FROM SMUGGLERS TO DRUG-LORDS TO "TRAQUETOS": CHANGES IN THE COLOMBIAN ILLICIT DRUGS ORGANIZATIONS

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PART ONE

THE ORIGINS AND DYNAMICS OF DRUG TRAFFIC

Smuggling, Violence and drug trafficking

Considered from a historical perspective, drug trafficking is the last stage of two forms of illegality: smuggling and violence. Smuggling can be traced back to Colonial times. During many centuries, Colombian borders have been porous contours through which goods, which the state wanted to tax but could not, were infiltrated. There is practically not a single Colombian border zone where smuggling is not a part of local tradition, where stories about clandestine paths are not known and shared by all inhabitants. But two particular zones became privileged conducts through which contraband entered the country almost without restrictions: Urabá, and above all, the Guajira peninsula, where everyone, the élites and the common people, the aboriginals and the Arab immigrants, all made a lifestyle based on fiscal crime.

Violence --generalized violence, one that invokes political arguments and affects large population groups-- has also a long history, although less extensive than smuggling. The Republic regularly mobilized hosts of peasants charged with assassinating their fellow countrymen in the name of one or another traditional party. This situation led to the period known as "la Violencia", with a capital V, during the 1940s and the 1950s.

Actually, violence is not unique, but rather multiple and of varied origin. There is no relationship whatsoever between today's violence and the type of violence which prevailed
during the decade of 1940. Nevertheless, these various violences have been similar enough so as to allow an apprenticeship of techniques, which can be used and improved --that is, made more destructive-- in the following violent period. Peace apprenticeship is not possible, because at the moment when society is learning to negotiate its conflicts in a peaceful manner, new arguments or conditions appear, which justify the use of violence and launch another destruction cycle. This is what happened, not to go too far, during the 1960s and the 1970s. In the 1960s, after a confrontation almost a century and a half long, the parties were beginning to settle their conflicts in a civilized way, when the Left, following Guevara's political ideals, started to promote revolution. And in the 1970s, the guerrillas were being forced to give in when drug trafficking created the conditions for a new violent cycle, in which we still linger. 

In the past, smuggling and violence have been close to each other. The smuggler has always had recourse to violence in order to settle conflicts that cannot be solved otherwise. Traditional drug traffickers, those who would cross the ocean in vessels hopefully faster than the government's, would usually be armed. In the case of Guajira, honor feuds have, along with extensive illegal activities, been invoked as justifications for the permanent carrying of arms. But the most notorious violent men did not devote themselves to smuggling before the 1970s. Their main food for thought was ideology; ideology, besides some occasional extortion, sustained them and they therefore kept away from the trade of illegal products. Only during civil wars did it become necessary to introduce a sporadic contraband of arms with the complicity of Caribbean sailors or inhabitants of the Venezuelan or Ecuadorian borders.

This situation started to change at mid-century, and Efraín Gonzáles is the person who better embodies this new world from its inception. A member of a conservative family, he educated himself in the partisan violence that devastated the southern part of Great Caldas at the beginning of the decade of 1950. He then settled in the Vélez province, in the Santander Department, from whence he extended his dominion over the various groups that were fighting over control of the emerald mines in western Boyacá. The majority of these mines were state property, as set forth by the 1886 Constitution, whereby all subsoil riches belonged to the state. But the Colombian state was then incapable, as it is now, to achieve effective
control over its riches, in spite of the fact that western Boyacá is located at the heart of the country, very near the capital. González put to practice what he had learnt during partisan "Violencia" in order to build an emporium, autonomous from state power, where both smuggling and extreme violence became business (Téllez, 1993).

Throughout many years, the place where González died remained a pilgrimage sanctuary, as has occurred more recently with Pablo Escobar's grave. The feat these two men achieved was to have organized, controlled and thrown some order on two markets --emerald and cocaine smuggling-- inherently unstable due to their illegal character, through the use of violence. Both men were able to enter popular imagination by having outwitted the state and its agents, at least until their deaths, González' in 1965 and Escobar's in 1993. The admiration for González was restricted to certain social sectors of the interior, while respect towards Escobar --certainly tainted with fear, at least in Colombia-- was more generalized and even surpassed the Colombian borders. During the almost three decades that separate the deaths of the bandit and the drug-lord, many changes occurred in Colombian society. One of the most important was the propagation of crime as means of life and social ascent mechanism.

*The establishment of the initial drug traffic organizations*

National legislation against consuming, trading and producing certain drugs originated with Law 11 of September 15, 1920. Since then there has been clandestine traffic, aimed at establishing a mediation between drug consumers and producers. Nevertheless, during the first decades, this traffic was just a secondary item of border smuggling. Its purpose then was to introduce drugs in the country --not to export them, as in present times-- through the ports on the Atlantic and Buenaventura, on the Pacific. Opiates and cocaine were the smuggled drugs, since marijuana, besides being abundantly found in its wild form almost all over the country, was very easy to cultivate.

According to official U.S. documents, during the 1930s Colombia was already integrated in the clandestine networks that tied Europe --where the main producers of manufactured drugs were to be found-- with consumers from the Caribbean countries. These documents state that
Colombian ports on the Caribbean --Barranquilla, Cartagena and Santa Marta-- were centers of intense illegal drug traffic. The following report, sent on August 24, 1933, by the business attaché of the U.S. embassy in Bogotá is of interest and would explain the reason why Colombian authorities were so ineffective in repressing drug smuggling:

Captain Gustavo Gómez P., general director of Colombia's National Police... and several other reliable Colombian officials have confidentially spoken to me in several occasions about illicit narcotics traffic in Bogotá. Apparently, there are enormous difficulties in controlling the traffic because of the fact that many drug addicts are socially or politically prominent; their personal influences are such, that it is impossible to pursue them. Narcotic use habits seem restricted to a rather small class; the high cost of drugs here places them out of reach for the majority of the inhabitants. It is understood that the habit is more extensive in Caribbean coast cities, such as Barranquilla and Cartagena, where there is certain contraband in ships and thus prices are lower. The main source of (heroic) drugs used in Colombia seems to be European (NA BH 821.111 NARCOTICS/77, U.S. National Archives, en Sáenz, 1996).

Drug trafficking conformed to a similar structure during the 1930s, although social reaction and legislation had begun to harm the popularity of manufactured drugs, especially cocaine. The situation completely changed as a consequence of World War II, since the confrontation forced an interruption of trade with Europe, thus radically eliminating the flow of opium products. The United States took care of providing the required drugs to cover medical needs, but morphine and heroin clandestine markets were affected and the prices of these drugs suffered a dramatic rise, beyond the reach of habitual consumers. Some of them opted for laudanum, a compound of opium and other substances, easier to get in drugstores but which implied forging medical formulas.

Until the 1940s, Andean countries were not important in international drug trafficking, and their production for the illegal market was insignificant. Actually, like almost all Latin American countries, Andean countries imported illegal drugs and, in some occasions, were
used as transit points towards their neighbors. But the war, first, and the defeat and subsequent occupation of the Axis finished off the traditional international drug trafficking centers. For this reason, cocaine produced in Peru, a country that had stored enormous amounts during the war, found its way to the United States and Cuba after 1945. The U.S. cocaine market was quite small. But a rising demand in Cuba compensated for this. Cuba not only served as transit point towards the U.S. market, due to its privileged position, but the island also emerged as market in its own right, since cocaine was Mafia bosses and gamblers' favorite drug (Walker III, 1989, y Gootenberg, 1999).

The 1950s meant a big change. Smuggling had been a long tradition in Latin America; now was the time to transform it in a two-way business, one which would not only allow imports such as liquor, cigarettes and fabrics, but also drug exports. Dispatching the merchandise was unproblematic, since trained personnel and transportation means were already available, and the routes were known. The only required investment was the installation of processing laboratories for heroin and cocaine production. These drugs were mainly produced for exportation, but this process also allowed supplies for the local market, in a successful case of import substitution. Thus, during the 1950s, illegal cocaine laboratories were commonly reported in all Andean countries: Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia and even Argentina.

South American drugs were introduced in the U.S. market by Cuban traffickers who did not face important difficulties, since Mafias, especially Italian, long established in the northern country, had enough with the heroin trade, which had a much more extended market than cocaine. Thus, strong ties between Colombian and Cuban criminals were established. In Colombia, the main laboratories were located in Medellín. One of them was mentioned in a U.S. government report:

On February 20, 1957, Colombian Secret Services agents, with the assistance of an anti-narcotics official from the United States, discovered a clandestine factory of heroin and cocaine at the property of Tomás and Rafael Herrán, in Medellín, Colombia. These brothers had been into drug trafficking since 1948. Heroin
produced in this laboratory was sold in Cuba, where the accused were arrested by
the police when Tomás Herrán was found in the possession of 800 grams of
heroin on December 24, 1956 (Bureau of Narcotics, 1958).

Everything seems to indicate that a piece of news published in *El Espectador* in May of 1959
referred to the same Herrán brothers. The news stated that, a year before, in Havana, FBI
agents had detained a Colombian citizen who had confessed that in Medellín “there was a
clandestine laboratory, and that he was one of the persons responsible for it.” It was also
stated that in that laboratory, “heroin, cocaine and morphine were produced, then transported
to Havana and from there distributed to Mexico, the United States and other countries of the
continent.” The laboratory, which indeed was found by federal agents in El Poblado, a
neighborhood in Medellín, was open only two months a year, during which it produced five
pounds of heroin that were subsequently sold at US$ 70,000 each. “That is to say, they
obtained US$ 350,000, which lead them ‘not to work during the rest of the year, in order to
avoid danger.’” The newspaper added that the FBI agents had returned to the country “to help
reaching the definitive culmination of the investigation”. One of the authors of the book
where this piece of news is reproduced asserts that he had known one of the owners of the
laboratory –“two brothers related to important families from Medellín and Bogotá”--, who
spent almost two years in a Cuban prison, until Fidel Castro’s government deported him. The
trafficker remembers that the laboratory transformed “coca from Tierradentro and El Paso, in
the Department of Cauca, and opium gum imported from Ecuador” (*El Espectador*, May 22,
page 3, reproduced in Arango and Child, 1984).¹

A couple of years later, another U.S. government report stated that, in May of 1961, anti-
narcotics agents from the U.S. had detained in New York two crew members from the ship
“Ciudad de Pasto”, who were in possession of 218 grams of cocaine. The news went on to
say that “the accused declared that they had obtained the cocaine from Jesús García Primero
from Cali, Colombia” (Bureau of Narcotics, 1962). We are not in the position to establish
whether or not this was a casual fact, resulting from the ambition of two adventurers to earn a
few dollars. Rather, it is evidence of the deep changes that Latin American drug trafficking
was going through as a consequence of the Cuban Revolution.
With Fidel Castro’s arrival to power in January of 1959, U.S. Mafia bosses and Cuban ruffians who had prospered around the casino world since the 1930s, as well as supporters of Fulgencio Batista’s regime, were forced to abandon the island. After settling in Miami, New York and Union City (New Jersey), Cubans with a dubious criminal past devoted to the only profession they knew. The ranks thus established augmented with a considerable number of exiles that had participated in the failed invasion of Bahia Cochinos, in April of 1961. Since that moment on, the state of Florida, and to a much lesser extent Union City, became the center of two very closely related phenomena, drug trafficking and anti-Castro politics. The U.S. government, in its intention to back the latter, showed complacency towards the former. In the first times, the Cubans imported the amount of drugs needed to satisfy the demand of wealthy members of their community, but towards the middle of the 1960s, they were already aware that there was a demand for cocaine in every corner of the United States. They thus started introducing drugs in greater amounts (MacDonald, 1988).

3. Beginnings of Drug Trafficking

The first suppliers of Cuban dealers during the 1960s were Colombians. They would buy coca base from Andean peasants, transform it into cocaine in laboratories located in Medellin, and then sell it to Cubans for U.S. distribution. A report from the U.S. government stated: "By 1965, Colombians supplied nearly 100 percent of the cocaine moving through the Cuban networks. Colombians refined the drug and Cubans trafficked and distributed it in the United States." (United States Congress, 1980). Similarly, the Colombian market was open to adventurers from all over the world. Until the beginning of the 1970s, according to a first hand testimony, “all [cocaine] buyers …were equally welcome, including many youngsters and small independent traffickers form the United States. For them, to negotiate with coca in Colombia was significantly easier than in the extremely tense and paranoid atmosphere of Bolivia or Peru” (Henman, 1980, y Sabbag, 1990).

This situation was no to last too long, as occurred with the successful alliance between Colombians and Cubans. During the 1960s, the flow of immigrants from Colombia to the
United States significantly grew, giving way to ethnic transnational networks, which criminal organizations took advantage of. Thus, towards the end of the decade, and during the first years of the 1970s, Colombians expanded their operations from production to traffic. On the other hand, starting in 1972, Colombian Security Administrative Department (DAS, Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad) and National Police started to act against drug traffickers. Their work, although it was successful in ending the trips of foreign adventurers who came to Colombia to buy drugs that they later sold in their countries of origin, was not able to weaken the Colombian organizations. It must then be concluded that the actions on the part of DAS and the Police were useful only for the consolidation of local drug-lord power, since they had eliminated small foreign traffickers. In any case, and as Henman and Sabbag attest to, 1973 signals the end of foreign independent cocaine traffickers (Henman, 1980, y Sabbag, 1990).

Towards 1976, the Colombians, who denounced continuous frauds on the part of the Cubans and were unsatisfied with their share in the profits, decide to rebel against their subordination. To this end, they sent gunmen to the United States, who systematically eliminated the Cubans in Miami and New York. In 1978 those Cubans that remained in the business were working for Colombian organizations, which, in the future, directly took care of wholesale distribution in most of the U.S. territory (Abadinsky, 1997). The Colombians thus seized control of the cocaine business just when the second cocaine epidemic, not yet over, was staring in the U.S. In this way, drug exports and confiscations, which amounted to a few tenths of kilos at the beginning of the 1970s, became tons towards the end of the same decade. And thus Colombian traffickers accumulated immense fortunes, which amply surpassed their most febrile fantasies.

The Cubans had been trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the usage of automatic weapons and shells, having the Bahia Cochinos invasion in mind, but they were unable to resist the Colombian sicarios (Kleinknecht, 1996). The reason, it has been argued again and again, was that criminals of Cuban or Italian origin, bound by a code of honor, used to direct their attacks towards the designated victim, whereas Colombians, educated in the school of political violence, showed no inconvenience in assassinating their victim’s
families and friends. For this reason, some North American journalists, referring to cocaine wars in southern Florida towards the end of the 1970s, stated: “Colombian cocaine traffickers brought to Miami a ferocious violence that U.S. order agents had never seen” (Gugliotta y Leen, 1990). Of course, violence cannot last long as a comparative advantage; it is enough to be more brutal in order to displace from the market him who controls it.

If it is accepted that things occurred, in general terms, as have been so far described, it is then possible to establish some of the conditions, which determined the fact that Colombia became the world center for drug trafficking. Until now, in general terms, efforts to explain the reason why Colombia reached this point have opted for very ample answers, which invoke immutable conditions such as the country’s geography or certain characteristics inherent to the nature of Colombians. No doubt, geography has played a certain role, but the determining factors are social. It is also impossible to talk about a nature or a global identity, which accounts for the multiple individual difference among the members of one society. Colombians, or rather, some Colombians, got to control gigantic international enterprises devoted to exporting drugs and violence as a consequence of different facts, some fortuitous, some deliberate.

In the beginning, between 1920 and 1940, drug trafficking consisted in introducing drugs in the country, by profiting from traditional smuggling networks, a phenomenon not different from what occurred in the rest of Latin America. Since the end of the 1940s, and during the 1950s, Andean countries became illegal drug exporters, a transformation in which nature had an influence, at least in two different ways. On the one hand, coca leaf was a traditional crop in the region, and poppies easily grew in the western mountains of South America. On the other hand, Andean countries were sufficiently close to the United States, as to have easy and cheap access to its market, but also sufficiently far away, so that the U.S. did not strongly pressure to end the trade, as was the case in Mexico. Evidently, the volume of illegal drugs that reached the U.S. from South America at that time was not very remarkable, and that is why the U.S. government neglected the problem and thus Latin American trafficker's networks were able to grow and strengthen.
During several years, Colombians had occupied subaltern positions within the trafficking networks managed by Cubans. This situation reversed through three subsequent stages. First, the increasing migration to the United States during the 1960s allowed for Colombians to create transnational drug trafficking networks and to directly start exportation to that country. In the second place, Colombian security forces eliminated independent foreign traffickers, thus favoring national exporters. And in the third place, Colombian criminals implemented unusual levels of violence, which allowed them to subordinate their Cuban counterparts. Chance then intervened: U.S. consumers started to demand enormous amount of cocaine, and the almost sole suppliers were Colombian traffickers, who in turn became immensely rich. Unfortunately, this economic success favored extremely violent criminals and Colombia had to suffer the consequences.

**PART TWO**

**THE NEW COLOMBIAN DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS**

During the most recent period, the trajectory of illegal drug production and exports has presented three clearly identified stages. Each one of these stages has shown a specific type of organization, dynamics and uneven effects upon the configuration of society and, especially, on Colombia’s political processes and the dynamics of violence.

*The first stage: "Marimba" from the Guajira Department*

There is evidence of the existence of marijuana fields in Magdalena Department, around the city of Santa Marta, since 1941 (Sáenz Rovner, 1996). As was mentioned before, the biggest fields with commercial ends appeared around 1955. According to an International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) report, in 1968 there were in Colombia "80,000 marijuana traffickers" (France Press cable originated in Lima, published in *El Tiempo*, September 19, 1968, quoted en Rosselli, vol. I, 1968), although this is definitely quite exaggerated. The national press gathered some sporadic information about marijuana seizures and clandestine
flights in Guajira in 1972, but it was not until 1974 that this topic received permanent journalistic coverage (Vélez, Tamayo and Pérez, 1980). Since then there was an exponential growth of marijuana production and exports.

During the boom in the sixties and seventies, marijuana was mainly produced at the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, towards the south of the Guajira peninsula. Its most notable promoters were former local liquor, cigarette and fabrics smugglers, who, stimulated by U.S. technicians and buyers, encouraged peasants and settlers to grow, dry and pack the grass. The quality of the crop, the *Santa Marta Golden*, forced a rapid demand rise, and marijuana became an important revenue source for the region.

In different degrees, a good portion of the population of these regions benefited from marijuana trade, which even displaced traditional crops such as coffee and cotton. The marijuana boom was a social phenomenon, but the conditions that fostered it responded to a specific conjuncture. Thus, when such conditions receded, both marijuana fields and the capitals produced by its trade evaporated. This boom, which allowed for Colombia to become, for a short period of time, the main producer of marijuana destined to the U.S. market, was a cause both of the "Buccaneer Campaign", launched by DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) in Jamaica, in 1974, and the Mexican government's "Permanent Campaign," which introduced the use of *paraquat* for fumigating marijuana fields since 1977 (Lupsha, 1990). Nevertheless, all along, U.S. traffickers were in control both of transportation to the United States and commercialization inside U.S. territory.

Even though marijuana cultivation did not significantly spread throughout the country, therefore not involving large numbers of individuals, the haughty attitudes, excesses and proud behavior --at times touching on aggression, exhibited by individuals involved in the trade, were revolting for the members of the traditional higher classes. Qualifying phrases, such as "emerging class," used by some of the more conspicuous representatives of the dominant classes to describe these late comers in some social scenes, describes, at least in part, the reaction provoked by marijuana traffickers (Camacho, 1988). This type of reaction illustrates the attitudes of some sectors of the dominant classes towards the increasing
modernization of Colombian society and its concomitant upward social mobility. For many of these sectors, which took on the label of "submerging class", these processes threatened the existence of a traditional order in which positions of power and privilege were awarded as a result of lineage and ancestry rather than capacity or personal merit.

The responses of the traditional dominant classes, related to the social and cultural order, nevertheless, did not conform to those of the State or the economic system. On the contrary, the official policy towards the increasing pressure to nationalize foreign currency expressed itself in the creation of the so-called "sinister teller", a mechanism through which the central bank exchanged dollars for pesos without concern for their origin, "no questions asked". With this practice, the State itself contributed to institutionalize the laundering of dollars produced by marijuana exports, but also those from traditional smuggling and later on, cocaine. From another perspective, not few Colombian businessmen considered the new fortunes of traffickers as an opportunity to engage in good business. Thus, some financial institutions lent themselves to the laundering of the new capitals. Others took advantage and sold properties to the new millionaires, who paid in cash, in dollars placed in foreign countries and therefore avoiding legal registry and taxes. It was thus that buying land and real estate became the most salient forms of laundering. Still others provided both their renown and expertise as figureheads, attempting to bestow some kind of respectability upon the newly enriched. In this sense, an evident ambiguity in the way traditional dominant classes dealt with the emerging class was configured. Nevertheless, only very few marijuana exporters became true rational and calculating businessmen. Their conspicuous consumerism and squandering determined the fact that their fortunes were only partially accumulated and/or recycled in other activities. Once the boom of exports was over, the great majority of them returned to their original status.

The marijuana boom was short. At the beginning of the 1980s, the U.S. government launched its “war on drugs.” Immediately after, U.S. police departments increased their efforts at interdiction of marijuana, both in the domestic front of distribution and consumption and the foreign one of production and exportation (Bertram et al., 1996; Baum, 1997; Gardner, 2000). Confiscation on the part of the U.S. Coastal Guard and the U.S.
Customs Service started to diminish in 1981. The price of marijuana in the Colombian market also started to go down, and this is why it is not daring to assume that the boom reached its end on that year. The decisive factor in such termination was the preference, on the part of consumers, for stronger marijuana varieties, such as the *sinsemilla*, which they could grow, by using hydroponic techniques, at home. This was definitive, since marijuana's great volume and characteristic smell made its detection quite easy during international transit. Thus, in spite of Colombian marijuana's price reduction, which attained levels much more inferior than those of Mexican or U.S. produced grass, the national product participation in the U.S. market receded throughout the 1980s, to become almost marginal (Gómez, 1998, y Reuter, 1993).

During this decade of 1970, a heated debate around the possibility of legalizing marijuana developed in Colombia. Even if it was clear that what was at stake was the legalization of revenues resulting from marijuana exports and the consequent attack on corrupt practices associated with its laundering (Anif, 1979). In spite of the fact that the marijuana boom did not last long --less than a decade--, its effects upon Colombian society and its relationship to drug trafficking were lasting. In particular, the marijuana boom determined the framework within which the Colombian discussion about drug penalization and legalization has taken place. Given the nature of the problem and the interests which were at stake, many analysts have argued that this debate fostered in Colombia a certain permissiveness around production and exportation of illegal drugs. In this occasion, the U.S. government, by way of its ambassador, expressed its radical opposition to any attempt at legalization, and thus buried this possibility.

But the debate focused on marijuana, failing to recognize the importance that cocaine had already attained. And what is worse, the debate was only concerned with one aspect of drug traffickers --their being drug smugglers--, neglecting their character as producers and exporters of violence. For this reason, during the 1980s, by the time when it became clear that national conditions, and especially international conditions, made it impossible to considerate drug legalization, and even less trafficker legalization, Colombian society had been feeding
the hopes of legalization on the part of the most violent traffickers. They then turned their weapons against those who, in their opinion, had deceived them.

In synthesis, the irrational character of the agents involved, the technical difficulties related to marijuana transportation, the frequent captures, U.S. production, international competitiveness and the politics of the U.S. government, were the factors that conjugated in the waning of the marijuana business. In this way, marijuana became another instance of the many cases of short cycle agrarian economies that have characterized Colombian economic history (Tovar, 1999). Its main effect was the stimulus to the invasion of lands poorly fit for agriculture but environmentally very rich of the Sierra Nevada and other regions, and the conversion of huge forest areas in agrarian fields, with the obvious adverse consequences on the region’s ecology. There remains. Today there is some marijuana production in Colombia, although it is languorous. Several authorities and experts calculate that around 5,000 hectares are nowadays covered with marijuana fields.

Second stage: The “cartels” and the drug-lords

Cocaine exports began to develop at the beginning of the 1970s. This was a much more lucrative business, which in the hands of more audacious, rational and organized businessmen soon acquired great dimensions. Those cocaine business pioneers were also expert smugglers, mainly from the Antioquia Department (Cañón, 1994; Arango y Child, 1984); very soon the trade grew with the presence of other delinquents from the Valle del Cauca region. As illegal drug consumption shows historical cycles of boom and descent (Musto, 1993), the activity of Colombian drug traffickers coincided with an accelerated demand rise in the U.S., which started an unusual process of accumulation of enormous amounts of money in the hands of the few businessmen involved.

Many invested locally, in the banking system, construction or industry, and thus tried to build a respectable cover. Others, on the contrary, followed patterns similar to their ancestors' and devoted themselves, in extravagant and conspicuous consumerism, to invest in land and horses, thus reinforcing their peasant origins (Arango, 1988). The main difference with
respect to their predecessors was that the sums of money these new traffickers received were far superior. Many anecdotes and testimonies show how some of these traffickers kept part of their fortunes in gold ingots and bills that, unused and permanently exposed to humidity would rot. In other words, they received far much more than they could handle.

Although some scholars have identified several organizations of cocaine traffickers, two of them became the focal points around which most of the business revolved. The so-called Medellin and Cali "cartels" got to control, in the experts' opinion, more than 70% of the Colombian exports during the decade of 1980 and half way through the 1990s. Other less important organizations gravitated around them, and very few independent ones achieved great commercial success.

The differences between this stage and the previous one are noteworthy: the new traffickers directly inserted themselves in an international market, in as much as they imported raw materials from Peru and exported to the United States, be it directly or through Mexican and other Central American intermediaries. And on the other hand, the immense revenue overflowed the national spaces for laundering, which forced them to establish businesses in fiscal paradises of the Caribbean, the State of Florida and Europe. Organizing distribution in U.S. cities also meant great entrepreneurial efforts, many of which involved significant deployment of violence. (Gugliotta and Leen, 1990; Thoumi, 1994).

At the national level there were also big differences with respect to the previous stage. The incomparably greater mass of capitals involved lead to the creation of more complex organizations and the close support of managers, lawyers, economists and other experts in dealing with large sums. And in their conspicuous spending, drug-lords also surrounded themselves with architects, decorators and even cultural counselors. They thus created vast networks, which allowed them to develop the business and gain a certain degree of respectability.

An American author describes, from DEA data, the main organizations in the following manner:
In Colombia there are some ten core organizations active at any one time. Each is capable of directing the movement of large amounts of cocaine from source to consuming countries and the reflow of the large illicit proceeds. Together, they handle more than sixty percent of the cocaine reaching North American and European markets… These core organizations directly employ a relatively small number of people. They draw upon more than 100 contractors that specialize in such functions as obtaining base from source countries, processing base into HCL, transporting HCL to market, laundering money, providing enforcement, etc. These specialized organizations range in size from less than ten to several hundred. Sometimes they link up among themselves. Both the core and the specialized groups hire from a pool of 1,000 or so skilled free-lancers such as pilots, chemists and assassins, and a much larger number of part time workers who are employed as guards, laborers and surveillants (Zabludoff, 1994)³.

The political options

One of the most prominent features of this stage has to do with the dimensions, modalities and political impact of the new type of drug trafficking, which took shape in different ways. The first and most noteworthy was the collective reaction of the organizations' bosses when a relative of one of the Medellín leaders was kidnapped by the guerrilla organization M-19 in November of 1981. After a meeting in Medellín, the main cartel leaders organized the group called MAS (Muerte a Secuestradores, Death to Kidnappers), with the purpose of liberating the kidnapped woman and "teach a lesson" to the authors. Very quickly, this organization assumed such dynamics, that it surpassed its initial aim of fighting kidnapping, and became an ultra-rightist armed force whose main task was protecting traffickers' lands, especially in the Magdalena Medio region. It also aimed at eliminating the FARC front that had established a stronghold in the region and become a local power. MAS, further encouraged by other rural landowners, became the basis for the creation of the powerful Colombian paramilitary movement, which later on became an important political armed force. At a certain point, MAS even intended to become a political party, MORENA (Movimiento de
Renovación Nacional, National Renovation Movement), recalling the experience of El Salvador and the ARENA Movement.

A second way of becoming involved in politics is related to the decision, on the part of some of the drug-lords, to participate, in a direct and personal manner, in the publicly elected corporations. One of them, Carlos Lehder, organized his own movement, Movimiento Latino Nacional (National Latino Movement), a blurry mixture of nationalism, populism and Adolf Hitler affinity, which actually obtained some representatives in municipal councils in the department of Quindío. Lehder launched his movement with pomp and circumstance, quickly getting attention and suspicion on the part of political leaders and journalists who were fearful and curious about the new competitor. Lehder's identity as a drug trafficker was publicly known when in a radio interview he acknowledged this role, thus eliminating any doubt with respect to the origins of his fortune. Some time before, he had already given signals of his philanthropy by openly giving out money, publicly supporting civic and social causes and building a hotel whose magnitude left few doubts about its enormous investment costs.

Pablo Escobar, on his part, also felt the need of projecting himself in the political arena. After having invested in civic and philanthropic activities in Medellín and neighboring Envigado, he searched his election at the Chamber of Representatives, in the shadow of some traditional politicians, a support he achieved with relative ease. Nevertheless, as was the case with Lehder, Escobar’s megalomania condemned him. Indeed, he did not foresee the reaction of some political sectors, which considered his presence in Congress as the invasion of the so-called "hot moneys" in the sphere of representative democracy. Several congressmen attached to these sectors developed a frontal attack against Escobar, and in a very short period of time succeeded in depriving him of his parliamentary investiture.

His reaction was a quite violent one. Even if during the process he attempted to recuse his detractors and relate them to "hot moneys", shortly after he opted for physically eliminating his stronger accuser, Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. With this action, Escobar
relinquished his parliamentary pretensions and, in exchange, he chose direct confrontation with what he would later on label "Colombian political oligarchy".

A third way of doing politics closely related to Escobar's trajectory, revolved around the rejection of extradition. The treaty subscribed between Colombia and the United States had remained undefined and there was no apparent political decision to revive it. Lara Bonilla’s death and president Betancur’s decision to reactivate extradition to the U.S. of individuals accused by that country’s authorities provoked a change in this situation. A first reaction from the part of traffickers was to seek a negotiation with the government: they met in Panama with the Attorney General and former president Alfonso López. In this occasion, the traffickers offered to end the business and to help pay Colombia’s foreign debt in exchange for a benign treatment on the part of the government. President Betancur, as might be expected, rejected this proposal. Thus the door was closed for an eventual negotiation, leaving way for the option of violent reaction against extradition by the drug-lords.

The confrontational character of this dynamics increased when Escobar and his allies opted for a different strategy and proceeded to group themselves under a new organization, “The extraditable” (“Los extraditables”). This organization unraveled a wave of violence and terrorism that shattered the country during the second half of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. The period was signed with kidnappings and murders of judges, members of national security corps and politicians, and dynamite assaults where the victims were many civilians detached from the confrontation.

One of the forms of struggle was the continuous pressure, in 1991, on the members of the Assembly whose mission was to write a new Constitution. The pressure was so intense, that the Assembly decided to include an article in the new Constitution whereby extradition of Colombian nationals was prohibited. Once this goal achieved, Escobar turned himself in, but nevertheless he was able to impose his conditions, demanding a particular prison, guards and especial locative conditions, which would guarantee not only his personal security, but also his ability to keep his business going (Escobar, 2000). Later, after Escobar’s death, this article was abolished from the Constitution.
This political process had several noteworthy consequences: on the one part, it reinforced the "godfather" nature of Escobar's organization (Naylor, 1995), in which he assumed a leadership based on the confrontation with the State and his power of intimidation over his associates. This leadership, besides embodying the acknowledgment that Escobar was the greatest cocaine exporter in the region, was based on the fact that he himself had directly joined in the struggle, supposedly in the name of all the exporters. Due to his enormous financial needs, Escobar compellingly demanded huge contributions from his peers. Some of them, feeling that they were being extorted, reacted leaving him alone or even searching to build alliances to fight him. This is to say, contradictions inherent to his leadership ended up creating new enemies for Escobar, even among his former comrades. Many of them organized themselves around the so-called Pepes (Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar, Pursued by Pablo Escobar) and launched a total war against the drug-lord, whose range of action was reduced, parts of his property destroyed and his closer partners eliminated. Escobar saw himself quickly involved in several battlefronts that, in spite of his immense power, surpassed his warlike capacities. The result was his death in an action by the National Police backed by DEA.

Escobar's leadership was not necessarily a response to needs inherent to the trade. In fact, traffickers who had consolidated their organizations were able to export their goods in an independent fashion. Unified action and godfathership, i.e., the consolidation of a specific type of organized crime, was not necessary for the business. But it was essential for the violent confrontation with the State. The Cali cartel bosses understood it this way, and instead of joining in the confrontation, preferred to penetrate the State by financing politicians' campaigns and buying their loyalty. This strategy was so successful that they were able to finance the presidential race in 1994, when Ernesto Samper was elected. During the debate in Congress, it was denounced that nearly one third of its members, besides a number of high rank State officials, had some kind of relationship with the Cali drug-lords. Several congressmen, as well as high officials, lost their investiture and went to prison.
This alternative way of doing politics was efficient as long as the Cali traffickers were able to keep their political payroll, which they achieved thanks to two strategies. In the first place, their relationships with politicians, officials and State security agents were kept in a certain level of discretion, so that it was difficult both to initiate juridical processes and to enforce sanctions. In this way, these relationships were uncovered only through rumor. In the second place, especially with respect to the Rodriguez Orejuela brothers, whose role in Valle was similar to Escobar's in Antioquia --they acted as godfathers, they were careful enough to try to build an image of legal businessmen, complying citizens and local benefactors. Some of the Valle traffickers achieved a strong insertion in some cities of the region, in which they found, if not complicity, at least high degrees of acceptance or tolerance (Camacho, 1993). Furthermore, not few business people from this region organized joint activities with the drug-lords, looking to obtain extraordinary economical benefits. Actually, the fact that the heads of this organization were captured has implied a strong financial deterioration for some of those businessmen.

But when the Rodriguez brothers and their main partners aimed at the highest target, the presidency, a reversal of fortune occurred. The pressure exerted by the president himself, together with unyielding demands from the U.S. authorities, lead to the declaration of war against them by the police, an institution traditionally accused of corruption and many of whose members were at the service of the Cali cartel. The result was the capture of the top members of the cartel and the voluntary turning in of some second rank participants.

The costs of this political process were extremely high for the country. As part of the rapidly increasing pressures it exerted on Colombia, the U.S. government took retaliatory measures towards the national government. On the one hand, the Colombian president lost his visa. On the other hand, during two consecutive years, Colombia was decertified, a tool the U.S. uses to punish those governments that apparently fail to cooperate in the war on drugs. Thus a double threat against Colombian institutional stability was consolidated: on the one part, the corruption expressed in the complicity of politicians and officials with traffickers; and on the other, Colombia's international image suffered a dramatic and unprecedented deterioration.
Now, the effects of the actions of the big traffickers were not only political. Their struggles, especially in Medellín, also resulted in the construction of two social types that would become the epitomes of Colombian violence. The first one is the sicario, a poor youngster, mainly from Medellín, who for a sum of money takes care of eliminating cartel opponents or enemies. In this way, debtors, traitors, noted politicians, judges, judicial officials and members of State intelligence and police corps were eliminated. The generalized presence of sicarios in Medellín turned the city into one of the world's most violent, and it developed accelerated process of stigmatization of its poor youth.

Traffickers were not the only ones to contribute to this process. At the beginning of the 1980s, as a result of peace negotiations with the Betancur administration, the M-19 guerrilla attempted to expand its action to some cities, creating "freedom camps," organizations of poor youngsters whom the guerrilla organization intended to train. When negotiations failed to succeed and the M-19 was forced to retreat into rural areas, these youngsters became gangsters susceptible of being hired by the highest bidder. Thus, traffickers found that part of the way had been paved for them, and that the M-19 had provided the labor they required to carry on their struggle.

The second social type to emerge in the process is the paramilitary. Originated around the MAS, the paramilitary bands soon expanded to become extreme rightist armies that acted, in some cases under tutelage or complicity of State armed organisms (Medina, 1990). Not few trafficker landowners took advantage of this opportunity and organized their own private bands. Nevertheless, the need to combat the guerrilla organizations grew in such way, that thanks to the generous financing of landowners --traffickers or not--, they have become, as we will further see, one of the main enemy of the insurgency.

One of the most important forms of politicization of drug trafficking did not emerge from the trader's actions. The U.S. government, through Ambassador Lewis Tambs, decidedly contributed in conferring it political status and thus feeding confrontation, both from guerrilla groups and traffickers against the State. Indeed, in April 1984, a police squad found an enormous cocaine laboratory in the southwestern jungle region of the country. The
ambassador seized the opportunity to publicly announce that FARC guerrilla members protected this laboratory, which in his opinion was a final proof that this organization had ties with traffickers. He then forged the term "narcoguerrilla", through which he meant to slander the guerrilla, to ignore its character as an insurgent political force and to stimulate confrontational politics as an alternative to negotiation, a political strategy that President Betancur seemed to favor. Thus, the ambassador, followed by the media and the State armed forces, and with definite support from some U.S. Congressmen, constructed a real fact from what was nothing more than rumors. His construction was based on the fact that the guerrilla group indeed received large amounts of money from contributions imposed on both direct producers and intermediaries. This tax ("gramaje") thus became the supposed evidence of organic and political ties between FARC and peasants, on the one hand, and traffickers on the other. Neither Pablo Escobar's declaration that he was a zealous foe of guerrilla groups, nor the fact that, along with other traffickers, he was organizing and financing paramilitary groups precisely meant to military fight guerrillas, were enough to counter this offensive (Camacho, 1988).

Years later, during the Samper administration, and after the financing of his campaign by the Cali traffickers was known, when retiring from his position, the director of DEA in Colombia poked the fire once again. He gave statements to the media in which he labeled Colombia as a "narcodemocracy". The politicization process of drug trafficking thus found new strength and furthered international pressure.

In synthesis, the "political phase" of drug trafficking was diverse, erratic and self-destructive. It is impossible to speculate as to what would have been the fate of traffickers had they decided not to participate in the political arena. They would have probably kept their business going, but sooner or later confrontation with the State would have become unavoidable. The pressure of public opinion, together with U.S. demands, would sooner or later force confrontation with the Colombian government. The fact that some traffickers did opt for becoming enemies of the State and others for acting as false friends (Orozco, 1992), eventually proved insufficient for the survival of traditional trafficking organizations. No doubt, the enormous accumulation of capital in so few hands was overwhelming for small
delinquents who saw themselves transformed in petty kings in their regions and in actual threats to State stability, having accumulated so much power and such capacity to corrupt, finance and buy both property and consciences. "They aimed too high", and got a conclusive reply: many surviving members of this kind of organization are in jail.

*Drug traffic and society*

These political and violent sequels were not the only ones to derive from Colombian drug trafficking. Indeed, traffickers' investments and expenses irrigated some sectors of society, a fact that fostered a certain degree of upward social mobility. Especially with respect to capital laundering, not few people had access to important earnings as a consequence of their belonging to specialized social networks. Both acknowledged businessmen and financial firms, as well as new and competent traders, were thus able to improve their fortunes, at the same time that they notably contributed to a process whereby Colombian society became less "aristocratic" and more plebeian. This is turn, ratified the old fears on the part of the "submerging class", of being invaded or replaced by the "emerging class."

With respect to production processes, especially in coca growing regions, these witnessed the enormous flow of labor for cultivation, harvesting and parts of the processing of raw materials. Some of the producers were able to make enough funds to settle as landowners and coca growers. Others just survived as paid harvesters of the leaf. Coca, then, also stimulated a horizontal social mobility that has converted the southwestern slopes of the country into highly populated areas, with the foreseeable negative consequences upon the ecology of an extremely rich biological reserve inappropriate for agriculture.

This is to say that in spite of the fact that drug trafficking did stimulate these ascending mobility processes, it also decisively contributed to a further concentration of property, especially in the agrarian sector. Many of the former traffickers had a peasant origin, and by buying land they enhanced their renown among their fellow peasants; but at the same time they were laundering their fortunes and assuring their future. Many traditional landowners saw the opportunity of selling their land, be it because they did not have the money they
needed to make it productive, or because pressure from guerrilla groups prevented them from personally tending to them. The result has thus been a kind of agrarian counter-reformation. In fact, even in the case of dead traffickers, the State has been unable to recuperate those lands and distribute them in order to facilitate some kind of property democratization.

*From drug-lords to "traquetos": the present situation*⁴

As a result of the dismantling of the drug cartels, the structure of trafficking has experienced radical changes. And these changes have coincided with transformations in other phases of the business. According to police intelligence sources, in Colombia there are between two hundred and fifty and three hundred trafficking organizations. Their leaders are some of the second rank cartel members: bodyguards, accountants, technicians, gunmen, former leaders' relatives, or simply new drug businessmen who economically benefited from the destruction of the cartels.

The new organizations are, besides, smaller, enclosed and clandestine, which means a lesser business management capacity and the need to abandon some of the most profitable aspects, such as retail distribution in some U.S. cities. The new traffickers have also been forced to develop new routes, international alliances, markets and export modalities.

These organizational changes have also coincided with central transformations of the business itself. The first one is the transfer of coca leaf production to Colombia. In part as an effect of eradication efforts in Peru and Bolivia --which include, especially in the former country, the capture and shooting down of small airplanes transporting coca base and paste--, Colombians opted for locally growing new varieties, more precocious. The result has been a substantial increase in coca growing area and therefore in exports. According to the most authoritative sources, the total cultivated area grew from 37,000 hectares in 1995 to 122,000 in 1999, and the potential production augmented from 60 to 520 tons (Rocha, 2000; State Department, 1999).
The second change has to do with the new type of alliance established with Mexican traffickers. Even though these contacts were already at work when old drug-lords were alive (Kenney, 2000), the new arrangements seem different. Indeed, the new exporters have decided to partially abandon distribution in U.S. territory, a task they have left to the Mexicans, who hold more extensive and efficient distribution networks. Besides, they have proceeded to negotiate with the Mexicans in kind, both reducing their revenue and also the risk of being captured by U.S. authorities.

As an expert on Mexican drug trade has pointed out,

“The dismantling of Colombia’s Cali group in 1995-1996 created new opportunities for Mexican traffickers, who began to develop their own wholesale and retail operations in the United States. Bypassing now-weakened Colombian operators, they also started forging direct links to coca leaf farmers and processing laboratories in Bolivia and Peru (Smith, 1999).

At the same time, some Peruvian traffickers have become independent from Colombians and have developed their own production and export networks (Lupsha, 1994). Thus Colombians are no longer the main direct suppliers for the U.S. market and, on the contrary, their position has become more and more subordinated to the Mexicans. There are also hints that Chilean, Argentinean and Brazilian markets are being increasingly supplied by Peruvian and Bolivian exporters. Nevertheless, Colombians keep a dominant role both as wholesalers for the Mexicans and in European markets, for which they have established alliances with trafficking organizations, especially from Eastern Europe.

They have also opted for diversifying their routes, now privileging the use of the Pacific Ocean, less populated and less watched than the Caribbean. At least for some time, innovation will benefit them: they have gained an advantage over those countries' authorities.

All these changes not only reflect an important capacity, on the part of delinquents, to adapt to new business conditions and to learn new survival strategies. They also become illustrative
of an enormous paradox, since while Colombian production evidently grow and worldwide drug use does not recede, Colombian organizations seem more atomized and therefore weaker.

With respect to their attitudes and behavior, these new traffickers seem to have learned their predecessors' lessons, and now avoid making the same mistakes. They do not attempt, at least in an open manner, to meddle in the political process, even if some of them can interfere with the local administrations in their regions. Some of them are more educated than the former traffickers, and have developed several strategies, methods and techniques aimed at making the business more dynamic, sneaking away from law enforcement (Kenney, 1999) and achieving a better insertion in their respective regions. This means avoiding sumptuous and accusing consumer habits, conforming to behavior patterns which do not make them excessively visible, and developing personal presentation techniques which identify them with legal businessmen. Great estates with luxurious buildings fine horse exhibitions, expensive cars and beautiful women now seem to be practices from the past. They were a kind of magnet for attracting Colombian and U.S. authorities.

These changes are of interest in several ways. In the first place, they throw doubts about those hypotheses whereby drug traffic has been thought of as a unitary organization combining business with a pretension to conquer political power, and in this sense as a serious threat to national security and democracy. From the preceding description it is clear that the new drug trafficking organizations, being independent, small, clandestine and with a limited capacity to act, are above all economic delinquents and would not aspire to gain political power or dominate the State. The most remarkable evidence of this is the seeming decrease in opposition to extradition: new traffickers apparently prefer to avoid being identified, captured and remitted to the U.S. than openly oppose extradition through violent means.6

Another interesting element is the need to acknowledge that the nature of the organizations does not play a fundamental role in drug trafficking dynamics. Be they big godfather-like organizations, or small or medium size independent entrepreneurs, the new picture shows a
strong fragmentation accompanied by a great adapting capacity to those conditions created by the actions of national or international authorities, the degrees of centralization of corruption in different countries, and the growing dynamics of international markets.

"Narco-landowners" and the paramilitary

Drug trafficking still plays a central role in the Colombian political process, even though the latter is not directly related to the new type of drug export organizations. Indeed, paramilitary groups, organized by the cartels in order to defend their rural properties in guerrilla zones, grew to become enormous armed bands that soon surpassed the agrarian interests of land owning drug-lords. After being trained by British and Israeli mercenaries in aspects such as settling disputes and eliminating enemies, the numerous paramilitary organizations started to unify around the ruthless struggle against guerrilla organizations.

Though some of these bands are still at the service of drug-lords, some others have assumed a dynamics that has turned them into big right wing armies relatively independent from the drug-lords and which conduct a struggle against subversion, in defense of the State and social order.

The paramilitary have then passed from the private sphere to the public one (Cubides, 1998), and have become one of the main axes of armed confrontation in Colombia. Moreover, this autonomization process of the main paramilitary organization has even allowed its principal military boss to publicly declare himself against drug trafficking. This, nevertheless, has not become an obstacle for traffickers, together with other landowners and extreme right political forces, to continue to finance the paramilitary.

The forms of demand

This phenomenon of the paramilitary has been fueled by the fact that regions where their armies have settled have also become cocaine and poppy growing areas. This has provoked a new process in which the paramilitary have become a second coca revenue demanding force,
next to FARC guerrilla groups. The paramilitary demand shows therefore two faces: on the one hand, they extract revenue from taxing big rural landowners, and on the other they obtain profit from direct production in areas under their power.

Thus on top of a growing demand in the international consumer market, three main internal sources of demand and dynamics of drug trafficking in Colombia --and, simultaneously, of armed conflict-- have consolidated. These three sources have been, in the first place, the traffickers themselves who, stimulated by the dynamics of the business, keep their own growing fields or buy raw materials from peasants. In the second place stands the FARC guerrilla group, with excellent profits from production taxes, destined to financing the war. In the third place, the paramilitary. Coca has thus become the main stimulus both for the business of drug trafficking and the armed conflict that crosses over Colombian society. In this sense, the democratic future of the country depends on the possibility that it may eliminate the phenomenon that better characterizes its own present historical situation and determines the possibility that it may become a less violent and more democratically ruled society.
NOTES

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1 Most probably, there is an error, since the agents involved must have belonged to FBN (Federal Bureau of Narcotics) and not FBI (Federal Bureau of Intelligence).

2 “Marimba” is Colombian slang for marijuana. The Guajira Department is located in the northern stretch of Colombian territory.

3 In his testimony to U.S. justice, Guillermo Pallomari, systems and accounting chief for the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers organization, stated that the organizations had "divisions", each with its area of responsibility: intelligence, political, financial, armed or security, legal and drug trafficking. See Michael Kenney, “DOCUMENTATION. A Synopsis of Guillermo Pallomari’s Testimony in the 1997 Operation Cornerstone Trial of Michael Abbell & William Moran,” Submission to Documentation Section, Transnational Organized Crime. The best analysis of the Colombian traffic organizations in terms of their entrepreneurial character is the work of Krauthausen and Sarmiento (1991)

4 "Traquetos" is slang for cartel gunmen who were in charge of drug-lord security and foe elimination. The expression has generalized to include several types of second rank members of trafficking organizations.

5 Known annual exportation of Colombian cocaine to Mexico has increased from 1 ton in 1995 to 30 tons in 1990, 28 tons in 1994 and more than 65 tons since 1995 (Rocha, 2000).

6 This does not exclude, of course, the fact that some traffickers seek to pressure the judges in charge of their extradition processes. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that these judges' lives are threatened. Nevertheless, the possibility that traffickers succeed in their objective of paralyzing justice is much more remote than it was during the last decade.
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