

## **A brief history of coca: From traditional use to the cocaine economy.**

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Coca is an alkaloid rich bush, *Erythroxylon coca*, which is native to the Andean region, growing like a weed at elevations between 200-1500 meters. In 2018, the Andean coca crop covered close to 250,000 hectares, with up to a quarter of a million households farming it (Restrepo et al, 2019: 16). Colombia has the lion's share, accounting for 70 per cent, Peru grows 20 per cent and Bolivia is in a distant third place, with only 10 per cent of global production (UNODC 2020a: 21). In 2019, Bolivia had 25,500 hectares, with a harvest valued at between US\$432 and \$534 million, representing between 9% to 11% of gross domestic product in the agricultural sector (UNODC 2020b).

Coca's rich social, cultural and medicinal significance in Indigenous Andean cultures dates to pre-Colombian times (Henman 1992, Carter 1996). However, since the 1970s coca in the Andean region has been largely grown for one explicit purpose, as the raw material to process cocaine<sup>1</sup> (García-Yi 2014: 60). In 2018, Andean cocaine manufacture reached a peak of just over 1,700 metric tons (UNODC 2020a: 21) valued at around US\$ 169.2 billion (Gutierrez 2020: 1008-9), a turnover roughly equivalent to the Ford Motor Company sales in 2018 (Statista 2020). Bolivia is caught at the very lowest rungs of the international drug trade – primarily producing low value cocaine paste, but increasingly the country refines pure cocaine too (Grisaffi 2021).

This chapter traces coca's history from the pre-Colombian trade to the contemporary illicit cocaine economy while considering the commodity chain's broader impacts on the social, political and economic life of Bolivia. We will see how coca underlined the silver boom of the 1600s that jump-started the world capitalist system; provided a bulwark against the ravages of neoliberal structural adjustment in the 1980s; justified US imperial adventures in the 1990s and was the driving force behind the rise of

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<sup>1</sup> This is less true for Bolivia than Colombia and Peru. In Bolivia traditional domestic coca consumption is put at 14,000 hectares and the country has just over 25,000 has under cultivation.

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Evo Morales and the Movement Towards Socialism in the 2000s. The chapter ends with a brief consideration of potential futures for drug and coca leaf policy.

**>Insert Map highlighting main coca growing regions**

### **Coca: from the Inca's to the 1952 Revolution**

Coca is one of the oldest known cultivated plants in the Americas—and has been consumed for thousands of years by indigenous Andeans (Dillehay et al. 2010). The leaf's mild stimulants dull hunger and fatigue, aid digestion, combat altitude sickness, and offer vitamins and minerals often lacking in local staples. (Allen 1988, Carter and Mamani 1986). Consumed widely as tea, it is also chewed by taking dried leaf mixed with an alkaline ash known as *leja* and slowly sucking it into a wad buried in the cheek. In Bolivia this practice is known as *Pijachar*, *Bolear*, or *akullikar*.<sup>2</sup> The most regular users are adult men, often long-distance drivers, workers (particularly miners) and farmers, who value coca's power to suppress hunger, thirst and fatigue.

Bolivia has two main coca growing regions, the Yungas and the Chapare. The Yungas, which sits to the east and northeast of La Paz, produces approximately 65 percent of Bolivia's coca crop (UNODC 2020b). Here coca is cultivated on steep terraced slopes alongside tropical fruit and coffee. Most of the 30,000 Yungas coca growers claim indigenous Aymara descent, but there is also a significant Afro-Bolivian population.<sup>3</sup> Coca has been cultivated in the Yungas valleys for at least 1500 years, to supply the Tiwanaku empire and then the Inca empire and later, during the colonial period, the mines of Potosí (Klein 1986). Yungas coca leaf is highly valued, as the small, green, sweet leaves are considered to be the best to chew.

By contrast, the Cochabamba Tropics, more often known as the Chapare, has only been settled since the 1950s. This massive region – equivalent in size to New Hampshire or Wales – produces a third of Bolivia's coca at elevations that vary from 300 to 2500 meters (UNODC 2020b).<sup>4</sup> The population is just shy of 200,000 people,

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<sup>2</sup> Those in need of a more serious pick-me-up, consume crushed coca leaf that has been soaked in coffee and then mixed with bicarbonate of soda and sweetener. This more powerful cocktail, known as "*coca Machucada*", is often consumed accompanied by an energy drink.

<sup>3</sup> Numbering about 25,000 people, Afro-Bolivians are descendants of slaves who were bought to Bolivia to work in Potosí's silver mines during the colonial period.

<sup>4</sup> Coca bush is also grown in extension zones in the Norte de La Paz (1.5%).

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the majority of whom self-identify as Quechua, and most people are bilingual, speaking a mixture of Quechua and Spanish (PNUD 2005: 302).

The archaeological record confirms that coca use in the Andes dates back at least 8000 years. Researchers have found trace amounts of cocaine in the hair of ancient mummies (Brown 2012) and discovered coca leaves in tombs alongside figurines of men with bulging cheeks indicating a wad of coca (Rivera et al. 2005, Dillehay et al. 2010). The varied locations of these findings, stretching from the dry desert coast of Northern Chile up into the highlands of Colombia, indicate that an expansive pre-Inca coca trade existed (Gagliano 1994: 14).

The Incas considered coca sacred and scholars believe that coca was a form of tribute payment throughout the Inca Empire with only kings, priests and state messengers possessing the right to chew the leaf (Rowe 1946: 291, Cintron 1986: 26, Garcilaso de la Vega (1943: 177). John Murra (1986) has challenged this idea that coca was reserved for the elites, arguing that its limited circulation was not because it was a sumptuary good, but rather because it was in short supply – coming as it did from a lower altitude. Murra explains that in addition to barter or trade, indigenous Andean communities obtained lowland crops like maize, hot peppers and coca through what he refers to as the ‘vertical archipelago’ (Murra 1986: 50). Indigenous communities owned land at different ecological steps (altitudes) where they could produce products which then flowed to other members of their same group (Murra 1979).

The Spanish conquest, beginning in 1532, initially led to the suppression of coca. Colonial forces saw it as an addictive substance and vilified chewing as a disgusting habit which corrupted colonial society. They denounced coca as ‘ungodly’ and associated its use with the devil because of the role it played in native rituals (Hemming 1970: 354, O’Phelan 1995: 141). What is more, the colonial authorities feared coca’s symbolism and links to the Incas might pose a threat to European authority, and prominent church leaders campaigned to fully prohibit coca use (Gootenberg 2020b).

And yet, the coca trade endured, in part because powerful economic interests were at stake. By the late 1500s, the lucrative trade involved around two thousand Spaniards and generated over one million pesos annually (Gagliano 1994: 34-43). Most of this income came from the mines of Potosi – where coca was so highly valued that it was often used instead of money (Klein 1986: 53). In 1573, Viceroy Toledo, representative of the King of Spain, gave up trying to suppress coca and taxed it instead

(Flores and Blanes 1984: 156). From that point on, coca became “commoditized” and, consumption expanded socially and geographically (Gootenberg 2008: 20).

The Spanish crown forced indigenous peoples to pay tribute to in the form of labour (known as *mita*) which led to the death of millions of indigenous Andeans in the silver mines of Potosí. The Spaniards quickly recognised that the miners could work longer and harder when they consumed coca (Klein 1986: 53, Gootenberg 2017: 5). Much like sugar in 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain – that fed the working classes and powered the industrial revolution (Mintz 1986), coca can be credited with an equally revolutionary role. Gootenberg (2020b) writes: ‘...the silver boom of Potosí (1570-1640), facilitated by Andean coca labour, drove the global commercial expansion that jump-started the European world capitalist system’

Coca became “...the most highly commercialized Indian product in the colonial Andean world” (Klein, 1986: 53). For the first two hundred years of colonization, Yungas production remained in the hands of indigenous Andean communities who paid a tax to Spanish landlords – the so-called ‘*encomienda*’ system.<sup>5</sup> This changed in the early 1700s, when entrepreneurial Spaniards established large scale haciendas (estates) in the Yungas to produce the crop – displacing but not entirely eliminating indigenous communities (Gootenberg 2008: 114).<sup>6</sup> Given the high price coca commanded, these coca-growing haciendas proved to be some of the wealthiest in the Andean region (Klein 1986: 56).

The formation of an independent Bolivian republic in 1825 transformed coca’s role. Gootenberg (2020b) explains that ‘...new national identities and politics meant reevaluating coca’s status’ which convinced elites to embrace coca leaf as “national,” and promote its commercial expansion. The coca trade only intensified with the tin boom of the early 1900s, driving up the price. Yungas hacienda owners, who represented a Europeanized commercial class, formed a trade association, the *Sociedad de Proprietarios de los Yungas* (later known as the SPY) to ensure their lucrative business continued (Lema 1997). They aligned with the mine owners (known as “La Rosca,”) to form the Liberal Party that ruled Bolivia from 1899 to 1920 (Soux 1993).

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<sup>5</sup> Encomiendas were grants awarded by the Spanish crown conferring the right to demand tribute and forced labour from the local indigenous inhabitants.

<sup>6</sup> The Yungas Ayllus played an important role in the 1780-81 anti-colonial rebellion led by Tupaj Katari and Bartolina Sisa, and supplied the Aymara warriors with coca leaf (Conzelman 2007: 90-1)

Until the 1952 national revolution, hacendados (large land-owners), mine owners and merchants distributed coca as a way to create dependence (Enrique Mayer 1986: 11). Fausto Reinaga (1969: 100, 127), the founder of the Bolivian Indian Party (PIB), argued that the coca leaf is a historic instrument of colonial oppression and subjugation. He characterized coca as an “opium of the masses” and as a “vice” (equivalent to alcohol) that “subdues the revolutionary spirit of indigenous peasants.”

And yet, while the elites valued the leaf for its profitability and its perceived utility as a stimulant for indigenous labour, they never considered consuming it themselves (Ehrinpreis 2018). In the early 1900s, coca chewing, which marked indigenous identity, was rejected by those aspiring to leave these roots behind. But this began to change when Bolivia went to war with Paraguay over oil fields – in the ‘Chaco War’ (1932-35). The poorly provisioned soldiers relied on coca as a substitute for food, and for the first time, non-indigenous working-class soldiers (urban poor who identified as mestizo) chewed the leaf, breaching the traditional ethnic boundaries of coca culture (Ehrinpreis 2020: 220). The Chaco war thus transformed coca into “a popular symbol of an emergent interethnic working class”, and in so doing laid the foundations for today’s ‘coca nationalism’ (Ehrinpreis 2020: 220).

The 1952 national revolution and the 1953 agrarian reform that followed it, created another turning point for coca. Peasant rebellions upended the Yungas hacienda class, and this allowed peasant farmers to exert control over the coca economy for the first time since the Spaniards invaded (Leons and Leons 1971). Coca cultivation was also expanding into the eastern lowlands (the Chapare) as mostly Quechua valley peasants on overcrowded highland and valley plots took advantage of government sponsored colonization schemes (Blanes and Flores 1982). The MNR government, which pursued an assimilationist project of mestizo nationalism, that aimed to turn ‘Indians’ into ‘peasants’, adopted an anti-coca position. “For the MNR, the disappearance of coca culture was a crucial indicator of progressive assimilation and “modernization” in Bolivia,” writes Ehrinpreis:(2018: 262). And yet, this was happening just as coca culture was beginning to emerge as a counterhegemonic element of the left-wing working classes.

## Coca: Sacred and profane

Coca is a commodity that circulates widely in the peasant economy and historically has functioned as a means of exchange in remote parts of the Bolivian highlands where market penetration was limited (Spedding 1994: 68). Mayer (1986) explains coca functions as a "quasi coin" because it acts as '...a medium of exchange, a standard of value, a means of deferred payment and a way to accumulate wealth' (Mayer 1986: 5). Chapare coca growers told me that right up until the early 2000s, when money was tight, they used coca in barter exchanges known as *trueque* or *cambio* in order to secure highland goods like potatoes that could not be grown in the lowlands. Barter is beneficial because it links up diverse regions, eliminates the need for profit seeking intermediaries, and the exchange rates on offer tend to be favourable (Mayer 2002: 177).

It is not just the trade exchange of coca that connects people, but the quotidian act of sharing the leaf too. Allen (1988) describes how in Quechua speaking communities in highland Peru, chewing coca – known locally as *hallpay* - is highly ritualised. People carefully select the best leaves to share and while chewing say prayers honouring the animate landscape. Allen argues that adherence to these practices "...orients the actors spatially, socially, and religiously, and in so doing integrates them into a larger cultural framework" (Allen 1981: 157).

The solidarity engendered by sharing coca is vividly illustrated in Nash's (1979) ethnography on Bolivian tin miners, and their observance of pre-conquest rites, in which coca plays an important role. Miners chew coca together on their breaks – and engage in elaborate rites (the Ch'alla) honouring the '*supay*' who is the lord of the underworld (see also Absi 2005). Nash saw involvement in these quotidian rituals as a form of building solidarity and class consciousness.

Coca is widely considered to be 'sacred'. Origin myths link coca to Inti- the sun god but also the Virgin Mary. Coca plays a central role in all life cycle rituals, from initiations, marriages, and death rites to the dedication of a new building and is essential for stimulating trust and community as a ritualistic element of every exchange (Carter and Mamani, 1986). It is most often used as part of a burned offering, known as the 'Q'owa', alongside other valued goods such as *chicha*, cane alcohol and llamas that together help to sustain the balance between the human and natural worlds

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(Wiedemann 1979: 39, Bolton 2002). Celso Ugarte, director of Bolivia's Sacaba legal coca market, said in 2019: "We call it the sacred leaf: it was used by the Incas and was given to us by god."

Coca is a key element in traditional medicine and for divination rituals. The curandero (traditional healer) uses coca to diagnose the causes of illness or misfortune. The taste of the coca: "sweet", "bitter" and "boring" provide positive, negative or noncommittal oracular answers. The leaves can also be 'read': a curandero tosses the leaves onto a cloth and interprets the pattern in which they fall (Mayer 1986: 8). Coca is used as a medicine to treat digestive ailments, altitude sickness and mouth ulcers, amongst other ailments (Weil 1978, Biondich and Joslin 2016).

Coca use is widespread throughout rural and urban settings. A 2013 study calculated that about 30% of the Bolivian population regularly chew the leaf and the majority use coca-based products like coca tea (CONALTID 2013). Coca chewing extends over Bolivia's frontier into northern Argentina (Rivera 2003) and Chile (González Miranda 2016). Gootenberg (2008: 113-15, 214-17) argues that the widespread acceptance of coca in Bolivia, has fed into sentiments of what he refers to as 'coca nationalism' – which 'like most strands of national identity, is a protean, invented tradition' (Gootenberg 2017: 5, see also Ehrinpreis 2018).

However, while views on coca have changed, there is still a racist stigma attached to chewing it (Pearson 2020: 286). Postero (2017) records how during the 2006-2007 Constituent Assembly, indigenous delegates in the city of Sucre endured racism on a daily basis including '...being insulted in the streets for carrying bags of coca' (Postero 2017: 121). While undertaking fieldwork, I observed that while most adult males chewed coca daily in the Chapare – they would not do so when in the city. People affirmed that it would be considered 'vulgar' or 'inappropriate' to chew coca in an urban setting. They feared being insulted as a 'pico-verde' (Green nose).

## **The International Context**

In Europe, during the colonial period, people had heard of coca leaf and wanted to try it, but it was difficult to acquire as the quality of the leaf degraded on the long voyage – leaving very little cocaine alkaloid present. The first person to preserve coca leaf and market its benefits was Angelo Mariani – a French chemist who soaked the leaf in red

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wine. The 'tonic' was sold for its health benefits and was widely popular, enjoyed by the Czars of Russia, various Pontiffs and US Presidents (Gagliano 1994: 113). Given its commercial success imitations soon arose, including Coca-Cola (Gootenberg 2008: 60-194).

In 1859, German chemist Dr. Albert Nieman discovered how to extract cocaine from the leaf and it soon became a popular and widely available stimulant in Europe and the United States. Sigmund Freud was an avid user who between 1884 and 1887 penned five essays extolling cocaine's virtues (Freud 1984). The drug was also lionised in literature – Sherlock Holmes consumed it and Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' is alleged to be a book about cocaine use (Andrews and Solomon 1975).

The validation of coca and cocaine abroad led to a reappraisal of the leaf in the Andes. Urban elites in Lima, Peru, came to view it less as a backward indigenous practice, but as modern and a resource to be capitalized (Gootenberg 2008). But this tolerance towards coca and cocaine was short-lived (Paoli, Greenfield, and Reuter 2012). By 1914, cocaine was illegal and it became a "pariah drug" in the U.S., and "abolitionist zeal ... became the driving force ... behind the unfolding global prohibition regime", a process that eventually led to the criminalization of coca leaf (Gootenberg 2008: 191).

In 1949, when a UN commission visited Peru to study coca leaf, the lead researcher immediately said an interview to the national daily '*El Comercio*' that he hoped to bring about the abolition of coca chewing which he classified as a '...pernicious habit' (Warren 2018: 37). The final UN study concluded that chewing coca '...induces in the individual undesirable changes of an intellectual and moral character,' '...hinders the chewer's chances of obtaining a higher social standard' and '...reduces the economic yield of productive work' (UN 1950 cited in Pearson 2020: 291). The 1950 report, has since been discredited as inaccurate and racist, but it was instrumental in shaping subsequent legislation that outlawed the leaf (Metaal et al. 2006).

In 1961, the status of coca leaf as a dangerous drug was enshrined in law when it was listed on the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (the most important international drug control framework). The convention called on signatory governments to eradicate all coca bushes, even those that grow wild, and to abolish the traditional practice of coca leaf chewing, within 25 years of ratification. Subsequent

conventions maintained these hard-line positions (Metaal 2014). Bolivia signed the document in 1976 and has long since missed the 25-year target.<sup>7</sup>

Zoe Pearson (2016) argues that the history of listing coca leaf as a controlled substance reflects colonial, ethnocentric, and racist attitudes towards the Andean region and traditional users of so-called ‘drug plants.’ Studies have established that in leaf form, coca does not generate toxicity or dependence (Weil 1981) and that coca leaf contains untapped resources for the benefit of humankind in the form of foods, pharmaceuticals, and other high-value plant-derived products (Restrepo et al. 2019, Duke, Aulik, and Plowman 1975, Penny et al. 2009). A 1995 World Health Organization (WHO) study, stressed its positive therapeutic uses, however, as a result of US threats to withdraw funding, the WHO never officially published the research (Metaal et al. 2006: 7-8). In addition, the Single Convention contradicts the UN’s own 2007 Declaration on Indigenous Rights, which promises to uphold and protect indigenous cultural practices.

The Andean countries have made numerous attempts to negotiate an exceptional status for coca and its traditional use. In the 1920s Bolivian diplomats, representing the SPY, attended the League of Nation’s drug conventions in Geneva and put up a ‘spirited defence’ for coca, but they deployed racist language to do so – including how coca was the only thing that would motivate ‘their Indians’ to work (Gootenberg 2001: 21, 2017: 6). In the early 1990s Bolivian President Jaime Paz Zamora (1989–93) embarked on “coca diplomacy” when he visited Europe to promote the export of coca leaves in the form of herbal tea, toothpaste, and wine. However, Paz Zamora’s efforts were undermined when, in April 1994, he was linked to drug traffickers (Menzel 1996: 89-91). It was not until Evo Morales came to power in 2006 that a Bolivian president again dared to argue that coca in its natural state is not a drug.

Morales has led the fight to decriminalize the leaf. Under the slogan “Coca yes, cocaine no,” his government committed to aggressive interdiction of illicit cocaine and announced plans for “development with coca” to industrialize legal coca leaf products. Bolivia’s 2009 constitution grants coca leaf legal protection for the first time, declaring that it is part of the nation’s cultural heritage, its biodiversity, and a factor in social cohesion (Vazualdo 2014). In 2012 Morales stood before the UN Commission on

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<sup>7</sup> The convention includes an important exception that allows the export of de-cocainized coca as a flavouring agent, to allow for the continued manufacturing of Coca-Cola in the United States (Gootenberg 2004: 247).

Narcotic Drugs in Vienna, held a leaf aloft and declared: “The coca leaf is not cocaine. We have to get rid of this misconception . . . this is a millennia-old tradition in Bolivia” (UNDP 2016: 10). Bolivia petitioned the UN to remove coca from the list of globally banned substances, in the face of strong opposition from the US and its allies. By 2013, Bolivia won an exception, allowing for traditional uses of the leaf (Pearson 2020). The amendment was an important symbolic victory, but as the reservation only applies to its national territory, the international export of coca or coca-based products remains proscribed (Jelsma 2016).

Morales’s defence of coca, not to mention his push back against US drug war policies, which included expelling the US ambassador, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Agency for International Development (USAID), put his government on a collision course with Washington. In 2008, the US ended all US financial assistance; suspended trade preferences, which the country had received in the framework of the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA); and vetoed Bolivian applications for loans from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank (Kohl and Farthing 2009: 61, Wolff 2017: 886).

### **Coca’s home: the Yungas of La Paz**

Fifty five percent of land cultivated in the Yungas is dedicated to coca, contributing to 80% of agricultural income in the region (UNODC 2020). Alison Spedding (1997) describes coca as a “total social fact” in the Yungas, central to the social, political, symbolic, and economic fabric of Aymara communities. Yungas slopes are steep, which means families are limited to employing manual labour in agriculture. Rival crops, like coffee and oranges grow better at lower altitudes and in better soil, making coca the only consistently reliable and profitable crop (Conzelman, 2007:145).

Peasant union organisations are universal (Arnold and Spedding, 2005:73) and were set up under government control after the 1953 Agrarian Reform released indigenous peoples from haciendas and granted them their own plots of land. These *sindicatos* were structured to ensure the equitable distribution of land, water and other public resources, address internal conflicts, and represent the interests of the community (Spedding 2003:169). They eventually gained their independence from the government and evolved to often serve as local government as well as growers’

representatives. By the late 1980s, many of the soils in the traditional area were degraded and too small to be subdivided among the next generation.<sup>8</sup> This has led young farmers headed to the east, south and north. Coca is an almost the ideal crop for the small peasant farmer –it grows like a weed; is light and easy to transport, provides between three to four harvests per year, and it generates higher returns than any other crop.

A marketing arm (ADEPCOCA) focused on legal coca sales began operating in 1989 in reaction to exploitation by La Paz-based intermediaries. Then in 1994, the six agrarian federations in the Yungas united into (COFECAY), which included growers both within and outside Yungas areas that had traditionally grown coca. These differing memberships have led to fierce rivalries erupting within and between COFECAY and ADEPCOCA,

Throughout Bolivia, peasant unions represent the domestic unit with oldest male serving as representative, or ‘head of the family’. Only in his absence is he replaced by a woman, usually his wife or widow, oldest son or on occasion oldest daughter. Single mothers are also generally recognized as family heads (Arnold and Spedding, 2005:95). Similar to peasant unions in the rest of the country, coca-growing unions gradually developed male and female chapters.

### **The Eastern Frontier: Colonization and the Chapare Unions**

The Chapare was first settled by lowland indigenous groups, the Yucarares and Yuquis, and then in the 1800s by scattered groups of highland peoples. But after the 1952 revolution, migration to the region really picked up (Flores and Blanes 1984: 76; Larson 1988: 253–58). It was driven by overcrowding in highland valleys, leading the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) government to promote rural-rural migrations to the eastern lowlands (Gill 1987). The Chapare was designated as a “priority settlement area” with the National Institute of Colonization charged with facilitating this process (Sanabria 1993: 43). Most settlers were unhappy about the limited freedom implied by directed colonisation programmes, such as technicians deciding what crops should be grown (they did not permit coca) and dictating where people could live (Eastwood and

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<sup>8</sup> Traditional and expansion zones under La 1008 were poorly delineated.

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Pollard 1985). Consequently, most migrants took advantage of the new road and spontaneously settled the land (Blanes and Flores 1982, Blanes 1983).

As colonization advanced the Yuracarés and Yuquis were forced further to the margins (Stearman 1989). One coca farmer told me: “They didn’t want to give up their lands. . . but we conquered them with alcohol, cigarettes and salt.” Today the Indigenous Territory and National Park Isiboró-Securé (more often known by its Spanish acronym, TIPNIS), located in the Tropics of Cochabamba, is home to forty-seven Amazonian indigenous communities totalling over 4,500 people (Yashar 2005: 206). The Yuquis, now one of Bolivia’s small indigenous groups, live in designated Yuki Indigenous Territory along the Ichilo River. These groups have a strikingly different relationship to land and territory to the highland migrants who ‘...often aspire to individual ownership, whereas lowland indigenous groups usually seek communally controlled territories” (Farthing and Kohl 2014: 114).

An imaginary red line (defined in 1992 by indigenous and peasant authorities) demarcates the agricultural colonization area of the Chapare (the so-called Polígono 7) from TIPNIS, but this border is seldom respected. Farmers regularly enter indigenous territory to plant coca, fish, hunt, and engage in illegal logging (Tamayo 2018). Land invasions have on occasion provoked violent conflicts – including over the future of a proposed road (Laing 2020, 32-4). But the sense of ethno-racial difference is by no means absolute, Yuracaré people have settled in coca grower communities and vice versa (Sturtevant 2015).

Given the almost total absence of the state, the highland settlers began to organize themselves into *sindicatos*, first to distribute and control land, but very soon they became a form of self-government that addressed everything from resolving boundary disputes to building schools and disciplining antisocial behaviour (Ramos Salazar 2011: 19). Today, the Chapare’s base level unions number close to 1,000 and are grouped into ninety-three centrals, which in turn they are organized into six federations that together form a coordinating body - encompassing around 45,500 families (Salazar et al. 2008: 19).

The first settlers who arrived in the 1950s, the so-called ‘pioneers’, chopped down trees and burned off the scrub. They began by planting rice and yucca to eat, and then coca. From the very beginning, coca was a cash-crop produced for the market, mostly to be sold in the mines of Potosi (Laserna 2000). With a regular cash flow from coca, the colonists were

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able to improve their economic situation and support family members still resident in the highlands (Albó 1976, Blanes 1983). Laserna (1992: 127) argues that because of the economic security coca provided not to mention its symbolic value: ‘...coca is for the "colonist" farmer what land is to the peasant.’

### **Economic crisis, the coca economy and rural social change**

In the early 1980s Bolivia responded to the burgeoning demand for cocaine in the United States and over time, other industrialized nations -to become a major supplier of the drug. Cocaine paste was already being produced in Bolivia in the 1950s (Millington 2018: 100-1, Henkel 1986: 55) but the trade really took off in the 1970s when Colombian criminal organizations came searching for cheap raw materials, initially coca leaf, but eventually cocaine paste too, which they transported to Colombia to refine into pure cocaine and from there exported to the United States and Europe (Gootenberg 2008: 274). Bolivian coca was in particular demand because, as one top police official explained to me in 2019 – ‘Bolivian leaf has a far higher cocaine alkaloid content and makes for better quality drugs. It’s the best unfortunately.’

The cocaine trade proliferated against a background of severe economic crisis. In the early 1980s the 1970s, oil-driven bonanza in foreign credit had dried up. tin mining had collapsed and Bolivia was in the throes of a severe drought (Crabtree 1987, Dunkerley and Morales 1986). The country experienced one of the highest rates of inflation in world history, an eyewatering 60,000 per cent in 1985 (Sachs 1987: 279). This rapidly eroded purchasing power and led to a decline in living standards exacerbated by the 1986 New Economic Policy, a ‘shock treatment’ that called for the privatisation of state owned enterprises, froze all public sector wages, relaxed labour laws, cut welfare expenditure, allowed the currency to float against the US dollar, and abolished import substitution policies and protective tariffs (Sanabria 1986: 91; Dunkerley 1990: 32-9).

The policy achieved economic stabilisation but at a great social cost (Kohl and Farthing 2006). The immediate effects included the mass sacking (euphemistically referred to as ‘relocation’) of twenty-three thousand miners and tens of thousands of factory workers (de la Torre 2013: 177). Peasants also came under attack as the government dismantled all trade barriers, which allowed cheap agricultural imports to

flood the country, undermining the market for domestically grown products (Urioste 1989). This hammered the peasantry who suffered from a rise in malnutrition and infectious diseases (Grandin 2006: 202).

At the same time, US and European demand for cocaine drove up the price of coca. In 1985 one hectare of Chapare coca generated \$9,000 annually. The next most profitable crop was citrus, which earned only \$500 per hectare (Healy 1985). The sharp rise in the value of coca leaves, combined with the deteriorating economic conditions in the rest of the country, led to a mass movement of unemployed workers, ex-miners and hard-pressed farmers to the Chapare (Sanabria 1986, 92). The population, which was no more than 25,000 in 1967, soared to over 350,000 by 1989 (Perez-Crespo 1991: 1). The land dedicated to coca cultivation went from 15,900 hectares in 1978 to 50,000 by the mid-80s (Sanabria 1986: 95). Mass migration to the Chapare created labor shortages in the highlands and contributed to socio-economic differentiation within peasant communities (Sanabria 1993).

There was plenty of work for the new migrants planting, harvesting and drying coca leaf or processing cocaine paste in the small workshops (known as kitchens) located close to the coca fields. The first step in processing cocaine is relatively simple. The drug workers soak shredded coca leaves in a mixture of gasoline, sulfuric acid, and caustic soda to extract the cocaine alkaloid. These days most drug workers use leaf shredders, adapted cement mixers, and large tanks of up to a thousand liters to turn over the mulch. But in the 1980s, everything was done by hand. Most workshops relied on young men, known as *pisa-cocas*, to stomp on the coca leaf in shallow, plastic-lined ditches to mix up the solution. This was a tough job, the coca stompers spent hours wading in a toxic stew, they suffered from intense headaches and ulcerated sores on their feet, but a worker could earn up to ten times the average daily wage by processing coca in this way (Dunkerley 1986: 144).

By the mid-1980s Bolivia was earning an estimated \$1 to 1.6 billion dollars annually from coca and cocaine, a revenue equivalent or greater than legal export revenue (De Franco and Godoy 1992, 387, Dunkerley 1986: 144). Even though substantial sums never entered the country, passing directly into bank accounts in Switzerland, Panama and Miami (Gill 1987: 187), the trade revitalized the Bolivian economy and prompted 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 were coca farmers most often invested their cash (Shakow 2014: 69-71).

James Painter (1994: 41) estimates that at its height in 1989, the coca-cocaine economy provided direct employment for between 120,000 and 243,000 people—more than ten per cent of the population – and even more jobs in support roles such as– cooks, transport, and commerce. By generating employment and much needed foreign revenue, the illicit cocaine trade provided a safety net for workers and peasants impoverished by neoliberal structural adjustment (Leons and Sanabria 1997: 9, Painter 1994: 54). Anthropologist June Nash (1992: 290) wrote: ‘without drug traffic ... the Bolivian people could not survive’.

While the cocaine trade generated wealth for farmers, the coca growers and paste processors were not the main beneficiaries of the trade<sup>9</sup>. Rather, just as in any other sector of the Bolivian economy– it was the white-elite groups who controlled the business (Leons and Sanabria 1997). Wealthy and well-connected cattle ranchers and businessmen in Beni and Santa Cruz, many of them friends and family of Bolivia’s military dictators from 1964-1982 who had been granted large swathes of land - smuggled large volumes of cocaine paste to Colombia. These agro-industrial capitalists were ideally positioned for this role, as they owned extensive land holdings and had aircraft and airstrips on their properties (Dunkerley 1984: 318-9).

Ironically this group emerged as a direct result of US government advisors promoting the formation of an export orientated agro-industrial sector in the eastern lowlands during the 1950s (Mesa, Gisbert, and Mesa 2003: 664). A sharp decline in the price of key export crops – like cotton and sugar - prompted them to turn to the illegal cocaine industry (Gill 1987: 173-94). Gootenberg (2020a) argues that it was not a lack of development but rather state-led post-war modernization projects – like those promoted by the MNR– that led to the expansion of illicit economies in the Amazonian lowlands (see also Millington 2018).

From the 1960s to 80s, successive military governments maintained strong links to the illicit drug trade (Laserna 1994: 4). In July 1980, a group of military officers, headed by Luis Garcia Meza, seized control of Bolivia, in what came to be known as the ‘Cocaine Coup’. The military was directly involved in trafficking drugs – and officers

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<sup>9</sup> Of the \$60 to 80 billion US street value of Bolivian cocaine in the early 1980s, only about \$100 million dollars found its way back into peasant hands (Medina 1986).

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pocketed large sums of money (Healy 1986: 106-7, Gillies 2018, Henkel 1986). Chapare coca growers who I spoke with recalled soldiers in uniform processing cocaine paste by the side of the road – and officers buying up drugs, which they loaded into trucks for export. Meza was forced out after only a year, but this did not stop the cocaine industry, which only grew as demand soared and after 1990, as a result of US drug war pressure in Colombia that pushed production south into Peru and Bolivia (Clawson and Lee 1996).

## **Drug War Imperialism**

Cocaine production and trafficking is driven by demand – mostly from the United States, which in spite of a recent decline in consumption, remains the single largest national market. US consumers consumed an estimated 145 metric tons of cocaine valued at \$24 bn in 2016, a decrease from 384 tons worth \$58bn only ten years previously (Midgette et al. 2019: xiv). There are growing markets in Latin America (particularly Brazil), Africa, Asia and Oceania, representative of cocaine's 'shift south' (Gootenberg 2021).

In the mid-1980s, in the face of a crack epidemic at home that brought pressure on the government, the US launched an offensive against drug producers and traffickers south of the border. The argument behind the 'War on Drugs' was straightforward: disrupting the supply at source equates to less drugs available on the street, a message that resonated with voters. But militarized interventions with names like 'Operation Blast Furnace,' 'the Andean Initiative' and the 'Triennial Plan' sowed chaos in the Andes, while doing little to stem the drugs flowing northward (Youngers and Rosin, 2005).

Washington based policy makers identified coca farmers as the first link of the drug commodity chain and cast them as criminals (Csete et al. 2016: 1458) turning them into the 'enemy' of the war on drugs (Albó 2002, 75). In 1988, the Bolivian congress passed the 'Law to Regulate Coca and Controlled Substances', commonly known as Law 1008 (in force until 2017), under significant US pressure (Conzelman 2008: 190, Ledebur 2005: 151). At that time Bolivia was still suffering the fallout of a deep economic crisis and was almost completely dependent on financial support from the US and international institutions, like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. The US made aid and loans contingent on Bolivia's adherence to

unilaterally determined eradication and interdiction targets through a process known as 'certification' (Painter 1994: 85).

Given the historic use of coca in Bolivia, it was impossible to outlaw the crop outright – this would have generated overwhelming social and political conflict. Instead, Law 1008 made a distinction between three cultivation zones. The Yungas of La Paz was identified as a 'traditional production area' –where 12,000 hectares of coca were permitted to supply the traditional market. The Tropics of Cochabamba (Chapare) was demarcated as a 'transitional production area', subject to gradual eradication combined with alternative development programs. Coca production anywhere outside of these regions was outlawed and slated for eradication (Durand Ochoa 2012: 56). In making these distinctions the law created tensions between Chapare and Yungas growers, and between Yungas growers in traditional zones (aligned with ADEPCOCA) and those in newer expansion zones (members of COFECAY).

Observers have described the law as 'draconian' as it ensured that those charged with drug-related offences were imprisoned indefinitely without the possibility of bail and set heavy minimum sentences (Farthing 1997). Conzelman (2007: 152-3) explains: "...one of the most notorious and insidious prescriptions of the law is that people arrested under suspicion of participating in the illegal cultivation of coca leaf, the transport of precursor chemicals, or the elaboration of cocaine are considered guilty until proven innocent and are placed in the custody of the judicial system". To this day, Bolivia has one of the highest rates of preventive detention anywhere in the region (Giacoman 2011).

Initially eradication efforts were slow to get off the ground. The administrations of Paz Estenssoro (1985-1989), Paz Zamora (1989-1993), and Sánchez de Lozada (1993-1997) preferred voluntary reductions to forced eradication. They recognized the crucial role coca played in absorbing labour and they wanted to avoid a showdown with the powerful Chapare coca unions (Brewer-Osorio 2020: 269). Chapare farmers were incentivised to allow the state to destroy their crops in return for cash payments of up to \$2500, but overall, this policy failed as no viable alternatives were on offer. Coca farmers allowed the military to pull up their old and unproductive plants, and then used the cash payments to invest in land to plant yet more coca. For every hectare eradicated under voluntary programs another was planted (Kohl and Farthing 2001: 36).

Beginning in 1994 the US took a harder line. In March ambassador Richard Bowers publicly stated that ‘the people of Bolivia, specifically the coca growers, have to accept the responsibility for the death of thousands of US citizens, as a result the bush must disappear’, a comment which only stoked anti-US sentiment in the country (Contreras 1995: 18). The following year the US decertified Bolivia for failing to meet its eradication targets and ended all economic assistance (Durand Ochoa 2012: 150).

President Hugo Banzer (1997-2001) and his National Democratic Action (ADN by its Spanish acronym) party came to power in 1997 with a promise to restore Bolivia’s ‘dignity’ - by destroying all coca above the limit mandated by Law 1008. The Leopards, special commandos from the Mobile Rural Patrol Unit (Unidad Móvil de Patrullaje Rural - UMOPAR), a US funded and trained anti-drug- police unit, led missions to destroy cocaine-paste labs and staffed checkpoints along the main roads. The Joint Task Force (FTC), a combined military-police force directly funded by the US, were charged with uprooting coca.

Banzer’s government also orchestrated the only attempt t to forcefully eradicate coca in the Yungas. Troops from the Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta (Joint Task Force, a military unit created in 1998 with U.S. funding) into the Yungas to destroy 1700 hectares of “excess” coca. Unannounced, the soldiers set to hacking the plants out of steep hillsides in La Asunta, an expansion zone. Hundreds of cocaleros, merchants, students and truck drivers gathered to protest this violent affront to their livelihoods and forced the Banzer government to back down (Spedding 2003)

US involvement in Bolivia’s drug war weakened Bolivian institutions, destabilised the political system, and severely under-mined national sovereignty (Stippel and Serrano-Moreno 2020). As part of a \$900 million package, the US donated equipment, including transport aircraft, helicopters, and assault rifles (Farthing and Ledebur 2004), and arranged for officers to undertake training courses at the School of the Americas<sup>10</sup>, an infamous military institute, where Latin American officers are encouraged to identify with US values and interests (Gill 2004). The Narcotic Affairs Section of the US embassy paid members of the security forces and public prosecutors involved in the ‘War on Drugs’ a bonus and until 2002 the embassy operated its own paramilitary group – the Expeditionary Task Force (Ledebur 2003).

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<sup>10</sup> The School of the Americas is now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

By 2000, the security forces had destroyed around 28,000 hectares of coca—coming close to reaching Plan Dignidad’s goal of zero coca in the Cochabamba Tropics. The US embassy considered the Dignity Plan a ‘success story’, but this came at a high price (Kohl and Farthing 2001: 36). Coca eradication decimated the regional economy of Cochabamba and by 2001 the Chapare had some of the highest rates of extreme poverty in the country (Grisaffi, Farthing, and Ledebur 2017: 148). The security forces killed, abused, sexually assaulted and seriously wounded scores of coca farmers, torched homesteads, and incarcerated thousands of people (Ledebur 2005, Salazar Ortuño 2008: 137-238, Spedding and Fernandez 2004). Journalist Alex Contreras states that from 1988 “...more than 115 people died, the majority coca growers and a minority uniformed. No one responsible for the murders was arrested, nor were those responsible sentenced. There was total impunity” (Stippel and Serrano-Moreno 2020: 372).

Following the 9/11 attacks in the US, the War on Drugs shifted gear (Youngers 2003). Rivera (2011, 24) states: ‘Evo Morales (the leader of the coca growers) and the coca growers were no longer political adversaries in the democratic arena: they were now drug terrorists, defenders of armed struggle with links to guerrillas in Colombia or Peru.’ The Chapare was declared a ‘red zone’ subject to special policing measures. Over 20,000 troops were deployed in the region and enacted what Gutierrez Aguilar (2014, 86) has described as a ‘systematic terror policy’. A male coca grower in his late fifties explained to me: ‘back then there was no peace here. If the police found just ten dollars in your pocket, they denounced you as drug trafficker. It was enough that if they found a bit of wire close to your house or some batteries then they (the police) would denounce you for being a terrorist. They said they were for use to make a cazabobo (explosive device). Back then it was dangerous to be a union leader - you were hunted down....’

When Banzer became ill with cancer, he stepped down and was replaced by his vice President Jorge Quiroga in August 2001. Quiroga immediately approved Decree 26415, which prohibited the drying, transport, and sale of Chapare coca leaf, an activity which until that point had been legal. The penalty was eight to twelve years in prison.<sup>11</sup> In January 2002 the coca growers mobilized to demand the reopening of markets where they could sell their coca. The so called ‘Coca War’ which lasted for one month and

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<sup>11</sup> In December of that year, an UMOPAR officer executed Casimiro Huanca – a leader of one of the Six Chapare Federations, a crime for which he was not punished (Gill 2004: 187-8).

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involved roadblocks and violent clashes with the security forces, left four cocaleros and two soldiers dead, and more than 70 people injured. The security forces destroyed the coca growers' station 'Radio Sovereignty' in a bid to undermine the union's ability to mobilize (Grisaffi 2019: 43).

In January 2002, Congress expelled Evo Morales from the parliamentary position he had been elected to in 1997 for allegedly inciting the 'Coca War'. Working class and indigenous people across the country mobilized to reinstate him (Oikonomakis 2019: 159). When Morales ran for President later that year, US Ambassador Manuel Rocha threatened voters that his country would cut all funding if they voted for Morales. Contrary to Rocha's intention, such attacks only bolstered Morales's popularity and his Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) party, came in a close second place (Van Cott 2003: 772).

While US policy makers lauded their alternative development and payment-for-eradication initiatives in the Chapare, these programs generally failed to benefit coca growers and their families.<sup>12</sup> The problems have been attributed to poor sequencing of assistance, the types of programs on offer and the fact that USAID did little to open new markets for the alternative crops they promoted (Marconi 1998, Quiroga 1994, Farthing and Kohl 2005). Alternative development was always an afterthought to the main goal of eradicating coca. As well, alternative development crops could never compete with coca because of its high price – buoyed in part by its criminalisation (Buxton 2020). One USAID staffer recalls: "The irony was that if eradication efforts experienced a period of success, the price of available coca would increase substantially" and "... the increased price usually was sufficient incentive for many farmers to accept the risk and return to growing coca (Pielemeier 2018: 42). In 2008, the unions banned USAID from operating in the Chapare and erected a sign on the main road that read 'territory free of USAID' (AIN 2008). In 2013 Morales called an end to all USAID programs nationwide (Achtenberg 2013).

After 40 years of militarized drug war polices –and billions of dollars - the flow of drugs northward continues apace (Mejía 2017). Against the background of consistent failure, critical scholars have suggested that the 'War on Drugs', has less to do with cutting supply than with giving the US military a role in the post-cold war world and

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<sup>12</sup> Bradly and Millington (2008) have shown that the shift to alternative development crops led to elevated levels of deforestation

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securing US corporate interests in the region (Paley 2014, Ballvé and McSweeney 2020). It is certainly the case that as a result, the US gained significant leverage over successive Bolivian governments– even if Bolivians pushed back (Gillies 2020).

### **Peasant Resistance and the founding of the MAS.**

Before 1985, the Chapare coca unions were politically incoherent, with coca growers supporting various traditional parties (Grisaffi 2017: 51-2, Oikonomakis 2019: 149). Nor was *cocalero* identity explicitly political, coca was thought of in much the same terms as any other crop that farmers grew, like bananas, rice or oranges. But the criminalization of coca and by association, cocaleros, changed all of that. State backed eradication programs radicalized and united them against their common enemies, namely the Bolivian state and the US embassy (García Linera, Chávez, and Costas 2004: 396). In the face of on-going military and police repression, the cocaleros built a powerful union. In the words of one union leader: ‘necessity forces us to plant coca ...that’s why we built the union - to stop the politics of zero coca.’

The first wave of migrants in the 50s and 60s were peasants from the Cochabamba valleys, and they modelled the organization of their sindicato on the ‘revolutionary syndicalism’ of their agricultural unions (Gordillo 2000). Initially these unions were aligned with the MNR and subsequent military governments as part of the ‘military peasant pact’ which lasted until 1974 when the military under the Banzer dictatorship murdered 100 peasant marchers outside of Cochabamba (Hylton and Thomson 2007: 83).

When unemployed miners migrated to the Chapare in the mid-1980s, they brought with them their union experience and militancy (Brewer-Osorio 2020: 267). One ex-miner told me: “I was a miner, I didn’t have fear, I knew how to light dynamite. I knew the union life.” He went on to say that because of people like him “more leaders were formed here in the tropics; we strengthened the unions.” The cocalero/as adopted the miner’s command structure and protest strategies including, hunger strikes, roadblocks and staging national-level protests (García Linera, Chávez, and Costas 2004: 414-37, Laserna 1999). Women played an important role as union leader, and later member of congress, Leonilda Zurita recalled, by protecting the men: ‘when the women did not participate, the men were run over, beaten, dragged off’ (Zurita 2005: 89).

In 1994, during Sanchez de Lozada's first administration (1993–97), the cocalero/as organized a massive march to the city of La Paz, for 'life, coca and dignity' – recalling the 1986 'march for life' organized by the miners (Contreras 1995). They demanded the withdrawal of the military and the police from Chapare, the depenalisation of coca, and the immediate expulsion of USAID. As repression intensified, this was followed up in 1995 with the "March for life and national sovereignty" – led by women who, on arriving in La Paz declared a hunger strike, forcing the government into negotiations (Camacho Balderrama 1999, Agreda, Rodriguez, and Conteras 1996).

The marches marked the start of a protest cycle and the radicalization of the coca unions. The unions established self-defence committees to prevent the military from eradicating coca plantations (Oikonomakis 2019: 155, García Linera, Chávez, and Costas 2004: 421). These groups were lightly armed with rifles dating back to the 1930s Chaco War (*mausers*) and homemade explosive devices known as *cazabobos* (fool hunters). Veteran mining leader and coca union advisor, Filemon Escóbar writes '...everyone was trained to make caza-bobos' (Escóbar 2008: 179). Even so skirmishes between coca growers and state forces were infrequent (Ledebur 2003).

The largest coca union – the *Federación Especial de Trabajadores Campesinos del Trópico de Cochabamba*—(FETCTC) worked to enhance the presence of the coca unions, both within the Unified Confederation of Campesino Unions of Bolivia (Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia— CSUTCB) – Bolivia's main peasant federation, and the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) -the overarching trade union federation<sup>13</sup> (Healy 1991: 92). The coca growers also lent their support to allied causes, such as the 2000 Cochabamba water war, building strategic alliances with other sectors (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2014: 3-27).

There were early debates over the future of the movement, some – drawing inspiration from the Zapatistas - argued for armed insurgency (Prest 2015: 189), including Evo Morales who publicly threatened that the Chapare was close to becoming a new Chiapas – in reference to the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Southern Mexico (Oikonomakis 2019: 170). Filemon Escobar explains "the concept of the guerrilla was very popular with the cocaleros"

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<sup>13</sup> Historically the COB had always been dominated by workers interests, specifically those of miners – but the decline of the mining sector weakened their position within the organization at the same time as the massive migration of miners to the Chapare blurred traditional distinctions between peasant and worker (Blanes and Mansilla 1994). Thus, the COB began to take interest in the Chapare peasants and incorporated their demands (Healy 1991: 101-2).

(Escóbar 2008: 179). However, after literally hundreds of workshops– in which amongst other issues the failure of Che Guevarra in Bolivia was analyzed - the coca farmers opted for the electoral path (Oikonomakis 2019: 182) and early democratic victories after the introduction of the 1994 Law of Popular Participation introduced municipal elections and funding throughout the country, further decreased the appeal of guerrilla tactics (Stefanoni, 2010: 147). In contrast to the Chapare, where unions took over town halls, the introduction of the LPP in the Yungas created rivalry between unions and Yungas municipalities as many governance functions overlapped between the two. The municipalities of Chulumani and, Coroico had been founded a hundred years earlier which made it difficult for local unions to exert the control over them they had in the Chapare (Conzelman, 2007: 159).<sup>14</sup>

In 1995, the Chapare growers established their own political vehicle that would eventually become 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). The decision to create a political instrument as opposed to a party – is linked to the crisis of legitimacy as parties were widely considered corrupt and controlled by elites (Zuazo 2009: 38). One male union member – who attended the founding meeting explained: ‘we realized that through union action alone we couldn’t achieve anything. So, we thought we need another tactic to make ourselves heard’.

The MAS began in the Cochabamba Tropics, expanding beyond municipal victories to the national level by linking up with other grassroots organizations and allowing them to run their own candidates on the MAS ticket (see Anria 2018, 61-97). The national profile expanded after Evo Morales entered Parliament as a deputy in 1997 and the MAS became the governing party of Bolivia in 2005, a role that it has maintained for all but one year ever since.

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<sup>14</sup> This marked difference in strength between the Chapare and Yungas unions is shaped by both geography and the Yungas history of haciendas (rather than the colonization in the Chapare. This left the Yungas with a local elite that the Chapare never had, union structures in the Yungas split between marketing and representation, differing relationships with municipalities, as well as, in no small part, contrasting experiences with the U.S.-financed Drug War. Not only did the Drug War bring less repression to the Yungas, it effectively created another fissure– the division between traditional and expansion zones codified in Law 1008. The Chapare has always been more homogenous in geography, population, and history.

## **The revalidation of coca**

'Before life was very different. Everyday there were deaths, everyday there was a conflict in the battle to defend mother earth and our natural resources, but more than anything the battle was to defend our sacred coca leaf. Coca is the emblem of our identity, of all first peoples of the Aymaras, the Quechuas and Guaranís.... Long Live Coca, Death to Yankees!' These were the words of a female union leader at the opening of a coca union congress in Lauca Ene in 2019. The speech was reminiscent of many I heard while carrying out fieldwork in the Chapare, no matter if it was a low level sindicato meeting or a national level event, union leaders would always start by emphasizing the centrality of coca to indigenous Andean culture and stress the injustice of foreign troops attacking their 'sacred' plants.

Today coca is intimately bound to indigenous liberation. 'Popular Coca Nationalism' – of the kind espoused by Evo Morales - has roots that can be traced back to the inter-ethnic coca culture that emerged following the Chaco War (Ehrinpreis 2020: 219). But it was only in the 1970s and 80s, when two distinct strands of popular pro-coca politics: that of unionized peasant cocaleros of the Chapare, and neo-indigenist Kataristas in the highlands, that the revalorization of the leaf, really took shape.

In the early 1970s, a small group of urban based Aymara intellectuals began to blend class and ethnic discourses into what came to be known as Katarismo, from the name of Tupaj Katari, an eighteenth-century anticolonial rebel (Escárzaga 2012). Katarista activists embraced coca as part of a broader effort to revalidate native Andean medical knowledge, and this contributed an explicitly Indianist element to peasant organizing and politics (Ehrinpreis 2018: 270; Ticona, Rojas, and Albó 1995: 42).

It was by no means inevitable that coca growers in either the Chapare, or the Yungas would mobilize around indigenous cultural difference in order to justify their oppositional politics. While outsiders label Chapare and Yungas coca growers as 'indigenous' – they exhibit a stronger class identity as upwardly mobile peasants, and many reject the indigenous label (Pellegrini 2016, Alderman 2020). Nevertheless, given the diminishing power of the class-based left as a result of the neoliberal onslaught on labour, coca growers joined the indigenous resurgence sweeping Bolivia and the rest of

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Latin America (Yashar 2005, 189-90, Vargas 2014). Coca growers began to present the defense of coca not only in terms of protecting the right to produce it, but also in terms of protecting its traditional uses and cultural value which could broaden their sector-specific demands into a something that appealed to all peasants (Contreras 1995: 3).

By the late-1980s, the CSUTCB created a Coca Commission with the aim to encourage consumers to back the protection and consumption of coca leaf (Healy 1991: 93-4). Peasant activists “...successfully made coca a symbol of indigenous ethnicity and pride” (Pearson 2016: 103). From that point on the coca unions, the CSUTCB, and later the MAS, seized the initiative to generate a new ‘common sense’ about coca, politics and nation. They argued that by defending coca, they were fighting for national sovereignty and dignity.

This narrative was particularly powerful for three reasons. First, widespread coca consumption creates a basis for what Gootenberg (2017, 5) calls ‘coca nationalism’ (see also Ehrinpreis 2018). Second, coca (and the cocaine trade) brings in hard currency which means that eradication programs damaged the larger regional (and national) economy and cut off its role as providing work for the unemployed (Sanabria 1999). Finally, the pro-coca, anti-US message was popular at a time when the Bolivian public identified externally imposed neoliberal policies as the root cause of their hardship (Albó 2008, 60, Durand Ochoa 2012: 109).

Sacred coca became a perfect meta-symbol tying together distinct demands into a powerful banner of anti-imperial resistance (Grisaffi 2010, Canessa 2006). Morales and the MAS adopted the vocabulary of indigeneity wrapped around the coca leaf to build broad based support in a heterogeneous society (Komadina and Geffroy 2007: 127, Madrid 2008).

### **A coca grower in the Presidential Palace**

In office, Morales and the MAS advanced an innovative policy, called ‘coca yes cocaine no’. The strategy, initially introduced in 2004 by the Carlos Mesa administration (2003-2005) legalized the cultivation of a small amount of coca leaf known as a ‘cato’ (a 1600 sq meter plot) in specific zones. The Morales administration expanded this to encourage coca unions to self-police to ensure that growers do not exceed this limit, and frontloads

development assistance to coca growing regions. The overriding aim of the policy is to reduce harms to coca grower communities (Ledebur and Youngers 2006).

Beginning in 2007, coca unions collaborated with the Morales government to develop a sophisticated monitoring, control and coca reduction system with support from the European Union (Farthing and Ledebur 2015). Local unions draw on their long history of self-governing to ensure that farmers respect the limit. Each union organizes regular inspections of coca plantations; and if commissions made up of local union members, find coca above one cato, they can level fines, order community service and restrict access to municipal public works projects. They can also eradicate the entire crop and prohibit replanting for one year (Grisaffi 2016). When communities refuse to comply, then workers from the coca control agency - the Unidad de Desarrollo Económico y Social del Trópico (UDESTRO) negotiate with community leaders for the coca to be forcibly eradicated by government troops. In contrast to past Drug War policies, eradication rarely involves violence (Grisaffi, Farthing, Ledebur, 2017:143).

Access to assistance to diversify crops is no longer conditional on the prior eradication of coca. The sequencing of assistance is important because the guaranteed income from the cato- which is around \$200 dollars per month, equivalent to the minimum wage- allows farming families to experiment with alternative crops. Coca farmers claim that government funding for rice-husking machines, tractors and processing plants for fruit, honey and fish—has expanded the market for local produce (Grisaffi 2016). Bananas, rice, citrus fruit and palm hearts now cover more cultivated land than coca in the Chapare, a result of sustained and integrated development efforts (Grisaffi, Farthing, and Ledebur 2017: 145).

There have always been tensions between Yungas and Chapare coca growers. On the one hand, Chapare growers have long considered Law 1008's classification of the Yungas as a 'traditional area' as arbitrary and deeply unfair. On the other, Yungas growers have fiercely defended their historic monopoly over the coca trade and presented Chapare coca as lower quality and only good for drug trafficking (Grisaffi, 2019: 124-5). Brewer-Osorio (2019) argues that the new coca policy has further exacerbated these divisions by rewarding Chapare coca producers with significant investment, while undermining Yungas growers' historic privileges and protections (see also Ramos Salazar 2018). Yungas growers have rejected participation in government led development programs and strongly oppose the expansion of legal coca in the

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Chapare (Pellegrini 2016: 112-6). ADEPCOCA, the marketing branch of the Yungas growers withdrew its support for the MAS (Pellegrini 2016: 47-8).

These tensions came to a head in 2017 with the passage of a new coca law, ten years in the making because of negotiation difficulties with Yungas growers. The new law was designed to legitimate the 20,000 hectares of leaf cultivation informally permitted since coca grower leader Evo Morales became the country's President in 2006, 8000 hectares above the limit established under Law 1008. The amount was arrived at by multiplying quantity of coca allowed per registered grower under a 2004 accord times the number of registered coca farmers. Subsequent compromises with Yungas growers raised the permitted amounts to 22,000 hectares, 14,000 in the Yungas, 7000 in the Chapare and 1000 in the north of La Paz department (Farthing 2017).

Researchers have shown that the new approach introduced by the MAS government has been successful in reducing illicit cultivation and the violence associated with eradication exercises, as well as in generating sustainable incomes for local communities (Farthing and Ledebur 2015). Bolivia's program has received widespread praise as a "best practice" from the Organization of American States (OAS 2013: 6) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2019: 9). The model has served for inspiration to coca growers in Peru (Grisaffi et al. 2020) and Colombia (Mortensen and Gutierrez 2019, Troyano Sanchez and Restrepo 2018).

And yet, while the program has had successes at reducing coca it would be naive to believe it has controlled drug trafficking. In a 2019 interview, a retired Bolivian drugs official told me that with the Drugs Enforcement Administration (DEA) out of the picture, Bolivia has become a major drugs transshipment hub for cheaper Peruvian cocaine paste. It is refined in Bolivia or Brazil, supplying Brazil's domestic market with the remainder exported to Europe and Asia. The UNODC reports that cocaine laboratories are mushrooming in Cochabamba, La Paz and Santa Cruz (UNODC 2020c) and some estimates put Bolivia's annual cocaine production as high as 254 metric tons (Economist 2018). The ex-police official explained that Colombian drug traffickers consider Bolivia to represent an 'acceptable level of risk' – because with no DEA present and having paid off the police and judiciary, they know that if they are caught, they will spend no more than one year in prison.

When the Morales government was ousted in November 2019, a military-backed administration avowedly opposed to the *Coca sí* strategy took power. The interim Áñez

government cracked down on the opposition and committed human rights abuses, including killing ten coca farmers when troops opened fire on a peaceful demonstration (Bjork-James 2020, 33). Añez's interim government swung Bolivia's anti-drug approach back to hard-line measures and committed to reinstate forced eradication, publicly denouncing coca growers as 'narco-terrorists' (Ledebur, Farthing, and Grisaffi 2020; Vargas 2020).

The US heralded the Añez administration, saying it had made "important strides in drug interdiction" — despite little evidence — and that cooperation between the two nations had "increased" (Asmann 2020). Less than a year later, in October 2020, Luis Arce of the MAS scored a landslide victory and promised to continue with the 'social control policies' put in place by his predecessor — but he faces a complex drug scenario with high levels of trafficking and the threat of Brazilian criminal organizations increasing their operations on Bolivian territory (Insight Crime 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The production, distribution and consumption of coca and its derivative cocaine have had immense social, political and economic impacts that reverberate not just in Bolivia but across the globe. Coca has been implicated in driving mass-internal migration, reshaping the political landscape and serving as a justification for neo-colonial relations between the US and Bolivia. Consumers in the Global North have exerted considerable influence over producers in the Global South.

Along with other contributions to this book, this chapter shows how commodities are not just abstracted markers of exchange value — as Marx would have it — but rather are firmly embedded in their social, political, and cultural contexts (Appadurai 1986). In this sense they "remain devices for reproducing relations between persons" and as such their value and meaning is constantly re-negotiated (Appadurai 1986: 25).

In Bolivia coca is something that is morally loaded, imbued with power, used as a vehicle to connect human and supranational worlds and as a sign of indigenous identity. But while coca leaf is widely considered to be sacred by Indigenous Andeans, cocaine is neutral, a banal substance that is simply a way to make a living. On the contrary, for the predominantly Western consumers coca leaf is nothing more than a weed and cocaine is

exciting and dangerous. It too can connect consumers on the street who trade drugs in exchange for respect, love and money (Arias and Grisaffi 2021, Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, Bourgois 1995)

While there have been shifts towards more progressive drug policy across Latin America – including recommendations for the creation of regulated markets for narcotic substances, amnesties, transitional justice, and greater investment in harm-reduction practices– the US has maintained its hard-line position (even while relaxing drug laws at home – particularly in relation to marijuana) (LSE IDEAS 2014). To some extent the US position benefits coca growers as the price of coca is buoyed by its very illegality as history shows, that when cultivation is extensive – as it was in the early 1990s – the price drops.

A bigger threat to the coca economy is that drug consumption patterns are changing. In the US consumers are shifting to pot, meth or legal opiates and demand for cocaine is declining (Midgette et al. 2019). If this trend continues, and other countries follow suit, it could potentially spell disaster for Bolivia's coca farmers, because while they argue that 'coca is not cocaine', in many cases it is. Ultimately, a frank conversation that goes beyond a focus on the legal status of drugs or the costs and benefits of specific interventions must take place including a consideration of the unequal insertion of marginalized urban and rural territories into the global economy that makes drug crop farming and drug trafficking the only realistic livelihood option.

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