of bands or gangs of criminals.⁴⁴

The International Civil Commission on Human Rights has likewise reported in 2008 that ‘there have been widespread arbitrary arrests of members of social movements ... To justify the arrests false evidence is used ... even false accusations of possession of drugs or of arms ... The logic behind all of this is to criminalise the members of social movements’.⁴⁵ For example, environmental activists Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera conducted a campaign against logging and deforestation by multinational corporations in Guerrero, which angered local *caciques*, who told regional military commanders that the two activists were drug traffickers. The military then arrested and tortured them until they confessed that they had been caught in possession of drugs and guns, even though it was later found that the ‘evidence’ had been planted by the soldiers. They were both convicted by the Mexican government and imprisoned. President Fox later released them but did not drop the charges against them, let alone punish those guilty.⁴⁶ Finally, the drugs war is also used as a means of social control of marginalised groups by arresting and incarcerating them disproportionately. Since 1995 there have been about 10 000 drug-related arrests per year in Mexico, and those who end up in jail tend to come from the poorest strata of society. In 2001, 20 000 people were convicted on federal charges (including over 9000 on drug-related charges). Fifteen thousand had less than a high school education, and more than 10 000 were day labourers or farmers, along with a substantial number of indigenous people incarcerated on drug charges, the majority of whom are used by drug traffickers to act as low-level drug transporters.⁴⁷

Money laundering

President Obama recently declared that his administration is ‘putting unprecedented pressure on cartels and their finances here in the United States’. In fact, the opposite has been the norm for decades and testifies to the power of the US financial community to take part in illegal activities to maximise profits while shielding themselves from retribution. It has been estimated that globally banks launder from \$500 billion to \$1 trillion every year from criminal activities, half of which goes through US banks. During the 2008 banking crisis UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) chief Antonio Maria Costa said that drugs money may have rescued some failing banks: ‘interbank loans were funded by money that originated from drug trade and other illegal activities’, he said, and there were ‘signs that some banks were rescued in that way’. ‘At a time of major bank failures, *money doesn’t smell*, bankers seem to believe’.⁴⁸ There is nothing new in this state of affairs, even if we consider only Mexico and Latin America. In the 1970s the US Treasury Department detected a currency surplus in Florida banks and ‘connected it to the large scale laundering of drug receipts’. After several years of delay Operation Greenback was launched in 1979 but failed to clean the banking system. President Reagan eased rather than tightened financial regulations and froze hiring for the operation, limiting its investigative powers. The operation’s chief prosecutor, Charles Blau, declared that George HW Bush, who led the anti-drugs effort, ‘wasn’t really too interested in financial prosecution’. Under

his watch Operation Greenback was immediately downgraded administratively from a high-level committee in Washington to a lesser unit in Miami.⁴⁹

US banks have laundered Mexican drug money. In 2010 Wachovia (now part of Wells Fargo) had to forfeit \$110 million to US authorities for having allowed drug-related financial transactions of the same amount, in addition to \$50 million for failure to monitor funds used to ship 22 tons of cocaine. The bank was sanctioned for not applying anti-money laundering procedures to the transfer of \$378.4 billion into dollar accounts from Mexican *casas de cambio* (currency exchange houses). Jeffrey Sloman, the federal prosecutor, said that 'Wachovia's blatant disregard for our banking laws gave international cocaine cartels a virtual carte blanche to finance their operations'. Yet the banking sector is so powerful that serious regulation is not applied: Wachovia's total fine was less than two per cent of its \$12.3 billion profit for 2009, and it was decided that there would be no criminal trial, let alone sending any director to jail. And this was not because the bank did not know: 'As early as 2004', the court settlement stated, 'Wachovia understood the risk that was associated with doing business with the Mexican CDCs [casas de cambio] ... Wachovia was aware that other large US banks were exiting the CDC business based on [anti-money laundering] concerns ... despite these warnings, Wachovia remained in business'.⁵⁰

An earlier case had Antonio Giraldi and Maria Lourdes Reategui, two American Express Bank executives, convicted in 1994 of laundering \$33 million for Mexico's Gulf Cartel, in what was at the time the largest money-laundering case involving a US bank. They were sentenced to ten and three years in jail, respectively, and the bank was sentenced to pay \$7 million in civil penalties.⁵¹ Also, in the early 1990s, Citibank helped Raúl Salinas, the brother of Mexico's President Carlos Salinas (1988–94), to transfer about \$100 million from Mexico to Europe secretly. A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report stated that 'Citibank actions assisted Mr Salinas with these transfers and effectively disguised the funds' source and destination, thus breaking the funds' paper trail'.⁵² Raúl Salinas has claimed that the money was simply part of an investment fund, but it is very unlikely that none of the money was related to drugs. A Swiss police investigation reported that he was a key actor in Mexico's cocaine trade, collecting large bribes to protect the traffic into the US.⁵³

Conclusion

Contrary to conventional analyses that focus almost exclusively on narco-cartels, this article has argued that US policy towards Mexico is shaped by political economic imperatives, rather than by concerns for drug control. In fact, drug wars have served to justify the expansion of US hegemony, which itself has increased the size of the drug industry. Further, mainstream analysts' favoured solutions—interdiction and seizure of drug shipments, arrests of drug kingpins, military and police operations—miss the point in at least three ways. First, in general, since US hegemony over the country has worsened drug problems, more equitable bilateral relations should therefore

be favoured. For example, instead of promoting neoliberal policies that result in unemployment and harsh living conditions south of the border and thus provide an abundant pool of labour for drug cartels, policies that support growth and development would make a positive difference. Better labour standards, working conditions and environmental regulations would be a good start.

Second, Washington should stop directly supporting some important drug actors in Mexico, whether these be the military, police or drug kingpin as paid informants (if the latter claim is indeed true).

Third, in addition to stopping the flow of firearms south, the findings of drug policy research should be applied. Whereas mainstream authors call for overseas drug control operations, interdiction and enforcement to tackle the narcotics problem, research has consistently found that such methods are ineffective, while the most effective methods to reduce drug consumption are treatment of addicts and prevention. Indeed, a widely cited RAND report calculated that ‘treatment’ was the most effective method for reducing cocaine consumption in the US and that targeting ‘source countries’ like Mexico was 23 times less cost-effective, ‘interdiction’ 11 times less cost-effective, and ‘domestic enforcement’ seven times less cost-effective.⁵⁴ The Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, conceived by ex-presidents Cardoso of Brazil, Gaviria of Colombia and Zedillo of Mexico, agrees and stated that: ‘The long-term solution for the drug problem is to reduce drastically the demand for drugs in the main consumer countries’, the US and Europe.⁵⁵ But the US has rejected the consensus on drugs policy, allocating 64 per cent of the drug control budget to interdiction and to arresting, prosecuting and incarcerating drug offenders, including the arrest of about 750 000 each year for possession of small amounts of marijuana. Only 36 per cent of the budget is reserved for treatment and other demand reduction activities. Nonetheless, the US has one of the highest levels of drug use in the world, while many European countries adopting softer approaches have significantly lower usage levels. In short, the solutions are known, but have not been fully implemented.⁵⁶

Notes

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