Creative Drug Consumption and Production in Medellin, Colombia

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These comments are a reflection on a series of visits to Medellin’s conflictive low-income neighborhoods and in-depth interviews with their youth. These areas of the city are plagued by gangs and have high violence levels and widespread drug consumption.

In these comments, it is argued that routine drug use in urban contexts has its own rituals and that drug producers for self-use build a civic ethics that aims to separate drug consumption from the criminal problems associated to it.

THE LINKS BETWEEN CONSUMPTION AND CRIME

Mainstream Colombians, including low-income neighborhood residents, believe that drug consumers generate neighborhood insecurity and equate drug users to delinquents. It is true that some criminal bands consume drugs quite openly, but there is not enough information to argue that drug consumption turns its users into criminals.

There is no question that two factors encourage crime. First, violence might be used as a competitive tool to control local drug markets. Second, the abstinence syndrome in addicts whose lives lack a sense of purpose encourages crime although this varies across drugs and use environments. Indeed, the effects of some drugs actually tranquilize the user and when drug use is ritualized, the user’s behavior is controlled.

It is true that some drugs are used to commit crimes. For example, some former sicarios (hired guns) confessed that they used stimulant pills to facilitate their killings, other gang members assigned to security used cocaine to do a better job meeting their duties.

In Medellin the most used drug is marijuana. Its use is visible and it is the drug that generates the most stigmas. It, however, relaxes the user and several interviewees claim that crime is not compatible under its influence.

The drug effects depend on the user and frequency and intensity of use. Bazuco, a crack-like drug used in Colombia, tends to generate chronic addiction; its users being homeless and frequent common criminals. It is easy to think of addict support systems that would discourage these behaviors.

CONSUMPTION AS ESCAPE

Many ritual consumers use drugs in patterns ranging from a couple of times a week to once monthly. This is illegal drug use to escape reality. The issue is whether there should be a valid social use for drugs that allow people to cope with reality.

In Medellin’s violent poor neighborhoods, young artists strive to use art to develop alternatives to gangs. Only two of a dozen artists interviewed claimed that drugs had a valued ritual role and one of them insisted on the right to disconnect himself from reality through ritual use of prohibited substances.

The artist’s issue is not just whether marijuana, acid, and drugs used in Colombian native communities such as yage and burundandga (Brugmansia candida), should be allowed, but also why Colombian society is producing such a large number of young people who feel the need to seek frequent relief from reality. If the social system offers few elements that help give meaning to life, drugs that initially offer a pleasant escape end up producing either a hopeless addict or a nonconforming ritual drug user.

PSICOACTIVE SOVEREINGTY

Another artist opted to develop a small coca planting. He is not a cocaine consumer and does not have a lab or the skills to produce cocaine but he insists on using coca tea as a mild stimulant similar to coffee and tea to revive and validate its ancestral uses in Colombia.

Medellin’s slums are home of hip hoppers, rockers, and Rasta’s along with graffiti artists some of whom have turned in mural painters. Some have developed hydroponic marihuana plantings. They refuse to buy marijuana and whisper that their reason is “to avoid funding the ongoing turf war” among gangs.

The control of mind-altering drug use cannot be achieved only by using the state’s heavy hand. Throughout history, their control has come from other society’s organisms: family, religion, peers, schools, and the like. Without their cooperation and support, the state is a hopeless enforcer. Socially accepted psychoactive drug use has always been limited to controlled environments. It may be argued that drugs can be used when they are domesticated to control the social costs of their use. Tradition has played a key role in those controls. Some drugs are currently in the process of domestication, particularly marijuana. This is why it is the most widely used illegal drug. The issue is whether it is socially beneficial to criminalize a drug that society is domesticating.
Criminalization of marijuana in Colombia generates social costs that are exacerbated by the country’s traditional use of violence as a conflict resolution instrument and the growing power of criminal organizations that have extended their control over a significant number of local governments and concentrated the world’s cocaine production. In Medellin, these organizations established neighborhood control systems that enforced conservative and undemocratic policies that went against the values and attitudes of many marijuana users.

Other drugs had been domesticated by native societies that did not have any voice when the International Drug Control Regime was established. Indeed, many of the native communities have been historically excluded from political power in the Country. A question raised by artists is simple: “why something that used to be provided by and its use controlled by a native priest is now provided by a criminal?” As shown, some do not just have questions, but they also experiment with micro solutions to their problems.

Today young residents of poor Medellin neighborhoods seek to solve their marihuana consumption issues in ways that are rebellious and avoid links with criminal networks. They are claiming spaces, build support networks, and seek to negotiate with the state in order to dodge the need of criminal protection for their consumption.

Cultural NGOs are working on pro-consumer concepts to offer young drug users options to their crime-related drug use. They argue that forcing young users to depend on an illegal and criminal supply network simply integrates criminal organizations and youth drug consumption, two social policy issues whose solutions may be easier if they were handled separately. The point is that drug consumption criminalization in Colombia feeds left and right wing guerrillas and other criminal organizations and makes it more difficult to strengthen the state to the point where it would be able to control its territory and establish a true rule of law.

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