



Mexico's Long War on Drugs: Past and Present Failures of a Punitive Approach to Drugs

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COLLECTION: WHY
THE DRUG WAR
ENDURES: LOCAL
AND TRANSNATIONAL
LINKAGES IN THE
NORTH AND CENTRAL
AMERICA DRUG
TRADES

POLICY COMMENTARY



ABSTRACT

The aim of this policy commentary is two-fold. First, to examine new historical research regarding the political, cultural, and social drivers informing the design and implementation of Mexico's 'war on drugs' – a set of state policies centered on punitive and militarized responses towards the drug problem – during the first and second halves of the twentieth-century. Second, to analyze how the longer history of Mexico's war on drugs can help us better understand this country's enduring reliance on such punitive and militarized approaches despite the detrimental consequences these had and continue to have on citizens' wellbeing and on the country's democratic institutions.

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KEYWORDS:

war on drugs; punitivism;
crime; dirty wars; security
cooperation; US-Mexico
relation

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kloppe-Santamaria, G. 2022.
Mexico's Long War on Drugs:
Past and Present Failures of a
Punitive Approach to Drugs.
*Journal of Illicit Economies and
Development*, 4(2), pp. 223–229.
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31389/
jied.115](https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.115)

Although there exist a rich body of literature that has examined the failures of Mexico's anti-drug policies, most of these works have focused on these policies' most recent iteration; namely, the war on drugs launched by president Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) and continued – with little to no change – by presidents Enrique Peña Nieto's (2012–2018) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador's (2018–present). Such literature has traced how militarized, short-term, and punitive strategies boosted lethal violence, criminal fragmentation, and human rights violations in the country (Schedler 2015; Durán-Martínez 2018; Trejo & Ley 2020). Recognizing the important contributions of these works, in this policy commentary I turn my attention to the historical precursors of these anti-drug policies in an effort to further elucidate the reasons behind these policies' endurance across different periods, their inherent contradictions and limitations, as well as their negative consequences on citizens' wellbeing and the country's democratic institutions.

Drawing on recent historical scholarship on Mexico's war on drugs and based on my own research on Mexico's violence and US-Mexico security cooperation, this policy commentary advances three arguments: 1) The failure of Mexico's war on drugs to contain the production, cultivation, and trafficking of drugs is not new. Rather than being a result of this country's recent democratic turn or of the emergence of more predatory criminal organizations, this failure is grounded on the longer history of this policy, its punitive and repressive character, and its selective, politicized, and biased implementation; 2) Mexico's long war on drugs has helped sustain forms of social and political control that have led to the exclusion and criminalization of different individuals and communities considered deviant, socially degenerate, or politically subversive. The instrumental use of this policy in upholding governing elites' political dominance can help explain why, despite its apparent failures, Mexico's punitive approach to drugs has persisted across different periods. 3) Mexico's war on drugs is neither mainly nor exclusively a by-product of US influence or diplomatic pressure. Instead, it reflects Mexican governing elites' inclination to support repressive counternarcotic policies based on their own interests and political agendas. This point is crucial as it allows us to illuminate Mexico's responsibility in reproducing a punitive approach to drugs that has had devastating consequences for thousands of citizens.

In the following lines I will present historical evidence supporting these arguments. I will structure this policy commentary chronologically. Rather than providing an exhaustive revision of the history of the war on drugs in Mexico, my aim is to highlight the main political, cultural, and social determinants behind the design and implementation of this policy. In the conclusion I will address the ways in which adding historical depth to our understanding of Mexico's war on drugs is central to explaining this policy's failures and its persistence up until today.

PROHIBITION AND PREJUDICE: THE ORIGINS OF MEXICO'S WAR ON DRUGS

At the turn of the twentieth century, Mexico implemented a series of prohibitionist policies at the local, state, and federal levels for the cultivation and commerce of marijuana. Written into the 1917 Constitution, these policies set the social and legal basis for the creation of a new drug control regime that put Mexico ahead of other countries, including the United States, regarding the prohibition of marijuana (Campos 2013). Although at the international level, the International Opium Commission (1909) and the Hague Opium Convention (1912) had introduced regulatory measures for opiates and cocaine, marijuana did not enter international anti-drug efforts until 1925 (Campos 2013: 201). More so, these international measures were regulatory and not prohibitionist in nature. Their main goal was to establish administrative controls for the import and export of opiates, cocaine, and from 1925 onwards, cannabis (Jelsma 2011).

In the case of the United States, the trade of opium and cocaine had been declared illegal from the beginning of the twentieth-century (Toro 1999: 624; Serrano 2012: 136). However, the outright prohibition of drugs did not really begin until 1930 when Harry Anslinger became the first commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) and was able to shift drug use 'from a medical issue to a public menace responsive only to tough criminal control' (Provine 2011: 43).

Mexico's prohibition of marijuana and later on other drugs was not an imported idea; it was 'homegrown' (Campos 2013). Premised upon the harms and maladies produced by drugs, Mexico 1917 constitution gave unprecedented powers to the newly created Department of Public Sanitation in order to tackle the cultivation and sale of substances that 'poison individuals and degenerate the race' (Campos 2013: 198). In the opinion of political elites and public officials alike, drugs like opium, cocaine, and marijuana, impacted directly the health and mortality rates of Mexicans and were conducive to a series of conduct that undermined Mexico's prospects for progress and modernization. Such conduct included laziness, drunkenness, madness, and the propensity to resort to violence.

The idea of 'racial degeneration' was at the center of political elites' concerns regarding the consumption and availability of drugs. Similar to other Latin American countries, in Mexico, racial degeneration was not seen as biologically determined (Buffington 2000). Instead, in the view of Mexican elites, social environment, assimilationist policies directed at indigenous and other non-White populations, as well as the exclusion or control of 'social pathologies' such as alcoholism, drug-consumption, and prostitution, could all contribute to the betterment of the race (*Ibid*). It was thus paramount to counter these pathologies not only through hygiene policies, but also through the criminalization of these practices and their corresponding punishment.

When it moved upwards to the United States, the notion of marijuana as a source of vice was further fueled by preconceived ideas and perceptions of Mexicans as prone to laziness and criminality (Campos 2012: 203–5; Provine 2011: 420–3). The US was certainly not alone in its efforts to identify 'others' or 'foreigners' as responsible for the maladies endured by 'good citizens.' In Mexico, Chinese minorities were associated to vice and degeneration, and were presented as the main culprits for the trading and commercialization of opium. Such portrayals led to different forms of discrimination, criminalization, and even violence. In addition to racial prejudice, anti-Chinese sentiment was informed by Sinaloa's elites' interest in controlling the profits of the production, processing, and smuggling of opium in Mexican territory (Smith 2013: 132; Enciso 2015: 73–5).

PUNITIVE ATTITUDES AND POLITICAL USES OF THE WAR ON DRUGS

Mexican elites' prejudices and punitive attitudes towards drugs and the so-called vices and transgressions these generated continued during the 1930s and 1940s. This was so despite the fact that by the late 1930s it had become evident that the prohibitionist paradigm yielded nothing but poor results in regards to the cultivation and consumption of drugs (Pérez Ricart 2017: 35). During the late 1930s, Mexican Dr. Leopoldo Salazar Viniegra, an outspoken advocate of the decriminalization of marijuana, criticized the prejudices, misconceptions, and social fears surrounding the consumption of marijuana (Enciso 2015: 78–9). He blamed newspapers for disseminating unfounded stories about the consequences of drug consumption and highlighted the importance of providing medical treatment for addicts based on scientific evidence.

Although controversial at the time, particularly among conservative groups, Salazar Viniegra's ideas became the basis of a new legal framework implemented in January of 1940. That year, President Lázaro Cárdenas modified the Federal Regulation of Drug Addiction and allowed for state clinics 'to supply the substances required by addicts at a low price' (Pérez Ricart 2017: 35). This change in policy, however, would not last more than a few months. Driven by US diplomatic pressure and homegrown opposition to Salazar Viniegra's ideas, the prohibitive framework resumed in the second half of 1940 (*Ibid*).

Although US diplomatic pressure certainly contributed to modify Mexico's responses to drugs, it would be wrong to assume this was the only or even most important factor shaping Mexican drug policy. At the domestic level, conservative public opinion rejected the use of psychoactive substances and played a crucial role in supporting a punitive approach to drugs (Pérez Montfort 2016: 279–85; Pierce 2009). Public perception regarding the social dangers provoked by drugs and alcohol became evident in stories published by both mainstream and more sensationalist newspapers in Mexico. In these stories, journalists and editorialists described how these substances led to aggressiveness and to the development of 'animalistic instincts' amongst

young and male adults (Kloppe-Santamaría 2020). These stories went often hand in hand with calls for effective and punitive responses towards drugs. A representative editorial, for instance, referred to ‘narcomanías’ as a danger to morality that needed to be firmly battled (El Informador 1934).

Stories about the moral dangers and disorders posed by drugs persisted during the 1940s and 1950s. In some contexts, political opponents used these stories in order to criticize the corruption of the government and mobilize people against the dominant party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). In Baja California Norte, for instance, where support for the PRI was weak, members of the right-wing party, *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) used locals’ concerns regarding the use of drugs to gain political support and denounce the corruption and criminal collusion of state officials and members of the police in the drug trade (Smith & Pansters 2020: 380–2).

The fact that social perceptions and political attitudes privileged a prohibitionist approach in Mexico did not preclude the emergence of alternative regimes at the state and local levels. Although they were formally bound to follow the legal framework established by the federal government, regional authorities promoted selective enforcement and criminal collusion over outright prohibition. Hence, while drug consumption and drug trafficking were defined as federal crimes in 1931, state governors from states such as Durango and Sinaloa tolerated and benefited from the illicit production and trafficking of poppy throughout the 1930s and beyond (Serrano 2012: 137).

The type of benefits that were gained from criminal collusion went past the personal enrichment of a few governors or law enforcement agents. In the state of Sinaloa, a system aptly described as ‘narco-populism’ (Smith 2013) allowed regional elites to retain political control by allowing two sets of groups to participate in the drug economy in exchange for their compliance and support: large landowners and right-wing ranchers who opposed redistributive policies and leftist peasants who demanded the radical promises of the revolution. In return for their loyalty, Sinaloan political elites allowed right-wing ranchers to participate in drug cultivation and trafficking and offered peasants the possibility of becoming poppy growers. The federal government accepted this type of arrangement as long as state governors remained loyal and kept the levels of violence at ‘acceptable’ levels (e.g. not drawing unnecessary attention) (Smith 2013: 128).

In the 1960s, the ascendance of more radical and leftist groups and the splintering of the PRI into different factions disrupted the type of criminal and political order promoted by Sinaloan elites. Without the stability and protection provided by a unified political elite, drug gangs also splintered alongside competing political groups (Smith 2013: 144). Furthermore, federal elites became increasingly interested in showing a firmer commitment to antinarcotics policies at the international level, particularly in regards to the US. Although the tacit agreement between federal and state elites came under increasing scrutiny, Mexican officials did not abandon the selective implementation of the drug war. Instead, they redeployed it with further political uses.

DRUG WARS, DIRTY WARS

At the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s the United States intensified its war on drugs both domestically and internationally. As a result, Mexico came under mounting pressure to tackle the drug problem at home. Through both diplomatic and forceful means, the Mexican government – particularly at the federal level – was compelled to align its antinarcotic policies with those of the United States. In 1969, US President Richard Nixon decided unilaterally to shut down the border through Operation Intercept in order to stop the entry of drugs, particularly marijuana, coming in from Mexico (Teague 2019). The operations that followed would no longer be launched unilaterally, but involved bilateral and concerted efforts to eradicate the cultivation of drugs. Operation Condor, an ambitious drug crop eradication campaign launched in 1976 under the tenure of Mexican president José López Portillo, exemplified this new trend (Toro 1999: 128).

Operation Condor and Mexico’s concurrent alignment with the US drug war has been traditionally explained as part of Mexican efforts to avert aggressive and interventionist policies

from the US (Enciso 2010, Toro 1999). When examined in terms of their political ramifications in the domestic sphere, however, it becomes clear that these anti-narcotics policies were not simply an expression of bandwagoning. Instead, Mexican political elites utilized US security assistance – which entailed the transferring of resources, weaponry, military equipment, and training – in order to sustain a new form of governance that combined both selective drug enforcement and the targeting of political dissidents in Mexico (Cedillo 2019).

During the period known as the Dirty War (1969–1978), political elites at the federal level used the resources and discretionary powers enabled by the war on drugs in order to intimidate and repress political opponents or ‘internal enemies.’ These so-called enemies included leftist student activists, revolutionary peasants, and individuals who participated in popular movements that challenged an increasingly authoritarian PRI-ista rule. Similar to the narco-populism of the 1940s, this new political order was undergirded by the state’s criminal collusion with the drug economy, but this time around the agreements between criminal and political actors would be primarily managed at the federal level. This relative shift from regional to federal forms of criminal collusion reflected the growing centralization of drug-control policies during this period as well as the greater presence of federal actors in the policing of both drug-trafficking activities and political forms of dissent.

In the state of Guerrero, where the cultivation of poppy flower and marijuana grew exponentially during the 1960s, members of the Mexican military and police, together with paramilitary organizations, carried out of extrajudicial killings, rape, torture, and the disappearance of hundreds of peasants and villagers (Aviña 2016). With the aim of securing the political control of this region, government officials criminalized the actions of political insurgents by pointing at their alleged collusion with drug-traffickers. In spite of these accusations, the main beneficiaries of the illicit drug economy were not guerrillas but rather federal state agents, including top-level officials of the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (DFS) and military officials (Aviña 2016; Teague 2019; Smith 2013: 154).

This dual strategy, in which the PRI-ista state waged a *selective war* on drugs while simultaneously waging an *all-out-war* against leftist guerrillas and political dissidents who were perceived as a fundamental threat to the government, was implemented in other states, including Michoacán, Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Durango, and Guerrero (Cedillo 2019; Teague 2019; Smith 2013). Informed by Cold War politics and empowered by the resources provided by the war on drugs, this strategy entailed the systematic targeting of peasants, guerrillas, students, and political dissidents that challenged PRI-ista rule (Teague 2019). In the context of contemporary Mexico, where drug cultivation is still concentrated in marginalized and indigenous areas, the violence impacting peasants is not so different from that of the past. This violence continues to be connected to the state’s selective war on drugs and the ‘attempts of politicians, police officers and soldiers to control the drug trade in alliance with, or in opposition to, rival groups of traffickers’ (Morris 2021).

LESSONS FROM MEXICO’S LONG WAR ON DRUGS

The long history of Mexico’s war on drugs offers key lessons to understand the inherent failures and contradictions of punitive responses towards the drug problem. First, the long history of Mexico’s anti-narcotic policies suggest that these responses have, from their very inception, been informed by social prejudice and racism rather than by scientific evidence or an interest in protecting the life and wellbeing of citizens. Despite the failure of punitive approaches to control the cultivation and consumption of drugs, political elites and a conservative public opinion continued to support these policies throughout the twentieth century with little if any exceptions.

Second, Mexican political elites have historically promoted a selective war on drugs, establishing state-sponsored protection rackets for certain criminal organizations while criminalizing competing drug-trafficking organizations and political dissenters in the countryside. In doing so, political elites have not only benefited from the profits of the drug economy. Rather, they have also been able to support specific forms of social and political control, from narco-populist strategies during the 1940s–1950s to repressive and anti-leftist tactics during the 1960s–1970s. The intersection of Mexico’s war on drugs with these forms of social and political control helps explain why, despite its detrimental consequences on citizens’ wellbeing and on the country’s democratic institutions, state officials have continued to rely on punitive approaches towards the drug problem.

As evidenced by this history, instead of being a mere reaction to US anti-narcotics diplomacy and pressure, Mexico's war on drugs has followed from Mexican governing elites' own political and economic interests. Furthermore, the long history of this war suggests that the failures of the war on drugs are not merely a result of Mexico's recent democratic transition or the irruption of more powerful criminal organizations. Instead, these failures need to be traced back to the long-term presence of institutional corruption and criminal collusion, the misguided but tenacious public support for prohibitionist ideas, next to the politicized use of force that have undergirded this war since the beginning of the twentieth century.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Journal of Illicit Economies and Development
DOI: 10.31389/jied.115

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kloppe-Santamaria, G. 2022. Mexico's Long War on Drugs: Past and Present Failures of a Punitive Approach to Drugs. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 4(2), pp.223–229. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.115>

Submitted: 30 July 2021

Accepted: 04 February 2022

Published: 02 December 2022

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