

The Proletariat of the Cocaine Trade:

Social reproduction and the governance of the illicit drug trade in the Chapare, Bolivia

Thomas Grisaffi

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I was sat drinking a soda in a shabby roadside bar with Mauricio, a thirty-six year old coca farmer. It was early evening and we were both tired after a full day of harvesting coca leaf. All of a sudden, the lull of chirping insects was broken when a beat-up Toyota Corolla sped through the village at 80 mph, followed by a police vehicle in hot pursuit. Shocked by this sudden interruption, I knocked my drink to the floor. Mauricio explained that whoever was in the car must have been caught with drugs at the police checkpoint, which was only ten miles down the road. Mauricio was unhappy about the dangerous driving '...there are kids about, they could have killed someone!' he said. But when I asked him what he thought about the fact they were drug traffickers, his response was muted: '...look a person has to make a living from something.' Mauricio's words summed up the view of most coca farmers who see participation in the drugs trade as a commonsense response to a tight economic situation. He went on to explain that '...everyone is involved in the *white factory* ... somehow.'

'White Factory' is the term used in coca growing regions of Bolivia to describe cocaine production. Indigenous communities throughout the Andean region have used the coca leaf for spiritual and medical purposes for thousands of years, but the coca leaf is also the raw material used to produce cocaine. Bolivia is caught at the very lowest

rungs of the international drug trade, it is the world's third largest producer of coca leaf after Colombia and Peru, and produces large quantities of low value base paste (the first step in refining pure cocaine). Estimates for the country's annual cocaine production differ by a large margin. Some Bolivian academics suggest about twenty metric tons (Burgos Gallardo 2017), but U.S. assessments are ten times that figure (Schultze-Kraft 2016). According to Bolivian economist Jose Carlos Campero, in 2010 the coca-cocaine circuit was the third largest source of revenue for Bolivia, after hydrocarbons and mining (Schipani 2010).

In this paper I draw on a case study from the Cochabamba Tropics (also known as the Chapare), one of Bolivia's two principal coca-growing zones, to analyze the motivations, consequences and functioning of base paste production. We will see that, just as Mauricio says, the majority of the population are involved in the illicit trade, through engaging in growing and drying coca leaf, processing base paste, or smuggling precursor chemicals. As far as most farmers are concerned, participation in the drugs trade is not a moral question; base paste processing is simply a way to make a living in a geographic space where few other economic opportunities exist.

Two main arguments are advanced. First, it is argued that we cannot understand how the local drug economy functions unless we first comprehend how it is rooted in deeper social processes: specifically 'reciprocity' which is a guiding principal of everyday sociality. The illicit trade, which involves a complex local supply chain, builds on existing social relationships, but is also generative of new relations, and as such, draws people together into dense networks of debt and dependency (while simultaneously excluding outsiders). Drug workers are called on to reinvest some of their profits into social relationships through the sponsorship of community-oriented activities. The community then works together as a corporate unit, to ensure the steady production of coca and base paste, for the benefit of all.

Second, while the agricultural federations that operate in the Chapare cannot be thought of as criminal organizations, they nevertheless facilitate the illegal trade. This is because they exclude the state and keep criminal actors at bay, thus allowing drug processors to go about their work with minimal disruption. In addition the federations act as a parallel form of governance in the region, thereby providing a framework allowing (illicit) contracts to be enforced and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Taken together, these factors mean that far from generating chaos, disorder and inequality, the illegal drugs trade contributes to the region's economic prosperity and social and political stability.

The paper begins with an overview of coca, outlining its traditional uses and the legislation controlling its production and sale. It then traces the history of migration to the Chapare drawing attention to the way colonization was intimately bound to the growth of the illicit drug industry. The final part examines base paste production in the region today, with an emphasis on the way the movement of cocaine ties people together into dense social networks, and the role the unions play in governing the region. The conclusions reflect on the Chapare's place in the drug commodity chain and the potential future impacts of any change to drug policy at the international level.

Coca Leaf: Sacred and Profane

Coca (*Erythroxylum coca*) is a perennial shrub native to the Andean region, where it has been grown and used for medicinal and nutritional purposes for more than 5,000 years (Murra 1986). Coca is most often chewed but it can also be consumed as a tea. Users value its properties as a mild stimulant, suppressing feelings of hunger, thirst and fatigue. Unlike Peru and Colombia where coca use is restricted, in Bolivia coca use is accepted across most sectors, regions, and ethnicities. An EU funded study published in 2013

concluded that about three million Bolivians (30% of the population) chew coca on a regular basis, and the majority consume coca as a tea or in the form of other legal coca-based products (CONALTID 2013). Alongside its nutritional value coca serves important social and cultural functions. It is a central element of rituals from birth to death, and the leaf is considered to be sacred (Carter and Mamani 1986). The widespread use of coca in Bolivia has fed into sentiments of what Paul Gootenberg has referred to as ‘coca nationalism,’ (Gootenberg 2017: 5).

The reason why Andeans have long held coca in such high esteem is precisely because it contains cocaine alkaloid; this is what makes coca powerful, but also dangerous in the eyes of law-makers. In 1961 the UN listed the coca leaf as a ‘schedule one drug’ alongside the most dangerous and restricted substances including heroin and cocaine on the UN Single Convention on Narcotics. The UN convention calls 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 (Bolivia’s military government ratified the Convention in 1976). The 1961 convention thus provided the justification and legal framework for subsequent US-backed forced coca eradication policies in the Andes, including Bolivia’s draconian anti-drug law 1008.

The U.S. drug warriors’ focus in the Andean region has been the aggressive eradication of coca crops. Eradication is most often done manually: military conscripts, accompanied by heavily armed members of the police, enter small farmsteads to uproot coca plantations (Colombia is the only country in the region to permit the aerial fumigation of coca crops). Forced eradication has proved to be both ineffective and damaging: eradicating crops destroys local economies, criminalizes some of the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of society, and legitimizes repressive policing. In the Andean region eradication teams have killed, abused, and seriously wounded scores of coca farmers, torched homesteads, and incarcerated thousands of people (Youngers and Rosin

2005). Not only has crop eradication sowed violence, but it has manifestly failed to achieve its goal to reduce coca acreage, all it does is to displace coca cultivation to new areas, a phenomenon policy analysts refer to as the ‘balloon effect’ (Dion and Russler 2008).

In December 2005 Evo Morales, an indigenous Aymara and former coca-grower, won a landslide victory in Bolivia’s presidential election. Since then Morales and his Movement for Socialism (MAS) party has been re-elected twice, both times with a wide margin. President Morales has argued that coca in its natural state is not a drug and that it could benefit humanity. In 2009 Evo Morales chewed coca leaf at the UN in Vienna stating: ‘we’re for the coca leaf but against cocaine.’ He went on to argue that the ban of the crop amounted to a ban of a culture, and was a ‘major historical mistake’ (Grim 2009). In 2013 Bolivia scored an important victory when it won the right to permit legal coca leaf chewing on Bolivian territory. However, the industrialization and international export of coca based products remains a proscribed activity (Jelsma 2016).

Early in his first term, Morales moved to fulfill his campaign promise to break with the US-backed anti-drugs strategy, which focused on the forced eradication of coca crops and the criminalisation of growers. The new policy known as ‘coca yes - cocaine no’ draws on the coca growers’ own distinction between coca leaf and cocaine: it legalised the cultivation of a small amount of coca leaf in specific zones; encourages the coca unions to self-police to ensure growers do not exceed this limit; and envisions the industrialisation and export of (legal) coca-based products, such as soaps, teas and candies. Scholars have hailed Bolivia’s approach as a less repressive and effective way to control coca production (Grisaffi and Ledebur 2016, Pearson 2016). And yet there is a contradiction here, because while Morales talks about coca as a legitimate crop with myriad legal uses, as one coca grower friend remarked: ‘coca usually is cocaine.’ He went on to say: ‘where do you think all the coca really goes? You think people can chew all this

coca? If there was no cocaine then there would be no coca trade. It all goes to the white factory.’

Coca, Cocaine and Colonization

The Cochabamba Tropics or the Chapare as it is more commonly known, is one of Bolivia’s two principal coca-growing zones (the other is the Yungas close to the capital city La Paz). It’s a vast region covering more than 24,000 square kilometers (a landmass equivalent to New Hampshire) stretching over three provinces, Chapare, Tiraque, and Carrasco. In 2012 the population of this tropical agricultural zone stood at just over 190,000 people, the majority are migrants from the Cochabamba valleys and mining centers in the highlands, many of whom were previously engaged in militant miners’ trade unions (INE 2014). Over 80 percent of the local population self-identify as Quechua and most people are bi-lingual speaking a mixture of Quechua and Spanish (PNUD 2005: 302).

Farmers from the highlands and valleys first settled this frontier jungle region in the 1950s and 60s. The so-called ‘colonizers’ or ‘pioneers’ formed into self-governing units known as sindicatos (syndicates or agricultural unions) and set out in the jungle to claim land. One of the first things the colonizers did was to clear an area for a football pitch and construct a building for their monthly union meeting. When they were first established the unions were mainly responsible for controlling land, but their remit soon extended far beyond that. Given the almost total absence of the state, the unions became the de facto regional authorities responsible for managing and taxing the coca trade, administering justice, and investing in, and building small-scale public works such as roads, schools, health clinics, and river defenses. To this day the unions play an

important role in self-governance, but they have to constantly negotiate their autonomy with an encroaching state (Grisaffi 2019: 84-108).

The settlers established small farms on plots measuring between 5 to 10 hectares, and planted a range of crops including maize, rice, citrus fruits and bananas. From the early days of colonization, coca was a crop that the farmers grew primarily to sell on the market and it accounted for the bulk of their cash income.¹ Life was tough for the settlers: people recall that it took them a long time to get used to the weather, which is far hotter and more humid than their communities of origin in the highlands, and they despised the ‘clouds of mosquitoes.’ The settlers had a lot to learn, none had experience of tropical farming, and some (who were ex-miners) had no farming experience whatsoever. The poor roads meant that it could take up to a week to get to Cochabamba, the nearest city (Wennergren and Whitaker 1976).

Initially the pace of migration to the Chapare was low, most people lived there for only part of the year, and there were high rates of abandonment (Clawson and Lee 1996: 134). However, this all changed in the late 1970s when increasing demand for cocaine in the United States (and to a lesser extent Europe) made cocaine base paste the nation’s most profitable export commodity. It all started when Colombian criminal organizations came searching for cheap raw material (initially coca leaf, but eventually base paste too), which they transported to Colombia to be refined into pure cocaine and from there exported to the USA and Europe (Gootenberg 2008). The Chapare’s population exploded as tens of thousands of unemployed workers and hard-pressed farmers flocked to the region to seek work in the illicit industry. By some accounts the population grew from around 24,000 in 1967 to 400,000 by the mid 1980s (Dunkerley 1990: 45, Perez 1992: 28). The mass movement of people from urban areas to engage in

¹ At that time the coca they produced was for traditional uses, with most of the crop sold in the department of Potosí to supply the miners, who chewed it (Laserna 2000).

agricultural labor represented a reversal of normal rural-urban migration and with it standard models of historical evolution (Dunkerley 2007: 40).

Most migrants were involved in growing, drying or marketing coca leaves. Others found work processing cocaine paste in primitive workshops located close to the coca fields, where they earned relatively high wages, when compared to other non-skilled professions (Rivera 1990). The local cocaine trade also generated indirect employment, including jobs for prostitutes, bartenders and restaurateurs. To this can be added a large number of people who transported the inputs necessary to process cocaine such as gasoline, cement and bicarbonate of soda. To give but one example, James Painter (1994: 57) describes how in the mid 1980s at least 2,000 people were involved in transporting and selling toilet paper in the Chapare, which was used for filtering and drying base paste.

A local shopkeeper described the Chapare at that time as being in the midst of a 'gold rush'. He said he could shift bicycles, crates of rum and radios with ease. The Chapare became one of the most expensive places in the country to live, with a single bread roll costing more than a dollar. And yet, while there was money in the tropics, the conditions were hard. The workers lived on a diet of tinned sardines and noodles and they took shelter in makeshift houses constructed from rough-cut planks with beaten mud floors. The combination of the precariousness of cocaine production, the emerging threat of the US backed 'war on drugs', and the fact that for many the Chapare was simply not a nice place to live, ruled out permanent investment in the region. The migrants, who were overwhelmingly men, invested their cash in the city of Cochabamba where the streets teemed with new cars and there was a construction boom, the Chapare meanwhile remained a pocket of rural poverty.

The 'coca boom' (1979-1985) could not have come at a better time. The Bolivian economy was battered by the combination of a severe drought, hyperinflation, and a

draconian government-engineered deflation that pushed unemployment to over 20 per cent (Dunkerley 1990). Bolivia's economic 'safety net' through this tumultuous time was the coca and cocaine trade, which generated between \$600 to \$1 billion dollars annually, matching (if not exceeding) total revenue from legal exports (De Franco and Godoy 1992: 387). The cocaine dollars trickled down to support a large informal economy and absorbed labor from the collapsed mining and industrial sectors (Blanes 1989, Mansilla 1992). James Painter (1994: 54) has argued that in so doing, coca and cocaine provided 'critical support' for the success of the National Revolutionary Movement government's economic stabilization program.

While the cocaine economy undoubtedly benefitted a significant chunk of the population, the coca growers and base paste processors were not the major beneficiaries of this industry - indeed they are best thought of as the 'proletariat' of the cocaine trade (Aguilo 1986). The real winners were the large-scale landowners in the states of Beni, Pando and Santa Cruz, who managed the refinement and transport of base paste outside of the country. They were ideally placed for this trade as they had large extensions of land in remote parts of the country, airplanes and landing strips (Dunkerley 1984: 318-19). Most importantly these landowners were well connected to military and political elites, who in some cases became directly involved in the illicit trade (Gillies 2018).

Coca Union Mobilization

In July 1986, when the coca trade was booming, the Reagan administration, in collaboration with the Bolivian government, sent 160 U.S. soldiers to Bolivia to initiate efforts to destroy drug laboratories and to train the militarized police force (known as the UMOPAR) in the techniques of jungle warfare. 'Operation Blast Furnace' as it came to be known, marked the start of US involvement in Bolivian drug control, an issue that

would define US-Bolivian relations for the following twenty years (Grandin 2006: 215-18). The repression against the drug trade fell disproportionately on the peasant farmers, who gain the least from the trade, while the ‘big fish’ were seldom arrested (Dunkerley 1990: 45).

In 1988, Bolivia passed anti-drug law 1008 (in force until 2017) under heavy US pressure. Law 1008 permits 12,000 hectares of coca cultivation in the Yungas of La Paz to supply the domestic legal market, all other coca, including that in the Chapare was outlawed and slated for eradication.² Initially, the Bolivian government paid Chapare farmers \$2000 dollars per hectare to eradicate their crops, but this policy failed. For every coca plant destroyed, the farmers planted new coca saplings elsewhere, and total acreage kept creeping up (Clawson and Lee 1996: 221) One farmer explained that they would take the pay-out and reinvest it in new crops, while the military did the hard work of uprooting old and unproductive plantations. ‘We’re not stupid’ he said. Given the poor results, in 1997 the Banzer - Quiroga administration (1997-2002), implemented a no holds barred forced eradication program.

The militarized approach dramatically reduced coca cultivation in the region, but the security forces were repeatedly denounced for the gross violation of human rights (Ledebur 2005, Salazar Ortuño 2008: 137-238). In a 2005 interview Don Emeterio, a coca grower in his forties explained, ‘we were chased down, abducted, locked up, beaten, we lost our brothers and sisters.’ The carrot was an ill thought out USAID led scheme to encourage farmers to grow legal crops, but these projects repeatedly failed to implement viable programs to benefit coca growers and their families. As a result forced eradication caused economic hardship and fueled discontent (Marconi 1998, Recasens 1995).

² The law has been described as ‘draconian’ as it made no distinction between street-level dealers and major traffickers, and ensured that Bolivians charged with drug-related offences were imprisoned indefinitely without the possibility of bail. Many Chapare coca growers were locked up on drug trafficking offences, and detentions led to overcrowding in the major prisons (Farthing 1997).

In the face of ongoing military and police repression the Chapare coca growers' unions organized its 45,000 members to resist the states' anti-coca policies by blocking roads, leading marches and staging national level protests. The union also set up its own party in 1995, which eventually became the MAS.³ The unions argued that they were small-scale farmers producing a crop for which there was no substitute that could yield even remotely comparable earnings. Further, they drew attention to the sacred status of coca leaf for Andean indigenous peoples, to argue that the US backed attack on coca, was an attack on the very idea of Bolivian sovereignty (Stefanoni 2007, Vargas 2014). In the context of a growing global indigenous rights movement, the union's emphasis on coca's cultural and symbolic significance gained domestic and international support, propelling Evo Morales to the Presidency.

Mauricio's Workshop

Mauricio (introduced at the start of this paper) grew up in the Chapare, but spent several years living in the city of Cochabamba, where he worked as a municipal administrator. He moved back to the region in 2008 to be closer to his parents, and to help them out on their farm. Five years later, in 2013, he decided to set up a cocaine paste workshop. This was not an outrageous career choice, but a logical step along a well-trodden path, one that his brothers and uncles had taken before him (it is overwhelmingly men who work directly in cocaine paste production). Mauricio was enthusiastic about the possibilities to make some cash from this new venture. He told me 'Look I worked in public administration for eight years. But the wage is really low. Here (in the Chapare) I can make money from coca. The life is better, there is no obligation to go the office

³ Leonidas Oikonomakis provides an excellent account of the internal debates that underlined the decision to form the MAS - placing emphasis on the role of organic intellectuals in steering the movement away from armed rebellion (Oikonomakis 2019, 169-194).

everyday.’ He explained that with coca cultivation and his ‘other occupation’ (drug processing) he could make well over US\$1000 a month, a substantial income in a country where the monthly minimum wage is less than US\$300.

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 (up to 1000 liters) to turn over the mulch. But, these are recent developments. When I began fieldwork in 2005, everything was done by hand. Most workshops relied on young men (known as *pisa-cocas*), to stomp on the coca leaf for several hours to mix up the solution. The costs associated with entering the cocaine trade then, are very low: the equipment is cheap to buy, the skills required are easy to learn, and the chemicals can be bought at a hardware store or gas station. Even so, not just anyone can set up a cocaine paste workshop. Only people who are said to be respectable and committed to their community have access to the necessary inputs. To understand why this is the case, we have to dig deeper to understand the importance of Andean notions of reciprocity.

Anthropologists have long argued that reciprocity is a core organizing principle of Andean indigenous communities (Harris 2000, Bolton 2002, Albó 2002). In the Chapare this is no different, indeed from the perspective of most Chapare farmers a ‘good person’ is not a self-reliant individual, but rather someone who demonstrates loyalty and care towards people and place (see Grisaffi 2019: 96-100). Farmers in the Chapare use the Quechua term ‘*ayni*’ (mutual aid) to refer to the constant exchanges that characterize daily life⁴. *Ayni*, can be practiced in a number of ways: people might gift one another food, work in a neighbor’s fields for no pay, or even lend unused portions of

⁴ *Ayni* has been defined as ‘a symmetrical exchange of delayed reciprocity between equals, usually manifest in labor exchanges,’ or simply put, mutual aid (Allen 1981: 165).

their land to others so that they might farm it. The point is, each person has to be entangled in the lives of others, offering support when called on, but also asking for assistance in turn. These daily Maussian exchanges tie people into dense relationships of debt and dependency and become a central way of drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Albó 2002: 10). Only those who live up to these social expectations are considered to be true members of the community and deserving of its protection. They are the ones who are able to engage in the region's main economic activity - namely drug production. Let us now consider each step of the drug trade to elaborate on this point.

To make one kilo of paste the owner of a workshop requires roughly six sacks of coca (weighing 50 pounds each). They buy this coca from accredited merchants, who are mostly local women and land-owners in their own right. In theory the merchants are supposed to take all of the coca they buy from local farmers to the official state sanctioned coca market in Sacababa (on the outskirts of the city of Cochabamba), to be sold for 'traditional' uses (for chewing, to celebrate rituals and so on); but hardly any of the Chapare crop ends up there.⁵ Rather the merchants 'divert' the coca so that it might feed the illicit cocaine trade (both locally and nationally). They do this because the drug processors pay around 20 cents per pound over and above the going price. In 2006 when the agricultural union attempted to enforce a rule that merchants must take all coca to the legal market, the local merchants rebelled.

The sale of coca in the Chapare is not a free market. At the very bottom of the chain are the farmers, who almost always sell their coca to the same merchant. More often than not the merchant is a member of their extended kin-group (a sister, cousin or affine), or someone who they are tied to through fictive kinship (*compadrazgo* or godparenthood). In turn the merchants look after the farmers' interests, including providing them with cash advances for a portion of the harvest, helping out the farmer's children

⁵ A UN study estimated that only six per cent of the Chapare coca ends up in the legal coca market (UNODC 2018).

economically, or supporting them in a reclamation they might have in the context of their grassroots union (for instance in a dispute over boundaries or settling a debt).

On the next rung up, are the merchants; they too operate within restricted networks. The amount of coca available on any-one day is finite, and the coca merchants will only sell to established contacts, which often means their kin relations and members of their base-level union (in other words, their neighbors). The merchants will simply not sell coca in large quantities to people who they do not know. First because they are suspicious of outsiders (for good reason, for decades the US Drug Enforcement Administration [DEA] had spies deployed in the region), but second, because if they sold the coca in their possession to an unknown party, then they would be letting down their regular clients, who might shun them on a future occasion.

Gasoline is another important input; to process one kilo of base paste the drug workers require 100 liters (about 26 gallons), alongside a range of other chemicals. However, there are tight controls on the movement of these precursors: local gas stations only allow people to buy one tank per day, and they add pink dye to it, which makes it less attractive for base paste production. There are also regular checkpoints along the roads where the police revise vehicles; they will impound any suspicious chemicals and arrest the driver. As a result, the essential ingredients are in short supply. Given the difficulty of buying gasoline locally, taxi drivers who ply the route from the Chapare to the city of Cochabamba (a four-hour ride) smuggle fuel, doubling the price in the tropics. Just like coca then, this is not a free market, smugglers will only ever sell chemicals to their regular clients - who they are often tied to through kinship or *compadrazgo* (god-parenthood).

Finally, there is the issue of where the drugs workshop should be located. A drug-processing site does not take up much space, but generally people do not want one located on their property. This is because if a coca union led commission or the police

discover it, then the farmer will lose his or her land. Drug workers, then, have two options. They can either set up a workshop on their own land, with all the risk that this entails, or, they can set it up on someone else's land and pay a 'ground rent,' transferring the risk to someone else. For Mauricio the latter option was more appealing. His parent's land was located along a main road and as such it was easily accessible by the militarized police, raising the likelihood that he would be caught. But also because of its location in the main colonization area, the land was high value, and it made no sense to risk losing it. Mauricio therefore decided to establish his workshop in a remote jungle area and pay the landowner (who was the godson of Mauricio's parents) a fee for doing so.

In 2013 Mauricio was a new entrant to the illicit trade. He was able to establish his workshop because, while he had lived away from the Chapare for some years, he was by no means an outsider. Mauricio was a member of an established Chapare family that was well-respected. As such he had the contacts necessary to rent land (where he could situate his workshop), and he was able to secure a steady supply of coca from an aunt, and gasoline from his godfather. His siblings meanwhile, collaborated to help him cover the US\$4000 start-up costs. Mauricio pledged to repay the money with interest once he had sold his first batch of base paste. He spoke of his siblings as 'partners' or 'investors'. Mauricio hired three of his male cousins who were aged between 16 to 18 years old to do the hard work. These laborers, known locally as *peons*, were responsible for carrying the heavy bags of coca, moving barrels of chemicals and operating the machinery, for which they were paid around \$30 dollars per '*entrada*' (session). Mauricio had worked as a coca stomper (*pisa-coca*) in his youth, as such he was familiar with the process (including the quantities of chemicals needed and when to add them) and was able to oversee operations.

From the very beginning Mauricio knew he would sell the base paste to Don Jenaro, a local man who was also Mauricio's godfather (Jenaro had paid for Mauricio's

wedding celebrations). Jenaro had a plot of land where he grew coca and oranges, but he also had a side business which involved buying up bricks of base paste and arranging for them to be delivered to buyers in the city. When the paste was ready Jenaro visited Mauricio at his home to check the product and pay for it (in 2013 a kilo of base paste in the Chapare cost around \$1650 dollars). This was a convivial moment, Jenaro bought along a bottle of Singani (a type of brandy produced in Bolivia) so that they could share a few drinks together. Alongside Mauricio, Jenaro had many other 'godchildren' (*abijados*), and all of them were duty bound to sell the paste they produced to him - he was after all their 'godfather' and in the words of Mauricio, 'you cannot deny your *padrino*.'

Don Jenaro then hired third parties, normally teenagers or members of the large itinerant work force (landless peasants who are always on the look out for work), to smuggle the drugs out of the region. Packages of cocaine would be taped onto the chests of young children, stowed in car door panels, or loaded into lorries under thousands of oranges. Some carry the paste by foot to the city of Cochabamba, a five-day trek with the risk of robbery. People also go on canoe trips along the winding rivers all the way to the department of Beni and further towards the frontier with Brazil. Local coca farmers mentioned that there are a handful of Peruvian and Colombian business people operating in the Chapare who would buy up locally produced cocaine paste and fly it out of the region on small planes.⁶

The coca paste still needs to be refined into pure crystalized cocaine (cocaine hydrochloride), but this is a complex process, requiring more skill, equipment, and expensive chemicals that are difficult to obtain (such as acetone and ether). This generally takes place outside of Bolivia, but the authorities have discovered operations located within the country (ERBOL 2016). In 2013 while on a fishing trip with Mauricio, I visited a small village deep in the Isiboro National Park (in the north of Chapare) that

⁶ Bolivia acts as an air-bridge for Peruvian cocaine on its way to the market in Brazil (Paredes 2017)

was only accessible by river. Mauricio told me that a Colombian run cocaine refinery operated there, and that the entire village was involved in the trade. Mauricio claimed to know this because his uncle lived in the village. The village did indeed appear to be very wealthy, each house had its own generator, satellite dish, large modern television and a range of white goods (these are not the kinds of domestic appliances one might expect to find in an isolated indigenous Amazonian village).

In Andean Indigenous communities there is a strong pressure for resources to be redistributed between community members. In the highlands there are explicit leveling mechanisms in place, which revolve around the sponsorship of saint's days festivals. The sponsors are responsible for paying for lavish feasts and parties, which can put them into debt for many years (see Abercrombie 1998). In the Chapare similar leveling mechanisms are at work. Mauricio, and others who are involved in drug production, have more disposable income than their peers who are not directly involved in these activities, as such they are 'invited' (although there is a strong social pressure to accept) to sponsor community oriented activities such as paying for the school graduation trip, organizing a band for a fiesta or buying matching uniforms for the local football team. Drug workers might also be asked to act as a *'padrino'* (godparent) for individuals, for example to pay for marriage celebrations, first confirmation or *quinceañera* celebrations⁷. Mauricio received many requests of this nature, and he honored each one. In turn he had a great many 'god-children' and was held in high esteem in the village, feted as a generous and kind person who was worthy of the community's protection. This in turn benefitted Mauricio as local people would support his activities, for instance by ensuring he had access to a steady supply of coca leaf and that the union would not interfere with his business. On the contrary, anyone who was perceived to have surplus cash (gained through licit or illicit means) but who did not invest into their social relations in this way,

⁷ *'Quinceañera'* refers to the celebration of a girl turning fifteen.

was said to be immoral and would loose 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.

In The Shadow of the State

The agricultural unions of the Chapare are not directly involved in the cocaine trade. On the contrary, the unions oppose illicit cocaine production in their official proclamations, and since Morales came to power the unions have collaborated with the state crop monitoring agency (UDESTRO) to restrict coca cultivation (Grisaffi, Farthing, and Ledebur 2017). They have also organized ad-hoc commissions to check that no member is producing cocaine paste on union controlled land. This has had the effect of pushing drug production deeper into the jungle and away from the main colonization areas (Grisaffi 2014).⁸ And yet while the union has made efforts to counter the drug trade the hegemony it exercises in the region has unwittingly provided a framework that enables the drug trade to function. This is because the union effectively excludes the state; provides alternative dispute resolution mechanisms; and suppresses the activity of criminal organizations. Lets now look at each of these in turn.

First: The union purposely excludes the state. It was 2nd July 2006, the night of the election for members of an Assembly that would re-write Bolivia's constitution. High-level union leaders and local municipal councilors (the Chapare town halls are run as an extension of the union [see Grisaffi 2019: 150-72]) had gathered on the terrace of the union owned and operated radio station, to drink beer and listen to the results as they rolled in. The mayor, who was himself a coca grower and union member, had invited the

⁸ Drug processors told me that they have been forced to alter their behavior, setting up production sites in ever more remote areas and never maintaining a production site in one place for more than two weeks. Often absentee landowners are unaware production ever occurred on their property.

municipal police commander and his driver to join the party. As the night progressed, people paid less attention to the results and more attention to drinking and dancing. A female union leader invited the male police commander for a dance, he agreed, and this provoked a huge amount of laughter. My friend, Diego, expressed his surprise at the spectacle ‘only one year ago you would never have seen thisan officer and a cholita (female coca grower who wears traditional clothes)⁹... dancing!?’

The dancing police officer was so strange because until the 2005 MAS victory, the coca growers had viewed the state as an enemy, one that was set on destroying their livelihoods. The unions purposely excluded the state and would not even permit agents of ostensibly benign arms of the state (such as development workers or those involved in land tilting) to enter their communities. The only way the state entered then, was through law enforcement activities in the form of militarized interventions conducted by UMOPAR. For Diego the dance was a sign that with Morales and the MAS in power this relationship had started to thaw. But even so, most people continue to be suspicious of the police - who they describe as ‘more criminal than the criminals’.

In a 2013 interview Sergeant Rojas, of the municipal police, explained that the regular police tend to stay in the main towns and do not venture into the rural hinterland. He said that there are many areas where his officers simply cannot go, or first have to ask permission from the union leadership before they enter. There have been reports of coca farmers holding members of the police hostage and setting fire to their trucks when they entered coca union territory without permission (Los Tiempos 2014). In Sergeant Rojas’s own words, the Chapare is ‘*la tierra de nadie*’ or a ‘no man’s land.’ The state’s limited-reach has obvious implications for the illicit trade. In the more remote areas of the Chapare, such as Isiboro Secure, where state presence is minimal, drugs workers can operate safe

⁹ In the Chapare Cholita is a word used to describe women who wear traditional Andean clothing - including a layered gathered skirt.

in the knowledge that they are unlikely to be detected and arrested. Coca farmers described how, in these areas the drug trade occurred more or less ‘in the open’.

While the unions exclude the state the militarized anti-narcotic police force (UMOPAR) are nevertheless present in the region: guarding the checkpoint that residents have to pass through every time they want to connect to the national highway or visit the largest towns. Coca growers would (on occasion) denounce the illicit activities of their neighbors to the police (for instance by providing a tip-off about when a shipment of drugs will pass through the checkpoint or informing on the location of a drugs workshop). This was not driven by a desire to see the local trade wiped out, nor to attack a competitor, however. Rather the involvement of the police was generally a way to ‘get back’ at someone for a personal grievance, which might have nothing to do with the drugs industry per se: a denunciation might be motivated by a perceived lack of respect, dispute over land boundaries, or marital infidelity amongst other issues. Drawing inspiration from Insa Koch (2018), I argue that in these instances the police are used as an ally to pursue personal vendettas, rather than to seek an abstract idea of justice.

Second: The union’s role as a regional authority. The unions represent the region’s primary civil authority, practicing a de facto autonomy, they function like a parallel state’ working to address common problems, from administering land to setting transport fares and opening out penetration roads (see Grisaffi 2019: 105-107). One of the most important roles of the local union is to regulate (often in a coercive way) daily coexistence and interaction between members. On-going disputes within the community, including robbery, disagreements over land boundaries, or outstanding debts are dealt with at the monthly union meeting, where the issue is debated and resolved with the participation of the entire community. The union has the power and authority to make sure 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 the fact that it controls access to land, and if any member contravenes a union mandate then the leadership can seize their land and expel the person from the community.

In the previous section we saw how coca growers are embedded in complex networks of exchange involving labor, coca, precursor chemicals and base paste. But of course, the debts that people incur are not always repaid in a timely fashion and people can and do come into conflict. Disputes between people who work in the drug industry mean disputes between neighbors (or even members of the same family), and they tend to be resolved in a pragmatic rather than a violent manner. But, if people cannot solve a problem on their own, then they can turn to the union and have their case heard at the monthly meeting. If a debt is linked to the cocaine trade (such as a failure to pay a worker for processing base paste) then the reason will not be publicly acknowledged, however (it will simply be spoken of as ‘a debt’). During fieldwork I witnessed many occasions where debts were settled in a peaceful and calm manner at union meetings. Even if one of the parties was not happy with the final verdict, they nevertheless knew they would have to follow the union’s command because if they did not then they risked losing their land.

Third: The Union suppresses organized criminal activity. Illegal armed actors operate in coca growing regions of Colombia (Ramirez 2011) and Peru (Kernaghan 2009), they intimidate farmers, dictate prices and in some cases force people off the land (Ballvé 2013). There have long been media reports that transnational organized crime networks control the drugs trade in the Chapare (Cuiza 2018), but this seems unlikely. The union is a powerful organization, which in the recent past mobilized thousands of its members to face down state forces, including setting up armed militias to fight against militarized eradication units. It is inconceivable then that a handful of Colombians or Brazilians

would be able to take control of this vast region, a task that not even the Bolivian state has been able to achieve.

The unions take an active role in policing their own communities and providing security. For example, when youth gangs reared their head in the Chapare, the unions stamped them out immediately. The local sheriff (a position that is appointed by the union) called on parents to bring their gang affiliated sons to the main plaza where he whipped them and had them confess to their crimes. Outsiders are treated with the most suspicion - and anyone who is thought to be involved in an activity that goes against the community's interest, faces the very real possibility that they will suffer the violence of 'community justice.' Punishment includes 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, hanging by the neck, or burying them in sand with only their head sticking out. Many people have been killed in this way (Vásquez 2013). While this behavior might sound brutal, most coca growers support the idea of violent punishment. People say that violent acts send a strong message that will deter people from committing crime in their area. I was told, "the criminals are afraid to come here" and "they don't dare commit crime here." Vigilantism of this kind is by no means unique to the Chapare, but can be witnessed right across Andes (Goldstein 2012, Starn 1999).

Finally, while the unions exclude criminal actors, it is also the case that criminal organizations would have no real interest in controlling the Chapare coca or base paste trade, as there would be very little to gain. The union manages the local coca markets and protects the coca plantations from state incursions. Thus, there is a guaranteed flow of high quality coca leaf that is sold to drug processors and traffickers who operate all over the country. In addition, while the price of Bolivian coca leaf is higher than in either Peru or Colombia, it is nevertheless the lowest point in the value chain and is labor intensive

to produce. From the perspective of a trans-national organized crime group then, directly governing the coca and base paste trade in the Chapare would not make economic sense. There are more profitable niches that they can dominate.

Conclusion

The local drug trade is entrepreneurial in spirit; drug workers raise capital, invest in equipment and hire laborers to manufacture a product, which they sell at a profit. And yet, it cannot be understood through a rational economic lens, local drug workers simply do not act as self-maximizing individuals. Rather, we have seen that the illicit trade has its own logic that prioritizes reciprocity, kinship and community over self-interested behavior. Drug workers, like Mauricio, utilize pre-existing social networks (often built on kinship relations) to secure access to the resources they need (coca and gasoline) and to sell the final product. This might mean forgoing profit to honor longstanding commitments to suppliers or buyers. Mauricio reinvests some of his profits into events or goods that benefit everyone. Such gifts indebted others who in turn look out for his interests. Conversely, people who are not part of these ongoing exchange networks are locked out of participation in the local drug trade. They cannot buy coca leaf or gasoline, hire workers or work in peace free from the intrusion of union leaders. In sum, the local cocaine trade is deeply embedded in the community, people work together to produce and traffic base paste in accordance with strongly held ideals of what it means to be a 'good person' and to advance their local community.

One of the reasons why the illicit trade is an accepted and tolerated aspect of everyday life is because it continues apace in relative peace. 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, which are hegemonic in the region, act as de-facto authorities, regulating

relations between union members (and even non-members who are resident 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 (for instance debts go unpaid) then the parties in conflict have non-violent ways to resolve the dispute. In addition the union excludes the state and keeps criminal organizations at bay. Combined, these facts mean that the drug trade can function in relative peace and contribute to the economic prosperity of the region.

I want to end by making a broader point regarding drug policy. We can see how at the very lowest rungs of the drug commodity chain, the cocaine trade generates high levels of employment (including providing jobs for men and women, and younger and older people) and economic stability. Indeed, it could be argued that coca cultivation and base paste production are drivers of development, offering farmers an unparalleled avenue for social mobility. Coca cultivation is far more lucrative than 'fair trade' coffee or cacao, for instance. Given the important role coca and base paste production plays in the regional economy, any change to the cocaine commodity chain will be strongly felt in this region.

Neither the MAS government, nor the coca unions, can truthfully represent the interests of their membership, because to do so would be to acknowledge their dependence on an illicit market. Instead, the coca growers' unions have always argued that 'coca is not cocaine' and promoted the decriminalization of coca leaf, which they say could be used to produce a range of (legal) products. However this policy might well go against the farmers' interests. If coca was legal then anyone would be able to farm it, and history tells us that when coca plantations are extensive the price drops. A more frank conversation is needed about the future of drug policy, one that acknowledges the importance of cocaine dollars to the poor people who survive at the rural (and urban) margins.

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