

## Book reviews

### **The Colombian puzzle: drugs, society, and human rights. Massacres, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia, Public Affairs, New York 2003.**

R. Kirk, FE. Thoumi, *Illegal Drugs, Economy, and Society in the Andes*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press/The Johns Hopkins University Press, Washington DC/Baltimore & London, 2003.

We must praise the recent publication of these two comprehensive books about Colombia, addressing different aspects of a long-term domestic and international conflict roving over an interwoven context of drug trafficking, drug and guerilla war, violence, and disrespect for basic human rights.

The books are written from a quite different perspective and target different audiences. Thoumi's book combines the life experience of a native Colombian with the international flavor of an internationally acclaimed scholar in the field of economics. Kirk's book was written by an American activist in the field of human rights (then affiliated with the Human Rights Watch). In their effort to grasp the deep meaning of a quite complex situation both make a deliberate move toward new and complementary perspectives. Thoumi, while in permanent dialogue with economic science, recognizes himself the limitation of any restricted perspective (including the limitations of former one-sided economics-driven analyses), and resorts to a deep analysis of Colombian society and history. Kirk, who mocks at her own position as a foreigner ("la gringa"), "lost" amidst a cross-fire of contradictory information and deliberate lies, sustains a double and intertwined point of view as an "insider"/"outsider".

Both authors have the courage to move beyond the usual stereotypes and to state clearly there are no easy solutions for the current state of things. Such kind of critical analysis usually challenges the fans of simplistic slogans and political propaganda with the complexities of real life. Both authors say frankly to their readers it was much easier (whereas hypocritical and counter-productive) to adhere to the points of view sustained by either the left or right, drug users or dealers, Americans or Colombians, such eternal dichotomies plaguing any valid alternative. It is frustrating for the informed reader to realize that such not-so-pleasant critical analyses are seldom heard by people in charge of formulating and moni-

toring public policies and international cooperation, plagued by cheap politics and massive doses of "more of the same" as a remedy for evident and successive failures.

Thoumi highlights the divide experienced by Colombia since the post-war year between a reasonable sound economy (for Latin American standards) and a context of permanent social and political crisis. Sky rocketing homicide rates are just the most evident somber indicator of a society demoralized by structural violence in its most deprived communities, kidnapping, bombings, and overt influence of illicit business on politics (either as a violent threat or through the pervasive menace of cooptation and corruption of authorities and civil leaderships).

In the last decades, the coca-cocaine industry in Colombia evolved from a domestic affair toward a multi-millionaire business, with strong links with the established powers, international distribution networks, sophisticated money-laundering networks and, worst, with complex and contradictory links with the very institutions, persons and policies aiming to curb its permanent grow and spread.

This seems to be the case of the continued effort to eradicate crops which has been basically fostering the disguise of coca plantations, the intertwining of coca crops with other crops (most of them key for the survival of the local peasants), and the continuous displacement of coca cultivations to new lands. The overall balance of such a programme is disappointing even from the point of view of those who have been in charge of it, since the coca acreage has been on increase instead of declining in recent years. If one adds to the very failure of the basic programme aim the many other problems caused by the continuous sparkling of dangerous products on a fragile environment and the deliberate efforts to evade fumigation, we may forecast an ecological disaster in the near future. We can expect a growing contamination of plants, animals, and water reservoirs, and further deforestation either caused by environmental progressive decay and the frenetic search for alternative, hidden, lands to grow coca bushes.

But this is just one side of the problem given its enormous social costs in terms of the daily lives and activities of peasants. Given the serious infra-structure problems of Colombian agriculture, not to mention the permanent conflict between guerillas, the paramilitary, the police, and the army, deeply rooted in the Colombian coun-

tryside and small villages, it is not difficult to understand why alternatives to coca cultivations have been nothing but a mirage.

Coca/cocaine offers the perspective of good profits (even considering that the share of producers and small retailers is irrelevant compared to the lion's share of big dealers and their financial brokers) and the well-established illicit networks provide the chance to bypass constraints such as deficits in transportation and commercialization. Coca/cocaine is a commodity illicit networks avidly seek for, unlike the "usual" commodities, such as bananas or manioc, challenged by the usual difficulties in terms of transportation, distribution, and commercialization. The next step of the industry is coca refining and it is quite a simple business, using a myriad of substances easy to buy and hide that can replace each other with no major interruption of the productive chain. The pipeline can be easily operated by untrained low-paid workers.

But, the inevitable consequence of such profitable, ever-growing, easy-operations industry is that it functions as a magnet for all kinds of people seeking for money and power, re-emerging deep-entrenched conflicts and triggering brand new ones. Cocaine has been the oil lubricating the historical conflicts between different fractions of the Colombian society, as the main source of easy profit, in the form of illicit taxes collected by guerillas, paramilitaries, bribe, and commodity to be traded with weapons and favours.

While violence has been deeply ingrained in Colombia, at least since the big conflict of the late 1940s/1950s, called much properly "La Violencia" (The Violence), the illicit network of cocaine smuggling and money laundering has been a fundamental element of its ever increase and progressive worsening. As mentioned by Kirk, it is not easy to discern the roots of the current conflicts since all the parties seem to resemble each other after the complete effacement of their original ideologies amidst generalized corruption and massacres made routine in the lives of communities. Weird alliances have been forged between those viewing themselves as the "left" and the "right", the "conservatives" and the "reformers", etc.

The overall perspective is of a country sinking under the burden of a generalized conflict and the consequences of an illicit industry that besides its obvious financial power, corrupts the very morale of the society fabric.

The role of the international community, especially the USA, has been a dangerous mixture of indifference, disrespect for domestic cultural and social specificities. Kirk highlights many times the conflictive nature of the incisive American policies and the quest for the protection of human rights. Thoumi emphasizes the infinite reenactment of failed policies, such as the attempts to interdict and control of chemical inputs.

The reader feels pessimistic after reading such two insightful books, but notwithstanding happy to move beyond ordinary propaganda and too-easy alternatives. I must confess to read Kirk's book was many times a difficult task for me, despite its objectivity and amiable style. That is a matter

of a shared experience of suffering of a whole generation of Latin Americas forced to live part of their lives under dictatorships (as my own generation of Brazilian fellow country men) and/or under a never-ending cycle of violence, as many Colombians or many other fellow Latin Americans suffering in the slums, dwellings, that abound in this part of the world.

Some conclusions came to my mind after reading such compelling books. Firstly, there are no easy solutions or rather "solutions" at all to the so-called "drug problem", the only wise decision is to reduce the harms and minimize the risks associated with the more destructive patterns of consumption. Secondly, one should always distrust of any easy alternative to complex, long-term, social problems. Thirdly, nothing justifies the use of violence to supposedly "ease" social conflict. Additional violence, whatever the origin and justification, just fuel the eternal cycle of murder and revenge. And finally, human rights should not be a smoke curtain to please those "boring" people concerned with their obvious violation. Policies should promote the respect for human rights or should not be considered sound policies at all.

The perverse alliances of the present are the "the serpent's eggs" nested in the leap of society. Later, such eggs will become full-grown serpents, scaring a larger number of people, challenging the very foundation of democracy and any hope to regain hope itself.

Francisco I. Pinkusfeld M. Bastos  
 FIOCRUZ, Oswaldo Cruz Foundation Av.,  
 Brasil 4365, Biblioteca de Manguinhos,  
 #229 Rio de Janeiro 21045-900, Brazil  
 Tel.: +55 21 3865 3231; fax: +55 21 2290 1696.  
 E-mail address: chicao29@hotmail.com

10.1016/j.drugpo.2005.01.001

### **Controlling Illegal Drugs: A Comparative Study**

Sandro Segre, Aldine de Gruyter (Nora Stern, Trans.), New York, 2003, 237 pp., ISBN: 0202307166/0202307174.

*Controlling Illegal Drugs: A Comparative Study*, describes and compares drug and welfare policies and their putative goals: supply reduction, demand reduction and drug users' rehabilitation in the USA, Sweden and Italy. Segre argues that as these countries faced no major economic drawbacks in the period under analysis, such prosperity could and should, hypothetically, translate into sound social policies.

Drug policy in the three countries is skewed toward law enforcement which aims to reduce drug supply and from this perspective there are no marked contrasts between them. On the other hand, additional drug policies and welfare policies were implemented with contrasting, sometimes opposite, social goals. Such contrasting policies have determined dif-