

# **The informal governance of the drug trade: Violence, social organization and cocaine production in the Chapare, Bolivia.**

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**Abstract:** Bolivia is a drug production and trafficking center and yet it exhibits far less violence than other countries that form part of cocaine's commodity chain across Latin America. With reference to a case study from the Chapare, a coca-growing and drug processing zone in central Bolivia, this article considers why this is the case. Building from the literature on embedded economies and the 'subsistence ethic' of peasant communities, it shows how the drug trade is part of a local moral order that prioritizes kinship, reciprocal relations and community well-being and in doing so restricts the possibilities for violence. In addition, the agricultural unions act as a parallel form of governance, providing a framework for enforcing illicit contracts and the peaceful resolution of disputes. It is argued that illicit crop and drug production can be understood as a form of autonomous grassroots development. This article draws on more than three years of ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2005 and 2019.

**Keywords:** Coca, cocaine, Chapare, Bolivia, peasant, indigenous, embedded economy

## **Introduction**

February 2014. Umberto had coca seedlings ready to plant - but he needed more help. Bouncing along cobbled roads through banana and orange plantations on Umberto's Chinese-made motorbike, we visited the houses of his relatives and friends. Eventually we found his nephew, Angel, outside his house, which was built from rough cut planks, had beaten mud floors and was topped by a corrugated iron roof. Angel agreed to join us within the hour – he had to – Umberto was his godfather (*Padrino*) after all. Umberto told Angel that he was going on another 'trip' and asked if he wanted to come along. Angel understood the subtext immediately and expressed muted interest – all the while glancing suspiciously at the Gringo (me).

Umberto and I then drove to his five-hectare farm. We parked the bike in the dense undergrowth, and then hiked for half an hour along a narrow, muddy path and forded several shallow streams. When we arrived, we took a break in a makeshift shack, to chew coca leaf and drink soda. I was curious to find out why Angel seemed so cautious about participating in the upcoming trip. After some cajoling, Umberto explained, that the phrase ‘going on a trip’ meant that Angel would be processing cocaine paste – the first step to refining pure cocaine. As Umberto warmed to the topic, he invited me to visit his drug processing workshop but then he laughed, warning that I might end up on the TV show ‘locked -up abroad’.

Umberto first got involved in the drug trade while he was in high school. His uncle, who I will call Jonas, employed him to soak shredded coca leaf in solvents to extract the cocaine alkaloid. On occasion, Umberto would transport cocaine paste to Santa Cruz, travelling on the bus with two kilos stashed in his bag. ‘If you carry one kilo - you get 100 dollars. It’s easy - there wasn’t a lot of control.’ He told me. When he was 20 years-old he transported five kilos of cocaine to Brazil via bus –for which he was paid \$800 per kilo. He crossed the border without incident but the taxi driver taking him to a cheap hotel was suspicious and reported him to the police. Umberto was locked up for two and a half years. He did not like Brazil. ‘They are very violent there ... they have cold blood’. He put two fingers in the air to imitate a gun and made a popping sound.

For Umberto, and others I spoke to, involvement in the cocaine trade was a mundane affair – a commonsense way to make money in a place where turning a profit from farming is tough, and few other opportunities exist. Umberto stressed: ‘it’s normal that people know about drugs, we all live from this, the country lives from this. We protect it ... It generates work.’ Umberto stressed that I should not think of him or his cousins as criminals but rather as small family-business owners. The drugs trade in Bolivia, he said, was nothing like Brazil: ‘here it is peaceful, we look after each other, We respect each other.’

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Cocaine is one of the most widely used illicit drugs in the world, with an estimated 18.2 million regular users (UNODC, 2018b: 29) and a turnover valued at up to \$169 Billion Dollars annually (Gutierrez, 2020: 1008). Consumers are concentrated in the U.S. and Europe, although markets

in Latin America<sup>1</sup>, Africa, Asia and Oceania are growing – representative of cocaine’s ‘shift south’ (Gootenberg, 2021). The drug is derived from the *Erythroxylum Coca* plant genus which Indigenous peoples in the Andes have consumed for at least 8,000 years (Dillehay et al., 2010). Users value coca’s properties as a mild stimulant and the plant is central to rituals from birth to death (Pearson, 2020). It is only when the cocaine alkaloid is extracted from the leaf and refined, that the coca leaf becomes a problem.

Bolivia is trapped at the very lowest rungs of the international drug trade. It is the world’s third largest producer of leaf and produces large quantities of low value cocaine paste and increasingly, pure cocaine too. In a 2019 interview, one retired top police official – who I call Dr Zambrana - told me that Bolivia’s annual production is around 34 metric tons, but the Economist newspaper reports a number as high as 254 MT (Economist, 2018). Bolivia is also a site for the transshipment and refining of Peruvian cocaine paste en route to markets in Brazil and Europe (Paredes, 2017). Nobody knows exactly how much money the business generates, but some journalists suggest that cocaine is Bolivia’s third largest export after hydrocarbons and mining (Schipani, 2010).

Illegal drugs are tied to organized crime, gangs, and high levels of violence (UNODC, 2019b: 99-101), and the countries along the main cocaine route from the Andes to the United States rank amongst the most murderous in the world (UNODC, 2019a: 16). And yet, while Bolivia is a drug production and trafficking center, it exhibits far less violence than other countries that form part of cocaine’s commodity chain (UNODC, 2020: 53). Bolivia’s murder rate of 6.3 per 100,000 is well below Mexico (25.8), Brazil (25) or Colombia (25) (Dalby and Carranza, 2019). In 2014, Bolivia had the fourth lowest Homicide rate in the whole of Latin America (AIN, 2014).

Police official Zambrana explained ‘This is not Mexico, this is not Brazil! We do not see extreme violence over the control of territory here. Occasionally we see the settling of scores (murders) but they are only ever isolated incidents.’ He went on to say that the Colombian emissaries of drug trafficking organizations, like doing business in Bolivia precisely because ‘...it is peaceful, this really is a business - violence is bad for business.’ This raises the question: What makes Bolivia different? Why does it have such low levels of violence? And what does Umberto mean when he says that compared to Brazil, ‘here we look after each other’?

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<sup>1</sup> Brazil is the second largest consumer of illegal drugs in the world and Argentina is experiencing ballooning domestic drug consumption, of ‘basuco’ a form of crack cocaine.

Interpretations differ as to why drugs trigger violence in some contexts but not in others. Researchers confirm rather the volume of drugs, the key factor is market destabilization (Durán-Martínez, 2017). Intensified state action against trafficking organizations leads to increased competition and territorial disputes (Lessing, 2017). Alongside the gangs (Fontes, 2018, Rodgers, 2015), the police are often a source of lethal violence (Denyer Willis, 2015). In some areas of Colombia it is the very presence of the state rather than its absence that has contributed to high levels of violent conflict (Ballvé, 2020). The drug trade, enforcement practices and generic drug ‘violence’ are sharply gendered – each affects men and women differently (Muehlmann, 2018). Rather than focusing on why violence occurs, I invert the focus to consider when it does not.

Self-serving, greedy, and single minded, in the popular imagination, criminals are the embodiment of the liberal bourgeois ideology, leading political scientists to draw on rational choice theory to understand extra-legal institutions of governance (Skarbek, 2014, Sobel and Osoba, 2009), including in the context of the cocaine trade (Kostelnik and Skarbek, 2013). These studies describe the rewards structure of criminal organizations - however such explanations only offer a partial account. They fail to give adequate weight to how people are embedded in specific places and adhere to local cultural norms and values. This is critical, because as social researchers have long known, ‘the economy’ is not separate from society (Polanyi, 1957), rather the two are always entwined, and local ideas about right and wrong shape individual behavior, and therefore the morality of any economic system (Thompson, 1971). Criminal activity, including the drugs trade, is no different it too is embedded in particular places and is shaped by, but also shapes, local culture and social dynamics (Bourgeois, 1995, Arias and Grisaffi, 2021, Gay, 2015).

Here, I present a case study from the Cochabamba Tropics (known as the Chapare), a coca-growing and drug processing zone in central Bolivia. I describe how most people who live in the Chapare are directly or indirectly involved in the illicit trade through growing, drying and commercializing coca leaf, processing cocaine paste, or smuggling. Building from the literature on embedded economies and the ‘subsistence ethic’ of peasant communities, I show how in the context of the drug trade, the mutual obligations that arise when people transact coca, precursor chemicals, cash or cocaine paste, tie them together into dense networks of debt and mutual dependency, and this creates a regulatory dynamic over space and time. The drug trade is part of a local moral order that prioritizes community well-being and in doing so restricts the possibilities for violence. In addition, the agricultural

unions act as a parallel form of governance, providing a framework for enforcing illicit contracts and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

This article draws on more than three years of ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2005 and 2019. Over that time, I collaborated with reporters at a local union run radio station and accompanied them almost daily. As well as observing union life, I entered more intimate spaces: working alongside farmers in their fields, going on fishing trips and participating in grassroots unions meetings, local celebrations and occasional all-night drinking sessions. As a young male I had privileged access to perspectives of other young men. I conducted dozens of interviews with coca farmers, drug workers, and local officials. Given the sensitive nature of the data all names have been changed apart from those of well-known public figures.

### **Embedded Economies**

July 2019, in the offices of Bolivia's Special anti-drug trafficking force (*Fuerza Especial de la Lucha Contra el Narco-traffico* or FELC-N), La Paz, Coronel Davila, then the director, dressed in olive trousers and a bomber jacket, explained that in contrast to neighboring countries, drug cartels – distinguished by their control over territory - do not operate in Bolivia. The local trade, he said, is run by family clans that specialize in one element of the trade - finance, processing, importing chemicals or smuggling - and they work together. 'The lack of violence is down to the culture - there is a low tolerance for violence here in Bolivia,' affirmed Davila. Freddy Monasterio, a senior drug policy official, echoed this perspective. He explained that the Chapare was settled by indigenous peasants from the highlands and that '...these cultures from the West prevent violence ... The settlers bought their traditions of reciprocity, equivalence and communal ideals with them, ....' He added, 'It's not like in your country ... there the more I have the happier I am - but here, the more I give the better I am'.

Wittingly or not, both Davila and Monasterio confirm the sociological argument that the economy can never be viewed as 'dis-embedded' from its social context. This idea stems from Karl Polanyi (1957: 243) who argued that people are not rational actors who operate in a de-personalized market context – and whose behaviors can be measured and modelled – because what we call 'the economy' is not easily distinguishable from the rest of their lives. Building from these foundations, E.P. Thompson (1971), James Scott (1977), and others

(Carrier, 2018, Arias and Grisaffi, 2021) have mobilized the concept of the ‘moral economy’ to highlight the inseparability of economic and social life.

The *substantivist* position is particularly relevant to the analysis of peasant livelihoods where work, subsistence, capital investments, profit and social reproduction are rolled into one productive unit –the family owned and run farm (Edelman, 2005). James Scott (1977), employed the ‘moral economy’ framework to argue that peasants are not driven by individualistic profit-maximizing rationality rather they seek to reduce risk and ensure subsistence. At the core of this ‘subsistence ethic’ are two values, the ‘right to subsistence’ and the ‘norm of reciprocity’ as the foundation for agricultural production and interpersonal conduct (Scott, 1977: 167). For the present analysis, reciprocity is fundamental because as Mauss (1990) argued, almost 100 years ago - it contributes to building group solidarity. In non-state societies, exchange relations represent an early form of social contract to transcend the Hobbesian Chaos.

The Andean region is an iconic case of Scott’s ‘subsistence ethic’. Reciprocity, Allen (1988: 93) asserts, is ‘a pump at the heart of Andean life’, as social relationships are grounded in constant everyday exchanges of goods, labor, and other forms of intra-household assistance – referred to by the Quechua term ‘ayni’ (Mayer, 2002: 506). Building reciprocity networks and maintaining co-operation are vital to agricultural production and to household survival. Debt, in this context, should not be understood in the moralizing language of the west (Graeber, 2014). These are horizontal networks between neighbors and kin, and to be entangled with one another through debt is the very basis of sociality (Van Vleet, 2008). Reciprocity is gendered: women bear most of the responsibility for maintaining community and kinship relationships (Maclean, 2010). These cultural practices should not be romanticized, as they can also be patriarchal and exploitative (Canessa, 2012, Harvey, 1994).

The counterpoint to cooperation is ‘*envidia*’ or jealousy – a constant in Andean communities (Van Vleet, 2003). Foster (1965) argued that in peasant villages there exists a strong belief that affluence comes at the expense of someone else, he referred to this zero-sum worldview as the ‘limited good’. June Nash (Nash, 1994: 17-20) uses the concept as a central theme in discussing her experience working with displaced indigenous peasants and tin miners in Bolivia – the very people who migrated to the Chapare to grow coca in the 1980s. To mitigate self-interest, Andean communities strictly enforce an ethic of equivalence –anyone who gets ahead is forced to reinvest surplus back into the community. An example is the fiesta cargo complex common in the highlands – individuals sponsor elaborate celebrations –indebting the sponsor for many years (Abercrombie, 1998). Levelling

mechanisms to minimize class differences and check individual power can be found in all peasant communities (Wolf, 2001: 201).

Andean peasants do not live in isolation nor are they stuck in time (Starn, 1991). Peasant communities face dispossession (Borras et al., 2012), proletarianization (Martínez Valle, 2017) and internal stratification (Zhang and Donaldson, 2010). But peasants have also proven resilient to market expansion, developing strategies to either avoid markets or to engage them on their own terms (Van der Ploeg, 2010). Agricultural social and cultural relations also give shape to contemporary patterns of capitalist production, as Marston (2020) shows in relation to Bolivian miners who maintain close ties to their communities of origin and transplant their rural customs to the mining context.

All of this is to say that just because peasants are integrated into global markets, does not mean that the ‘subsistence ethic’ and related moral economies wither away. In the Andes cooperative and reciprocal forms of organization coexist with market-oriented strategies, to create what Walsh-Dilley (2013) refers to as ‘hybrid economic spaces’. Faas (2017: 410) goes further to argue that Andean populations have adapted these strategies to new contexts, including development programs, social and political movements and state practice.

When it comes to analyzing social and economic life in the Chapare, people who are considered to be *jaqui*, or ‘good people’ are those tied together through quotidian exchange relationships which demonstrate loyalty and care toward people and place. Given that the very same peasant farmers who grow coca- are also involved in drug production and trafficking, it is reasonable to assume that this illicit activity is also structured by some of the same principals outlined above. In what follows, I show how the local drug trade both builds upon but also transforms these relationships – and how they attenuate violence and maintain stability.

### **Coca, Cocaine and Colonization**

The Cochabamba Tropics, or the Chapare as it is commonly known, is one of Bolivia’s two principal coca-growing zones. It is a vast region, equivalent in size to New Hampshire or Wales. The population stands at just shy of 200,000 people, the majority migrants from the Cochabamba valleys and highland mining centers, many of them previously part of militant miners’ trade unions. Over 80 per cent of the local population self-identify as Quechua (PNUD, 2005: 302) and most people speak both Quechua and Spanish - but most often a mixture of the two - the proverbial ‘*Quechañol*’.

People from the highlands and valleys first settled the Chapare in the 1950s and 60s – partly as a result of US backed modernization programs that funded roads in the Amazonian lowlands (Gootenberg, 2018). Silvio Zavala, an overweight man in his early 70s with milky colored eyes – indicating cataracts, explained that he moved to the Chapare as a teenager in the 1960s, following his parents who were subsistence farmers in the high, arid *altiplano*. ‘Back then the land was free,’ he told me. ‘If you liked something, well then you just marked it out - and worked it. It was yours.’ Silvio and his family established a small farm on a plot measuring eight hectares, chopping down trees, burning scrub and planting maize, rice and some coca.

Silvio explained how it was a tough time, particularly as many settlers had no previous experience of warm weather tropical farming. People helped one another, relying on intra household mutual aid. ‘Ayni, it’s reciprocity. One day, I work for you - and another day you work for me - all with no pay. Back then everything was ayni ... There was a lot of solidarity, if someone built a house (from wood and palm thatch), everyone had to go to help’ said Silvio. Ayni most often refers to labor exchange, but in the Chapare it is also used to describe lending tools, gifting crates of beer and even the long-term loan of land. Significantly this is all transacted without the use of cash.

Given the lack of roads and market access, cultivation was for subsistence. Silvio explained: ‘in those times, people had anemia, the bellies of the kids were always swollen - the aim was just to survive’. Silvio’s family planted coca and this crop accounted for the bulk of their cash income, but he explained that the price was low. ‘We grew coca, it was the only thing that made sense - the only thing we could carry to Villa’ (the location of the nearest market town, a full day’s hike from the family’s land). At that time most of their coca crop was sold in the department of Potosí to supply miners who chewed it.

There was no state presence to speak of and it was up to the settlers to hack out a new life and society from the dense jungle. ‘We cut out our own roads, built our own schools, made our own laws’ he told me. ‘it was us... *we made the state present.*’ The so-called ‘colonizers’ or ‘pioneers’ formed into self-governing unions known as *sindicatos* (syndicates or agricultural unions) to solve collective problems. The unions took on the role of local governance and became the primary vehicle to address local needs from controlling land tenure and administering justice to funding and building public works.

The coca growers put strict conditions on who could join their unions, normally only including people they already knew. To this day the unions comprise extended kinship networks, people who used to be neighbors in the highlands and old friends. People describe

their grassroots union as being a community who care for one another. In Silvio's words, 'there was a lot of solidarity, everyone was equal, we worked together'

### **The Growth of the Cocaine Industry**

'I don't know why they throw the blame at us (coca growers) for drugs trafficking. The government threw a lot of people out onto the street so what did they do? The only thing they could, they came here to plant coca!' Silvio lamented. In 1985, Bolivia's annual rate of inflation reached close to 30,000 per cent (Mayorga, 2005: 152). The price of tin crashed leading tens of thousands of miners to lose their jobs. This followed on the heels of a prolonged drought that drove thousands of starving farmers off their land (Kohl and Farthing, 2006).

The booming cocaine market in northern countries attracted these desperate Bolivians who moved to the Chapare in droves to grow coca. The drug trade had begun there in the early 1970s when Colombian criminal organizations came searching for cheap raw materials, initially coca leaf, but eventually paste too, which they refined into pure cocaine in Colombia before exporting it to the United States and Europe (Gootenberg, 2008). Bolivian coca was in demand because, as Dr Zambrana explained – 'our leaf has a far higher cocaine alkaloid content and makes for better quality drugs. It's the best unfortunately.'

Two main activities define the agro-industrial stage of the cocaine trade: growing and drying coca leaves, and then processing them into cocaine paste. Paste production takes place in small workshops located close to the coca fields – like the one operated by Umberto. Making paste can be mastered without formal training, centered on a *quimico* (chemist), a mid-level technician usually drawn from among local farmers. Paste production involves smuggling precursor chemicals, processing leaves, and transporting paste to secondary locations for refining into purified cocaine hydrochloride. Drug workers also require lookouts, cooks, and coca leaf suppliers.

In the mid-1980s Bolivia was earning an estimated \$1 billion dollars annually from coca and cocaine, a revenue equivalent or greater than legal exports (De Franco and Godoy, 1992: 387). The coca and cocaine trade revitalized the economy, prompting an urban construction boom. The drugs dollars trickled down to support a large informal economy (Blanes, 1989), generating high levels of employment in the Chapare (Healy, 1986), but also in the urban peripheries where coca farmers most often invested their cash (Shakow, 2014).

The illicit cocaine trade provided a safety net for those impoverished by neoliberal structural adjustment policies imposed on Bolivia by the IMF (Painter, 1994: 54).

Even though coca is used to process drugs, it never lost its cultural value. Silvio explained ‘we are not interested in drugs - what interests us are coca’s curative properties.’ While most people chew coca leaf, levels of drug use in the Chapare are very low. The people who process coca leaf into drugs or grow it with full knowledge of where it will end up, also use it to heal themselves, to make offerings to earth deities, and in divination ceremonies.

### **The War on Drugs and Peasant Resistance**

In July 1986, when the coca trade was booming, the Reagan administration sent 160 U.S. soldiers to Bolivia to initiate efforts to destroy drug laboratories and to set up and train *La Unidad Móvil de Patrullaje Rural* (the Rural Mobile Patrol Unit), more popularly known by its acronym UMOPAR, the special anti-drug police force. ‘Operation Blast Furnace’ as it was known, marked the start of U.S. involvement in Bolivian drug control, an issue that would come to define U.S.-Bolivian relations. The repression fell disproportionately on peasant farmers, who gain the least from the trade, while the ‘big fish’ – affiliated with agri-business and political elites were seldom arrested (Gillies, 2020). Some geographers have argued that the US backed ‘war on drugs’ has less to do with stemming illicit substances than with protecting US corporate interests in Latin America (Paley, 2014).

In 1988, Bolivia passed anti-drug Law 1008 (in force until 2017) under heavy U.S. pressure. The law permitted 12,000 hectares of coca in the Yungas of La Paz to supply the domestic legal market, with all other coca, including that in the Chapare outlawed and slated for eradication. Initially farmers were encouraged to rip up their existing coca plantations by a cash payment of up to \$2000– but such initiatives failed as farmers uprooted unproductive plantations and used the cash to plant yet more coca (Clawson and Lee, 1996: 221).

Between 1997 to 2002, the Banzer-Quiroga administration succumbed to U.S. pressure and introduced forced crop eradication in the Chapare (Gutierrez Aguilar, 2014: 86). Military conscripts, accompanied by heavily armed UMOPAR, entered small farmsteads to uproot coca. This approach dramatically reduced coca cultivation in the region, but the security forces were repeatedly denounced for gross violations of human rights (Ledebur, 2005). The carrot was an ill-thought-out USAID-financed scheme to encourage farmers to

grow legal crops, which repeatedly failed to produce viable alternatives to coca. As a result, forced eradication caused economic hardship and fueled discontent (Farthing and Kohl, 2005).

The coca growers' agricultural unions responded by organizing their 45,000 members to block roads and stage national-level protests (Oikonomakis, 2019). The unions and their allies set up their own 'political instrument' in 1995, which eventually became the Movement Towards Socialism, known by its Spanish acronym – the MAS. The objective was to scale up the struggle against neoliberalism, ensure access to land, implement pro-peasant policies, and defend the right to cultivate coca (Zuazo, 2009).

Against a background of social and political turmoil (mass mobilizations toppled two presidents in 2003 and another in 2005), the unions shifted their previous class-based rhetoric to one emphasizing indigenous pride rooted in the 'sacred coca' as a common tradition. They argued that by defending it, the agricultural unions and the MAS were fighting for sovereignty and dignity. Sacred coca was the perfect meta-symbol - it tied together distinct demands into a powerful banner of anti-imperial resistance and was something that everyone could support, regardless of whether they identified as indigenous or not (Grisaffi, 2010). This was a powerful narrative at a time when the Bolivian public were fed up with top-down government reform, high levels of poverty, growing inequality and repression (Brewer-Osorio, 2020).

The election of indigenous coca grower leader, Evo Morales (2006-2019) and his MAS party, marked a sea change for Bolivian drug policy. Early on, Morales broke with the U.S. and extended a policy first launched in 2004 under the Mesa administration that legalized growing a small amount of leaf (known as a *cato*). The *cato* accord encouraged coca unions to self-police; and front-loaded development assistance to allow coca regions to diversify their production. Researchers have hailed Bolivia's approach as a less repressive and more effective way to control coca production (Grisaffi, 2016, Buxton, 2020: 33-4), and it has received support from the United Nations Development Program and the European Union. Dr Zambrana argued that one reason the drug trade remains peaceful in Bolivia is precisely because of the harm-reduction approach– a fact that researchers concur on (Farthing and Kohl, 2012).

## Cocaine Paste Manufacturing

In contrast to coca growing regions elsewhere in the Andes – including Colombia’s Nariño, Urabá and Putumayo regions (Idler, 2019) or Peru’s VRAEM and Huallaga valleys (Durand Ochoa, 2014), where illegal armed groups either dominate or did so historically, in the Chapare no single person, family clan or gang has ever controlled the coca and cocaine trade. Rather it remains in the hands of the farmers themselves and participation is widespread.

Ivan Choque, a fifty-year old farmer with three gold teeth, has worked in cocaine paste production for most of his life. He stressed that everyone in the village where he lived was either directly or indirectly involved, ‘everyone is *‘del lugar’* – (from this place)’, landowners and members of the local union. Just as the household unit relies on intra-household exchanges of labor and goods (*ayni*) and the support of extended kinship networks (including fictive kin) in order to facilitate social reproduction, the cocaine economy too is structured around these same networks.

At the lowest rung are coca farmers who depending on the quality of their land, might produce anywhere between four to ten 25 kilo sacks per cato (a plot measuring 40x40 meters) every three to four months. Roles are not exclusive –a person could be at once a coca farmer, coca merchant and operate a drugs workshop. The first steps of the illicit trade are concentrated in limited geographic areas, often within the same space.

To produce one kilo, drug workers soak anywhere between 200 to 400 Kilos<sup>2</sup> of shredded coca leaves in a mixture of gasoline, sulfuric acid, and caustic soda. Most workers use leaf shredders, adapted cement mixers and large tanks of up to 1000 liters. The costs of entering the paste trade are low. The equipment is cheap, the skills easy to learn, and the chemicals available at a hardware store or gas station.

Even so, not just anyone can set up a workshop. Only local people have access to the necessary reciprocity structure to succeed. Because the union controls access to land<sup>3</sup> the only people who can grow coca are union members tied together by kinship or bonded through *compadrazgo* (godparenthood)– a form of fictive kinship. *Ayni*, allows for clearing land, tilling planting, weeding, fertilizing and eventually the harvest, drying and packing of the crop. While no money changes hands, the expectation is that at some future date the favor will be returned.

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<sup>2</sup> The amount of coca required depends on the alkaloid content of the leaf.

<sup>3</sup> Most coca growers have official land titles granted by the state – but the union still has the power to veto a sale, or to force the sale of land.

The next rung on the ladder are the coca merchants – they tend to be local women who are also landowners and members of their local agricultural union. Farmers almost always sell their crop to the same merchant, who usually is part of their extended kin-group, a sister, cousin or affine, or someone they are tied to through *compadrazgo*. In return for this loyalty, the merchants provide the farmers with cash advances and act as godparent to their children. Farmers cannot seek a higher price from other buyers because of their long-standing commitments to specific merchants. If someone offered farmers higher prices, they would swiftly be condemned, lose their reputation and be cut out of reciprocity networks.

In theory, merchants are supposed to take all of the coca they purchase to the state-sanctioned market in Sacaba, on the outskirts of the city of Cochabamba, to be sold for traditional uses, but a United Nations study estimated that only 6 per cent of the Chapare coca ends up in legal channels (UNODC, 2018a). Merchants divert the coca because drug processors pay more, in 2013 they paid around 20 cents per pound over the legal price.

To process one kilo of paste, drug workers require up to 150 liters of gasoline alongside other chemicals including sulfuric acid and bicarbonate of soda. However, local gas stations are only allowed to sell one tank per person per day, and by law they have to add pink dye to it, which makes it less attractive for paste production. Police at regular checkpoints along the roads search vehicles and impound suspicious chemicals.

Given these difficulties, taxi drivers who ply the route from the Chapare to Cochabamba, smuggle fuel, doubling the price.<sup>4</sup> Just like coca, this is not a free market. These taxi-driver smugglers –almost all coca growers and union members - will only sell to their regular clients who they are often tied to through kinship or *compadrazgo*. Victor, a sixty-year-old taxi driver and grower – and who in the 1990s had been an anti-drugs cop – confirmed that he delivered fuel to many cocaine paste workshops on a regular basis.

The next rung of the paste production ladder are the drug processors, again they are union members, landowners and coca farmers – people like Umberto. They invest capital, around four to five thousand dollars to establish their workshops, and these start-up costs are covered via loans from other family members. They hire laborers, normally young men, who carry the heavy bags of coca, move barrels of chemicals and operate the machinery. They are paid around \$30 dollars per '*entrada*' (the time it takes to produce one kilo of drugs). A 'chemist' who knows the technical aspects of how to process cocaine paste is paid up to 100

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<sup>4</sup> The expansion of petrol stations in the heart of drug production areas means that there is less demand for fuel smuggled from Cochabamba.

dollars per kilo to oversee production. In Umberto's case he was both the owner and the chemist. He paid three workers – rather than practice *ayni* - because the workers did not have their own workshops where he could repay the labor. Umberto described the young men as 'trusted people' –they were all members of his extended (fictive) kinship group. For instance, Umberto was Angel's godfather, having paid for his Confirmation celebration.

At the top of the ladder are the '*acopiadores*' (collectors) –wealthier local farmers who buy up bricks of cocaine paste and transport it to either the city or refineries located deep in the jungle. The *acopidaor* too has regular clients, and relationships that are often formalized through bonds of godparenthood. One *acopiador* who I knew, had a great many godchildren – and all of them sold their cocaine paste to him. The drug workers did not view this arrangement as exploitative– but as common sense and positive. In the words of Umberto '... I have to sell to my *Padrino* (godfather), he paid for my wedding – so of course I cannot refuse him!'

The *acopiadores* then hire third parties, known as '*hormigas*' (ants) to smuggle the drugs out. Individuals hide one or two kilos on their body. In December 2019, Victor, the taxi driver, told me that he regularly took up to 30 kilos a journey, hidden in specially made hiding places in his car known as '*macanaco*'. There are two police checkpoints (operated by FELC-N) to reach either Cochabamba or Santa Cruz.<sup>5</sup> Victor is a cool character, 'When I carry a load - I just chew my coca and smoke a cigarette - and I always get past'. He confirmed that while it is possible to bribe the police if you are smuggling fuel, you cannot do that so easily for drugs. 'Most people just cross their fingers... but he said they almost always get through. The only way they catch you is if someone reports you'. He explained that happens because of '*celos*' (jealousy) - when someone wants to get the better of you.

In the Chapare, leveling mechanisms – similar to those in highland Andean communities – are in operation. Those who are directly involved in drug production – workshop owners, collectors but also coca merchants- have higher disposable incomes than farmers and are under strong pressure to pay for activities such as the school graduation trip, a band for a fiesta or matching uniforms for the local football team. Drug workers might also be asked to act as a sponsor, for example to pay for marriage, first confirmation or *quinceañera* celebrations. Anyone who the community perceives as having surplus cash, licit

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<sup>5</sup> There are police checkpoints at 'Castillo' (in the heart of Chapare), Locotal (mid-route to Cochabamba) and Bulo-Bulo (on route to Santa Cruz).

or illicit, who does not invest in social relations, is said to be immoral and loses rights and protection.

Drug workers who end up with a great many ‘godchildren’ are held in high esteem and are deemed worthy of community protection. This in turn ensures drug workers a steady supply of coca leaf or chemicals and that the union will not interfere with their business. On the contrary, anyone who the community perceived to have surplus cash, gained through licit or illicit means, but who does not invest in their social relations in this way, is said to be immoral and would lose rights within the community. For example, if they worked as a drug processor then the union would close down their workshop and expel them from the community.

### **Local Unions and the Informal Governance of the Cocaine Trade.**

Unions are not directly involved in the cocaine trade. They oppose illicit cocaine production in their official proclamations, and when Morales was in office, leaders collaborated with the state crop monitoring agency to restrict coca cultivation (Grisaffi et al., 2017, Grisaffi and Ledebur, 2016). They have organized ad-hoc commissions to check that no member is producing cocaine paste on union-controlled land, which has pushed drug production deeper into the jungle (Grisaffi, 2014). And yet, the hegemony the union exercises has unwittingly provided a framework that enables the drug trade to function. This is because the union provides alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, suppresses the activity of criminal organizations and to some extent excludes the state.

Leadership positions are filled by grassroots members, who hold onto their position for no more than a couple of years (unless they climb up the union career ladder). This means that just as union members are directly or indirectly involved in the drugs trade so too are the leaders. Ivan Choque explained ‘look, everyone is involved, that means the leaders too ... how can they not be? How can it be going on in front of their noses and them not be aware of it?’ Several leaders and former leaders told me that they either had previously been involved in drug production, or that they were currently.

The Chapare agricultural unions are the de-facto civil authority – they function like a parallel state (Grisaffi, 2019: 105-7). They regulate, often in a coercive way, daily coexistence and interactions. Ongoing disputes, including robbery, boundaries, or outstanding debts are addressed at the monthly union meeting with the participation of the entire community. The union has the authority to ensure that people respect communally

determined resolutions. As one union member told me, ‘When we say something, we make people respect it. We are very strict.’

The union’s authority derives from its control over land. The leadership can order the sale of any member’s land at a price they determine and expel the person from the community. This is said to be the most severe punishment possible because, in the words of one farmer ‘if you are expelled from the union – you lose your land, your family, your neighbors – it is like you are an orphan’.

When debts are not repaid in a timely fashion, people can and do come into conflict. Disputes between neighbors or family members tend to be resolved in a pragmatic rather than violent manner. My friend Milton told me about when he was still a teenager and worked as a ‘pisa-coca’ (coca stomper). On one occasion, he had mulched the leaves carelessly and the entire batch had spoiled. His uncle (who owned the workshop) held Milton’s parents responsible for the lost earnings and demanded they pay him \$1,000 dollars. After a verbal argument, they split the difference and paid five hundred dollars each.

If people cannot solve a problem on their own, they turn to the union. During the regular union meeting, both sides are given the opportunity to present their version of events and to call witnesses. The emphasis of community justice is to reconcile the demands of both sides rather than to punish. During fieldwork I witnessed many occasions where debts were settled peacefully. Even if one of the parties was unhappy with the verdict, they had to follow the union’s decision or risk losing their land. If a debt was linked to drug trafficking, this would not be acknowledged at the meeting as talking openly about drugs is taboo.

The unions play an active role in policing and providing security. Outsiders are treated with the greatest suspicion and anyone thought to be acting against the community’s interest faces the possibility of punishment. This can include stripping the suspect naked and then tying him or her to the *palo santo*, a tree that is home to thousands of poisonous biting ants, tying up the culprit and dousing them in petrol (this is mostly a threat but several people have been burned alive), hanging by the neck, or burying them up to the neck in sand (Grisaffi, 2019: 95). Vigilantism of this kind is by no means unique to the Chapare but can be witnessed across the Andes (Wemyss, 2019, Goldstein, 2003).

While this behavior might sound brutal, most coca growers support it. People say that violent punishment acts as a strong deterrent. I was told, ‘the criminals are afraid to come here’ and ‘they don’t dare commit crime here.’ Given the union’s power, it is difficult to imagine how an organized criminal group could either emerge organically or enter the region from outside.

The unions resist control by the State. If the police enter coca growers' territory without first asking permission from a union leader, they run the risk of violent assault. A local police commander told me 'here the police, well we have the law on our side, but they have more power, they don't just control the unions, but the communities too... they decide who comes and who goes ...we just stay at the margins.' The police refer to the Chapare as *la tierra de nadie*, a no man's land.

Coca growers would, on occasion, denounce the illicit activities of their neighbors to the police. This was not driven by a desire to see the local trade destroyed, nor to attack a competitor, but rather was generally a way to punish someone for a personal grievance. This might have nothing to do with the drugs industry, but be based on a perceived lack of respect, dispute over land boundaries, or marital infidelity for example. Drawing from Koch (2018), I argue that the police are used as an ally to pursue personal vendettas rather than linked to any abstract idea of justice.

### **Refining pure cocaine**

In 2013, on a fishing trip in the northern Chapare, close to Cochabamba's state border with Beni, I visited Santa Rosita –a small village only accessible by canoe. I travelled with Mauricio, Daniel and Freddy, all coca growers. Daniel was *Yuracare*, which is a local indigenous minority. As we set up camp, a canoe came by carrying three men – one of whom was Colombian (identifiable by his accent). They asked what we were doing there. Mauricio explained we were there fishing but also visiting Daniel's uncle, Crespo, in Santa Rosita. The men seemed satisfied and while they were polite, there was something menacing about the encounter.

The following day we visited Crespo for a lunch of fried Tapir. Each house in the village had its own generator, satellite dish, large modern television, refrigerator, and sound system, unexpected items in such an isolated place. Mauricio explained that the land was owned by a Colombian rancher, who refined pure cocaine. Small planes – carrying drugs and money - landed in fields normally used for grazing cattle, and small boats brought in the necessary chemicals. Mauricio added that Crespo and his neighbors were well rewarded by the rancher for processing drugs and tending cattle.

To make pure cocaine (known locally as *La Fina*), a higher value product - cocaine paste passes through a second and more complex stage of processing. It requires skill, equipment, and industrial chemicals, such as acetone, potassium permanganate, and ether that

are difficult to obtain. Start-up costs are high, according to Coronel Davila, FELC-N national director, somewhere between 150 and 300,000 dollars. Up to 20 people labor to transform paste into pure cocaine— and laboratories often count on armed guards for protection.

Within Bolivia cocaine refining mostly takes place in the Beni department, but over recent years crystallization labs have crept south into the Chapare (Sanchez, 2011).<sup>6</sup> Locating a lab there has two advantages - first the dense forest, lack of roads and bridges means that it is difficult for the police to enter. But second - well-organized peasants help keep the state at bay. Coronel Davila told me that traffickers pay the local villagers up to 500 dollars a week - in return they work but also offer protection. Just this happened in February 2019 when peasants faced up to UMOPAR operatives on a drug interdiction mission (Sanchez, 2019).

People who grow coca and process cocaine paste in the Chapare worried about the southern expansion of drug refineries as they see it as disrupting the established moral order. I was continually told by friends not to travel to the northern Chapare as it was ‘too dangerous’. Ivan Choque explained that ‘Violence is reaching us, bit by bit.... If you saw what goes on in Isiboro and these places your jaw would drop.’ During a 2019 fieldtrip, growers regularly told me stories of decapitations, disappearances and random violence that goes on *adentro* (deep in the jungle). Ivan explained that the armed guards who protect ‘*la fina*’ (pure cocaine) will not hesitate to silence anyone who threatens to ‘*pisar la manguera*’ (step on the hose). ‘If they knew we were talking about this - with you ... a gringo. well!’ He raised his eyebrows and ran a finger across his throat.

The refineries represent a significant capital investment, and according to Ivan’s analysis, this has ruptured the long-standing reciprocal relationships that characterize everyday life. He stressed that ‘before drug trafficking was communal. We all shared the benefits - but it is less like that today.’ He claimed that a ‘*rosca*’ (a small clique) has taken over a large part of the local trade, setting prices and eliminating competition. Further, the refineries fly in large quantities of cocaine paste produced in Peru’s VRAEM region – which is up to \$1000 dollars per kilo cheaper<sup>7</sup> and this is destabilizing the local paste market.

## Conclusion

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<sup>6</sup> There are also drug processing operations in Yapacani.

<sup>7</sup> Peruvian cocaine paste is much cheaper than its Bolivian equivalent, around \$800 per kilo as opposed to \$1800, and so traffickers buy it to supply the refineries.

This article set out to understand why, in contrast to other drug production and transshipment countries in LAC, Bolivia has low levels of drug related violence. Drawing on a case study from the Chapare this article has advanced three main arguments. First: Involvement in the illicit drugs trade should not be thought of as a moral failure. For most farmers, cocaine paste processing is simply a way to make a living in a geographic space where few other economic opportunities exist. While drug workers do not get rich, engagement in this illicit trade nonetheless represents an avenue for unparalleled social mobility and allows marginalized populations and territories, to be incorporated into global markets (Gutierrez, 2020: 1016). The drug trade supports a large number of people in low-skilled positions, stabilizes families' livelihoods, allows people to stay in rural areas, and supports small businesses, such as hardware stores and builders. In this context illicit crop and drug production can be understood as a form of autonomous grassroots development.

Second: The drug trade is entrepreneurial in spirit: farmers and low-level drug workers grow a cash crop (coca); commercialize precursor chemicals (gasoline); produce a value-added product (cocaine paste); and occasionally sell their labour as paid drug workers or smugglers. And yet, this activity cannot be understood exclusively through a rational economic lens; local drug workers simply do not act as self-maximizing individuals. Rather, the illicit trade is rooted in collective sociocultural practices of solidarity, reciprocity or redistribution. The drug trade builds on existing social relationships, but also generates new relations, and as such, draws people together into dense exchange networks while simultaneously excluding outsiders. The community works together as a corporate unit, to ensure the steady production of coca and cocaine paste, for the benefit of all. In Umberto's terms 'Here we care for one another.'

Third, the stability of the trade can be traced to the influence of the unions. In a place where the state's presence is patchy, the unions, act as the preeminent authorities, regulating relations between union members and even non-members who reside in the region. Everyone has to abide by the union's orders, and if they do not then they face a range of sanctions, which, as we have seen can be severe. Thus, when business agreements are not fulfilled, such as when debts go unpaid, the parties have non-violent ways to resolve the dispute. In addition, the union excludes the state and keeps criminal organizations at bay. Taken together, these factors mean that far from generating chaos, disorder and inequality, the illegal drug trade contributes to the region's prosperity and social and political stability.

Some farmers see a gradual weakening of this local moral order, however. As drug refineries expand into the Chapare, local people worry about increasing levels of violence,

driven by larger investments, concentrations of capital in fewer hands, and armed defense of laboratories. This represents a gradual dis-embedding of the economy – faceless actors unknown to the community, who do not operate according to their local values and who are difficult to control. And so, just like the enclosures of the commons during the British Industrial revolution discussed by Polanyi, or the shift to market prices as opposed to fair prices analyzed by Thompson, when the cocaine trade becomes detached from everyday social reproduction and local moral orders – the threat of danger looms large.

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