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Why is the Drug Trade Not Violent? Cocaine Production and the Embedded Economy in the Chapare, Bolivia.

Thomas Grisaffi, University of Reading.

Bolivia is a drug production and trafficking centre and yet it exhibits far less drug related violence than other countries across Latin America that form part of cocaine's commodity chain. Drawing upon long-term ethnographic fieldwork carried out since 2005, this article presents evidence from the Chapare, a coca-growing and drug processing zone in central Bolivia, to consider why this is the case. Building from the literature on embedded economies and the 'subsistence ethic' of peasant communities, it shows how the drug trade is part of a local moral order that prioritizes kinship, reciprocal relations, and community well-being, facilitated by the cultural significance of the coca leaf. This has served to restrict the possibilities for violence. In addition, coca grower agricultural unions act as a parallel form of governance, providing a framework for the peaceful resolution of disputes, and work actively to exclude the state and criminal actors.

Keywords: Coca, Cocaine, Chapare, Bolivia, Peasant, Indigenous, Embedded Economy, Reciprocity

INTRODUCTION

February 2014. Umberto Flores had coca seedlings ready to plant but he needed help. Jolting along cobbled roads on a motorbike, we visited the houses of his relatives and friends, but nobody was available. Eventually we found Umberto's nephew, Angel Castillo, outside his house, which was built from rough cut planks and had beaten mud floors. Angel agreed to join us within the hour. He had to: Umberto was his godfather after all. Umberto had paid for Angel's first confirmation, and subsequently bank rolled his education, paying for his school uniform, course materials and graduation party. Umberto said that he was going on yet another 'trip' the following week, and asked Angel if he wanted to come along. Angel understood the subtext immediately and expressed muted interest, all the while glancing suspiciously at me, a *gringo* (foreigner) he did not know.

Later, when we arrived at Umberto's five-hectare farm, we took a break in a makeshift shack, to chew coca leaf and drink soda. I was curious to find out why Angel seemed so cautious about participating in the upcoming trip. After some cajoling, Umberto explained, that the phrase 'going on a trip' was code for processing cocaine paste, the first step in refining pure cocaine. As he warmed to the topic, Umberto invited me to visit his workshop, to see how he soaked shredded coca leaf in solvents to extract the cocaine alkaloid. But then he laughed and rescinded the offer, warning that I might end up on the TV show 'Locked -up Abroad'.

For Umberto, and others I spoke to, involvement in the cocaine processing was a mundane affair, a common-sense way to make money in a place where turning a profit from farming crops other than coca is tough, and few other opportunities exist. Umberto explained: 'it's normal that people know about drugs, we live from this… the country lives from this. It generates work.' He stressed that I should not think of him as a criminal but rather as a small family-business owner. The drugs trade in Bolivia's Chapare region, he said, was nothing like Brazil or Mexico – in reference to the high levels of inter-personal violence and homicide that he knew about from TV: 'here it's peaceful, we look after each other, we respect each other.'

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Cocaine is one of the most widely used illicit drugs in the world with most consumers concentrated in the U.S. and Europe, although markets in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, are growing, representative of cocaine's 'shift south' (Gootenberg, 2017: 3-4). The drug is derived from the coca plant which Andeans have consumed for millennia as a mild stimulant that is central to rituals from birth to death.

Bolivia is trapped at the very lowest rungs of the international drug trade. As the world's third largest cultivator of the leaf, it produces significant quantities of low value cocaine paste. Pure cocaine production is expanding although estimates of annual production diverge wildly: Gustavo Zambrana,[1] a retired anti-drugs police official, put it at around 34 metric tons (MT) in a 2019 interview, while the Economist newspaper reports 254 MT (Economist, 2018).[2] Bolivia is also a site for the transhipment and refining of Peruvian

[1] Interview, retired police official, Cochabamba 15th July 2019.
[2] Between 2006 and 2019, the Bolivian police seized on average 24 tons of cocaine per year (VDS, 2021: 95)

cocaine paste on route to markets in Brazil, Argentina, and Europe. Nobody knows precisely how much money the business generates, but it ranks among Bolivia's principal exports (McDermott, 2014).

Illegal drugs are tied to organized crime, gangs, and high levels of violence, and the countries along the main cocaine route from the Andes to the United States rank amongst the most murderous in the world (UNODC, 2019: 16). Researchers talk of violence being 'endemic' in Latin America. In a context of poverty and social exclusion, diverse armed actors use violence to ensure access to markets, secure drug routes and to enforce illicit contracts (Koonings, 2012). And yet, while Bolivia is a drug production and trafficking centre, it exhibits far lower levels of interpersonal and homicidal violence linked to the drug trade than other countries that form part of cocaine's commodity chain[3] (UNODC, 2020: 53). Police official Zambrana explained 'This is not Mexico; this is not Brazil! We do not see extreme violence over the control of territory here. Occasionally we see the settling of scores (murders), but they are only ever isolated incidents.'

Explanations vary as to why drugs trigger violence in some contexts but not in others. Research has confirmed that rates of violence are not so much linked to the volume of drugs in a given setting, rather the key factor is market destabilization. Intensified state action against criminal organizations or the breakdown of state sanctioned protection, frequently leads to increased competition and territorial disputes (Durán-Martínez, 2017; Lessing, 2017). The strategic location of the drug market, the density of criminal organizations, and weak institutions also affect levels of violence (Bergman, 2018: 143-73). Alongside the gangs (Rodgers, 2009) state security forces and the police are a source of lethal violence (Denyer Willis, 2015; Ballvé, 2020); to say nothing of US backed drug war policies that have sown disorder and violence throughout the region (Cepeda and Tickner 2017).

But while researchers have tended to pinpoint the violence it generates, in practice the cocaine trade is a multi-billion-dollar industry involving hundreds of thousands of people, who for the most part do not compete in harmful ways. It is mutually beneficial for illicit entrepreneurs to cooperate and much of the trade occurs peacefully under forms of self-government in the shadow of state power (Arias and Grisaffi, 2021: 10-3, Lessing and Denyer-Willis, 2019). Thus, rather than considering why violence occurs, I invert the focus to consider when it is absent and why. How is the illicit trade governed internally in the

[3] Bolivia's murder rate of 6.3 per 100,000 is well below Mexico (25.8), Brazil (25) or Colombia (25) (Muggah and Aguirre, 2018: 25-6).

Chapare? How is trust and co-operation built and maintained? And what does Umberto mean when he says: 'here we look after each other'?

In the popular imagination criminals are greedy and self-serving, leading political scientists to draw on rational choice theory to understand extra-legal institutions of governance (Skarbek, 2014, Sobel and Osoba, 2009, Kostelnik and Skarbek, 2013). While these studies provide insights about the rewards structure in criminal organizations, such explanations fail to adequately consider the impact of local cultural norms and values. This is critical, because as social researchers have long known, 'the economy' is not separate from society (Polanyi, 1957). Local ideas about right and wrong shape individual behaviour, and therefore the morality of any economic system (Thompson, 1971), including in the cocaine trade (Arias and Grisaffi, 2021).

The Chapare coca-growing region is not immune to violence: there are high rates of domestic violence (Herbas, 2019), community justice can be brutal (Grisaffi, 2019: 95), and the militarized drug war unleashed a wave of violent state-sponsored repression from the mid-1980s until the early 2000s that left over 100 people dead (Salazar, 2008: 137-238). And yet, according to coca growers who I spoke with, the local drug trade itself, is not a driver of serious interpersonal violence. On the contrary, people told me that the illicit trade rarely generates conflict and is a source of wealth and stability.

In what follows, I describe how most *Chapareños* (residents of the Chapare) are directly or indirectly involved in the illicit trade through growing, drying, and commercializing coca leaf, processing cocaine paste, or smuggling. Building from the literature on embedded economies and the 'subsistence ethic' of peasant communities, I show how the mutual obligations that arise when people transact coca, precursor chemicals, cash, or cocaine paste, tie them together into dense networks of debt and mutual dependency, creating a regulatory dynamic over space and time. In addition, the agricultural unions act as a parallel form of governance, providing a framework for the peaceful resolution of disputes. These factors attenuate violence in the cocaine trade.

This article draws on more than three years of ethnographic fieldwork spread out between 2005 and 2019. The longest stints were from 2005 to 2008 and 2013 to 2014, with shorter yearly visits. During that time, I collaborated with reporters at a local campesino run radio station and accompanied them almost daily. As well as observing union life, I entered more intimate spaces: working alongside farmers in their fields, going on fishing trips and participating in grassroots union meetings, local celebrations, and occasional all-night

drinking sessions. As a young man, I had privileged access to perspectives of other young men in what tended to be a highly gendered environment. I conducted dozens of interviews with coca farmers, merchants, cocaine paste processors, and union and municipal leaders. I also travelled to Cochabamba and La Paz, to interview police and government officials. The focus of my research was always the agricultural union, rather than drugs per se. However, after I had known people for several years, they started to talk to me about this issue. All data I present is common knowledge in the region, as such I do not reveal anything that might potentially imperil participants of this research. Given the sensitive nature of the topic all names have been changed apart from those of public figures.

EMBEDDED ECONOMIES: RECIPROCITY AND EQUIVALENCE

July 2019, in the offices of Bolivia's Fuerza Especial de la Lucha Contra el Narco-traffico, (FELC-N) — Special anti-drug trafficking force— in La Paz, Coronel Maximiliano Dávila,[4] the director, explained that in contrast to neighbouring countries, drug cartels do not operate in Bolivia[5]. The local trade, he said, is run by family clans that specialize in one element — finance, processing, importing chemicals or smuggling — and they coordinate operations. 'The lack of violence is down to the culture, there is a low tolerance for violence here in Bolivia,' affirmed Dávila. Charles Mendoza,[6] a senior official at the Viceministro de Defensa Social y Sustancias Controladas (VDSSC) — Vice-ministry of Social Defence and Controlled Substances— echoed this. The Chapare, he explained, was settled by indigenous peasants from the highlands and '…The settlers bought their traditions of reciprocity, equivalence and communal ideals with them … these cultures from the West (highlands) prevent violence.'

Wittingly or not, both Dávila and Mendoza confirm the sociological argument that an economy can never be viewed as 'dis-embedded' from its social context. This idea stems from Karl Polanyi (1957: 243) who argued that rather than reflecting rational actors who operate in a de-personalized market context with behaviors that can be measured and modelled, what we call 'the economy' is not easily distinguishable from the rest of peoples' lives. From these foundations, scholars have mobilized the concept of the 'moral economy' to highlight the inseparability of economic and social life (Thompson 1971, Scott 1977).

[4] Interview, Coronel Maximiliano Dávila, FELC-N, La Paz, 29 July 2019.
[5] Drug cartels are distinguished by the fact they control territory.
[6] Interview, Government Official, VDSSC, La Paz, 30th July 2019.

Criminal activity, including the cocaine trade, is also embedded in specific places, and is shaped by, but in turn also shapes, local culture and social dynamics. From Brazil's favelas to Jamaica's slums, the ability of gangs to run a drug business depends on their relationship with the local community which serves as a source of recruits and provides cover for their activities (Bobea and Veeser, 2021). It is common for gangs to offer services, such as free transport or financing day care centres, and to provide commercial opportunities by organizing large-scale events (Jaffe, 2012, Gay, 2015). Drugs gangs might engage in governance beyond their core membership, for example by tackling local crime such as theft (Arias, 2017). It should come as no surprise then, that communities in stigmatized territories abandoned by the state often-times actively support illicit drug economies (Blume, 2021; Heuser, 2019).

The idea (which Polanyi called *substantivism)* that the economy is embedded is particularly relevant to the analysis of peasant livelihoods where work, subsistence, capital investments, profit and social reproduction are rolled into one productive unit, namely the family owned and run farm (Edelman, 2005). Building on the work of E.P. Thompson (1971), James Scott (1977) described this as the 'moral economy' of peasants, who are not driven by individualistic profit-maximizing rationality but rather by the desire to reduce risk and ensure subsistence. At its core are two values, the 'right to subsistence' and the 'norm of reciprocity' as the foundation for agricultural production and interpersonal conduct (Scott, 1977: 167). For the present analysis, reciprocity is fundamental because, as Mauss (1990) argued almost 100 years ago, it contributes to building group solidarity.

The Andean region is an iconic case of Scott's 'subsistence ethic'. Reciprocity, Allen (2002: 73) asserts, is 'a pump at the heart of Andean life', as social relationships are grounded in everyday exchanges of goods, labor, and other forms of intra-household assistance. Reciprocity in the Andes assumes two principal forms, *ayni* and *minka*. Their exact meaning varies from place to place and has changed over time, but in broad terms ayni is a reciprocal labour exchange between individuals or families while *minka* refers to collaboration on a communal project such as maintaining roads or an irrigation system (Walsh-Dilley, 2013: 666-7). These systems rely on the dense web of fictive kin created through *compadrazgo* (godparenthood), which makes up one of the most significant social relationships in Andean rural society.

Building reciprocity networks and maintaining co-operation are vital to agricultural production and to household survival. Debt, in this context, should not be understood in the

moralizing language of the west (Graeber, 2014). These are horizonal networks between neighbors and kin, and to be entangled with one another through debt is the very basis of sociality. People considered '*jaqui'*, or 'good people,' are those bound together through quotidian exchange relationships which demonstrate loyalty and care toward people and place (Canessa, 2012). Reciprocity is gendered: women bear most of the responsibility for maintaining community and kinship relationships, for instance by cooking, taking on care duties, and offering their labor to others (Maclean, 2010: 499).

The counterpoint to cooperation is '*envidia'* or jealousy, a constant in Andean communities (Van Vleet, 2003). Foster (1965) argued that peasants often believe that affluence comes at the expense of someone else, he referred to this zero-sum worldview as the 'limited good'. To mitigate self-interest, Andean communities strictly enforce an ethic of equivalence, anyone who gets ahead is forced to reinvest surplus back into the community. An example of this type of levelling mechanism, which can be observed in peasant communities worldwide (Wolf, 2001: 201), is the fiesta cargo complex common in the highlands, where individuals sponsor elaborate celebrations indebting them for many years (Abercrombie, 1998).

Reciprocity and levelling mechanisms, like many social interactions, are lubricated and mediated through the sharing of the coca leaf, which is considered 'sacred' in Bolivia and a key element in reinforcing indigenous identity (Pearson, 2020). This means that although coca is used to process drugs, the leaf itself is treasured and strengthens *cocaleros* moral economy. While almost everyone chews coca leaf, according to community leaders, levels of drug use in the Chapare are very low. The people who process coca leaf into drugs or grow it with full knowledge of where it will end up, also use it to heal themselves, to make offerings to earth deities, and in divination ceremonies. They do not see this as a contradiction. Farmers often perceive the demand for coca for the drug trade as one more of the multiple benefits the leaf brings them. This contrasts sharply with Peru where coca leaf is marginalized and Colombia where it is illegal except for use by isolated indigenous groups (Grisaffi et al., 2021: 3).

Andean peasants neither live in isolation nor are they stuck in time. Peasant communities face dispossession, proletarianization, and internal stratification (Borras et al., 2012, Martínez Valle, 2017). But they have also proven resilient to market expansion, developing strategies to either avoid markets or to engage them on their own terms (Van der Ploeg, 2010). Agricultural social and cultural practices also give shape to contemporary

patterns of capitalist production: for instance, Bolivian miners maintain close ties to their communities of origin and transplant their rural customs to mining, including chewing coca and using it in offerings to earth deities (Marston 2020). All of this is to say, that just because peasants are integrated into global markets, does not mean that the 'subsistence ethic' and related moral economies wither away. Nor does it mean that peasants are bound by some 'ancient' logic of reciprocity, as Mauss might have argued. In the Andes cooperative and reciprocal forms of organization coexist with market-oriented strategies, to create what Walsh-Dilley (2013) refers to as 'hybrid economic spaces' (see also Tassi, 2017).

The above discussion is central to this article: namely why and how the drugs trade in Bolivia's Chapare region is characterized by a lack of violence. Given that the people involved in drug production are also [or often] peasant farmers who grow and consume coca, it is reasonable to ask whether and in what ways illicit activity is structured by the moral economy outlined above. I argue below that in the Chapare the subsistence ethic and its symbolic ties to coca leaf, as well as the role of the coca unions as the de facto civil authority, explains the redistributive and conflict management mechanisms that regulate this economy and limit violence.

COCA, COLONIZATION, AND CAMPESINO UNIONS

The Chapare, one of Bolivia's two principal coca-growing zones, is a vast lowland humid forest with just shy of 200,000 people, the majority migrants from the Cochabamba valleys and highland mining centers, many of the latter previously part of militant miners' trade unions. Over 80 per cent self-identify as Quechua and most people speak both Quechua and Spanish (PNUD, 2005: 302), but most often a mixture of the two, known locally as '*Quechañol.'*

Similar to schemes promoted throughout the Andes, a government push to alleviate rural highland and valley overcrowding which exacerbated poverty, led to colonization projects in the Chapare during the 1950s and 60s, driven in part by the completion of US financed road linking Cochabamba to Santa Cruz (Gootenberg, 2018). Coca complemented subsistence farming and emerged as one of the few economic pursuits available to provide cash income (Grisaffi and Ledebur 2016: 9). Silvio Zavala,[7] now an overweight man in his early 70s explained that he migrated to the Chapare as a teenager from the high, arid

[7] Interview, farmer, Chapare, 26th July 2019.

altiplano during the 1960s. 'Back then the land was free,' he told me. 'If you liked something, well then you just marked it out and worked it. It was yours.' Silvio and his parents established a farm on eight hectares, chopping down trees, burning scrub and planting maize, rice, and some coca.

Silvio described it as a tough time, particularly as many settlers had no previous experience of warm weather tropical farming. People helped one another, relying on intra household mutual aid with no money changing hands. 'Ayni, it's reciprocity. One day, I work for you and another day you work for me …. Back then everything was ayni ...' said Silvio. Ayni also incorporates the lending of tools, gifting crates of beer and even the long-term loan of land. Given the lack of roads and market access, cultivation was for subsistence. Silvio explained: 'in those times… the aim was just to survive'. Coca accounted for the bulk of the family's cash income, but the price was low. 'We grew coca, it was the only thing that made any sense, the only thing we could carry to Villa', the nearest market town, a full day's hike away. Most of their crop was sold to supply miners in the department of Potosí.

There was no state presence to speak of and settlers hacked a new life and society out of the dense jungle. 'We cut out our own roads, built our own schools, made our own laws', Silvio told me. 'It was us… we made the state present.' These early settlers formed into self-governing unions known as *sindicatos* (syndicates) to solve collective problems (Spedding, 2004: 93-4). They put strict conditions on who could join, normally only people they already knew. This meant the unions comprise extended kinship networks and people who used to be neighbors in the highlands and old friends, people often described their community as being like an extended family, people who care for one another.

Like in other parts of Bolivia (see, e.g., Doyle, 2020), grassroots unions, now numbering over 1000 in the Chapare, play an important role in local governance. They serve as the primary vehicle to address communal needs from controlling land tenure to administering justice (Grisaffi, 2019: 105-7). The union has the authority to level sanctions, such as fines or community work, against anyone who transgresses communal values.[8] Growers describe sanctions as legitimate because they are based on a consensus that reflects the will of every member (Grisaffi, 2021, 12-3). The unions also play a redistributive role: they raise money from membership fees and a tax levelled on the local coca market, which they reinvest into the community, to pay for celebrations, mobilizations, and the maintenance

[8] The union's power results from its control over land. Most growers have official land titles, but the union can veto a sale, or force the sale of land at a price they determine.

of communal infrastructure like a road, water supply, or village plaza. People can appeal to their local union for help to pay hospital bills, a funeral, or an emergency stipend to cover a lean period. In Silvio's words: 'there is a lot of solidarity, everyone is equal, we work together.'

COCAINE, THE WAR ON DRUGS AND PEASANT SELF-DEFENSE

'I don't know why they put the blame on us for drugs trafficking. The government threw a lot of people out onto the street so what did they do? The only thing they could, they came here to plant coca!' Silvio lamented. In 1985, after a period of hyperinflation, the price of tin crashed, and a new government immediately implemented a neoliberal austerity program, which led to massive layoffs in mines and factories and the opening of borders to agricultural imports that undermined peasant livelihoods. This followed on the heels of a prolonged drought that drove thousands of starving farmers off their land (Kohl and Farthing, 2006).

The booming cocaine market in northern countries pushed up the price of coca and desperate Bolivians moved to the Chapare in their thousands to plant it (Painter 1994: 41-58). The cocaine trade had its beginnings in the Chapare during the early 1970s when Colombian drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) came searching for cheap raw materials, initially coca leaf, but eventually cocaine paste too, which they refined into pure cocaine in Colombia before exporting it primarily to the United States (Gootenberg, 2008: 274). Bolivian coca was in demand because, as Police Official Zambrana[9] explained: 'our leaf has a far higher cocaine alkaloid content and makes for better quality drugs. It's the best unfortunately.'

There was plenty of work for the settlers, planting, harvesting and drying coca leaf or processing cocaine paste in small workshops located close to the coca fields. This first step in processing cocaine is relatively simple and can be mastered without formal training. The *quimico* (chemist), a mid-level technician usually drawn from among local farmers, oversees production. The owners of the cocaine paste workshops, known as '*pichicateros'*, soak between 200 to 400 kilos[10] of shredded coca leaves in a mixture of gasoline, sulfuric acid, and sodium bicarbonate (baking soda). These days most drug processors use leaf shredders, adapted cement mixers, and large tanks of up to a thousand liters to turn over the mulch. But

[9] Interview, retired police official, Cochabamba 15th July 2019.
[10] The amount of coca required depends on the alkaloid content of the leaf and the technique used to process the drug.

these are recent developments. Until the mid-2000s, young men, known as *pisa-cocas* stomped on the coca leaf in shallow ditches to mix up the solution.

By the late-1980s, the coca and cocaine trade had revitalized the economy and Bolivia was earning more than $1 billion dollars annually from coca and cocaine, a revenue equivalent or greater than legal exports (Dunkerley 1986: 144). The drugs dollars that trickled down generated high levels of employment in the Chapare, but also in the urban peripheries, particularly in and around the city of Cochabamba, where successful coca farmers most often invested their cash in second homes (Shakow, 2014).

In the late 1980s, government officials, the US embassy and the media built on a 'narco-frontier imaginary' (Goodhand, 2021), to construct the Chapare as a lawless borderland and publicly denounced cocaleros as drug traffickers and criminals (Farthing and Ledebur, 2004). In 1988, Bolivia passed anti-drug Law 1008 (in force until 2017) under heavy U.S. pressure. The law permitted 12,000 hectares of coca in the Yungas of La Paz to supply the domestic legal market, with all other coca, including that in the Chapare outlawed and slated for eradication, turning farmers into the 'enemy' in the war on drugs (Albó 2008: 31). The emphasis was always on police and later military repression, with the alternatives such as crop substitution (often including a cash incentive) that began in the mid-1980s an afterthought, further limited by the US refusal to work with coca grower unions. These initiatives largely failed, as distrust was high and the booming cocaine economy was the strongest economic option available, despite the risks of repression associated with it (Grisaffi et al., 2017: 134-8).

Between 1997 to 2002, the Banzer-Quiroga administration succumbed to U.S. pressure and ramped up forced crop eradication. Military conscripts, accompanied by heavily armed members of the Rural Mobile Patrol Unit (*La Unidad Móvil de Patrullaje Rural* – UMOPAR), destroyed massive amounts of coca, dramatically reducing the area under cultivation, but at the cost of violations of human rights, including arbitrary detention, rape, torture, and summary style executions (Ledebur, 2005).

Crop eradication caused economic hardship and in response, the coca growers' unions organized their 45,000 members and the separate women's unions to block roads and stage national-level protests (Salazar, 2008). The unions established lightly armed self-defence groups to prevent the military from eradicating plantations, and some leaders argued in favour of armed insurgency. But after much internal debate, they opted for the electoral path (Oikonomakis 2019). Building on their positive experience when they won all Chapare

municipalities after municipal elections were introduced for the first time in 1994, the unions with other rural peasant allies set up their own 'political instrument' in 1995, which eventually became the *Movimiento Al Socialismo* (MAS). The fight to defend growing coca leaf was part of a broader agenda which included the struggle against neoliberalism, ensuring access to land, and implementing pro-peasant policies (Zuazo, 2009).

The unions and the MAS shifted their previous rhetoric which largely emphasized class to one focused on the 500-year indigenous struggle with the 'sacred coca leaf' as a common national indigenous tradition. They argued that by defending coca, they were fighting for the sovereignty and dignity of the nation (Grisaffi, 2010). This narrative resonated with Bolivians fed up with top-down government reform, growing inequality and repression, seemingly driven by external forces (Brewer-Osorio, 2020).

The election of coca grower leader, Evo Morales (2006—2019) as President marked a sea change in Bolivian politics. His MAS party promoted redistributive policies, expanded state presence into marginal rural areas, and increased the political participation of the poor and working classes (Postero, 2017). When it came to combating drug trafficking, the MAS administration 'nationalized' its efforts, expelling the US ambassador and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 2008 and eventually USAID too. Morales extended a policy first launched in 2004 under the Carlos Mesa administration that legalized growing a small amount of leaf known as a *cato* (a 40x40m plot), demilitarized the Chapare, encouraged the unions to self-police, and front-loaded development assistance. Bolivia's innovative approach led to an immediate cessation of drug war violence and has been hailed as a less repressive and more effective way to control coca production (Farthing and Ledebur, 2015).

COCAINE PASTE MANUFACTURING

In contrast to coca growing regions elsewhere in the Andes — including Colombia's Nariño, Urabá and Putumayo regions (Idler, 2019) or Peru's VRAEM and Huallaga valleys (Durand Ochoa, 2014) — where illegal armed groups either dominate or did so historically, in the Chapare no single person, gang or DTO has ever controlled the coca and cocaine trade. Rather it remains in the hands of farmers and participation is widespread.[11] Ivan Choque[12], who has worked in cocaine paste production for over thirty years, stressed that almost all the

[11] Between 2006 and 2019, the police destroyed over 58,000 drug workshops nationally, only a fraction of what exist (VDS, 2021: 99).

[12] Interview, farmer and drug worker, Chapare, 23rd July 2019.

landowners and members of the local union in his village were either directly or indirectly involved. Nonetheless, even though the costs of entering the paste trade are low, the skills easy to learn, and the chemicals available at a hardware store or gas station, not just anyone can set up a workshop.

Only local people have access to the necessary reciprocity structure to succeed. Just as the household unit relies on intra-household exchanges of labor and goods (*ayni*) and the support of extended kinship networks (including fictive kin) to facilitate agricultural production, the cocaine economy too is structured around these same networks. In what follows, I outline the different roles of the local cocaine trade and how they connect to one another. These roles are not exclusive: a person can be at once a coca farmer, merchant, smuggler and operate a drugs workshop, because often the first steps of the illicit trade are concentrated in the same geographic area.

At the lowest rung are coca farmers who depending on the quality of their land, might produce anywhere between four to ten 50-pound sacks per cato every three to four months. Because the union controls access to land the only people who can grow coca are union members, who in turn are tied together by kinship or bonded through *compadrazgo*, a form of fictive kinship. *Ayni*, allows for clearing land, tilling planting, weeding, fertilizing and eventually the harvest, drying and packing of the crop. While no money changes hands, the expectation is that at some future date the favour will be returned.

On the next step are the coca merchants who represent a powerful commercial class. Women dominate informal commercial activity in Bolivia no matter what is being traded, and the coca merchants, known as Chhakas after the leaf cutting ant, are no exception. Farmers are only permitted to sell coca through the market assigned to their union, and they almost always sell their crop to the same merchant, who is most often part of their extended kin-group: a sister, cousin or affine, or someone they are tied to through godparenthood.

In return for their loyalty, merchants provide cash advances on the farmers' harvest and act as godparent to their children. These long-standing commitments mean that farmers cannot seek a higher price from other buyers. Conversely, if a merchant offered farmers higher prices so they could corner the coca market, they would swiftly be condemned, lose their reputation, and be cut out of reciprocity networks. While it might be restrictive, ultimately this closed network not only benefits the merchants but is a critical element in keeping outsiders out of the coca trade.

In theory, merchants must take all their purchased coca to the state-sanctioned market in Sacaba, on the outskirts of Cochabamba, to be sold for traditional uses, but only about 6 per cent of Chapare coca ends up in legal channels (UNODC, 2018).[13] Merchants divert coca to the drug trade because the cocaine paste workshop owners frequently pay more: around 20 to 30 cents per pound over the legal price. Again, they operate within restricted networks. The amount of coca available on a particular day is finite, and the coca merchants will only sell to established contacts, this often means their kin relations and members of their base-level union, in other words, their neighbours.

Equivalent to the coca merchants are the smugglers who supply the workshops with processing inputs. To process one kilo of cocaine paste requires up to 150 litters of gasoline. But anti-drug laws prevent local gas stations from selling more than one tank per car per day. Taxi drivers' who ply the route from Cochabamba to the Chapare, smuggle fuel, doubling the price in the region. Just like coca, they do not operate as free agents, the taxi-driver smugglers are almost all coca growers and union members, who will only sell to their regular clients.

Up one rung on the ladder are the cocaine paste workshop owners, who are all union members, landowners, and coca farmers: people like Umberto. The owners invest capital, around four to five thousand dollars to establish their workshops, and these start-up costs are covered via loans from kinship networks. They hire laborers, normally young men or even teenagers (mostly the sons of local families), who carry the heavy bags of coca, move barrels of chemicals, and operate the machinery. Umberto paid three workers, rather than practice *ayni*, because they did not have their own workshops where he could repay the labor. Umberto described the young men as 'trusted people' –they were all members of his extended kinship group, including, Angel, who was his nephew and godson.

At the top of the local production ladder are the '*acopiadores'* (collectors), wealthier local farmers who buy up bricks of cocaine paste which they transport to either the city or to refineries deep in the jungle. The *acopidaor* too has regular clients, and relationships that are often formalized through bonds of godparenthood. One *acopiador* I knew, had many godchildren and all of them sold their cocaine paste to him. The owners of the workshops did not view this arrangement as exploitative, but as common sense and positive. In the words of

[13] An unspecified quantity of coca goes east to Santa Cruz (the country's largest coca leaf market for traditional uses) directly rather than through the circuitious route of transporting it first west to Sacaba and then east to Santa Cruz (Farthing and Ledebur, 2015).

Umberto '… I have to sell (cocaine paste) to my *Padrino* (godfather), he paid for my wedding, so of course I cannot refuse him!'

The *acopiadores* then hire third parties, known as '*hormigas'* (ants) to smuggle the drugs out. Individuals hide one or two kilos of paste in a backpack or taped to their body. Travelling on busses, taxis or in private cars they are difficult to detect. In 2019, Gregorio Terceros[14], a 60-year-old taxi driver and grower (who in the 1990s had been an anti-narcotics cop) confirmed that he regularly took up to 30 kilos per journey, hidden in his car. Gregorio explained, 'When I carry a load – I just chew my coca and smoke a cigarette – and I always get past (the police checkpoint located on the main highway)'. He confirmed that while it is possible to bribe the police if you are caught smuggling fuel, things get more complicated (and expensive) if you are transporting drugs, indicating some level of collusion with the state.

In the Chapare, levelling mechanisms, like those in highland Andean communities, persist. Those directly involved in drug production such as workshop owners, collectors but also merchants, have higher disposable incomes than farmers, and they are under pressure to pay for activities that benefit everyone, such as the school graduation trip, a band for a fiesta or matching uniforms for the local football team. Illicit entrepreneurs might also be asked to act as a sponsor, for example to pay for a wedding, first confirmation or *quinceañera* celebrations.

Illicit entrepreneurs who acquire many godchildren are held in high esteem and are deemed worthy of community protection. This in turn ensures they can buy and sell coca leaf or chemicals and that the union will not interfere with their business. On the contrary, anyone who the community perceived to have surplus cash, gained through licit or illicit means, but who does not invest in their social relations in this way, is said to be immoral and would lose rights within the community. For example, if they owned a cocaine paste workshop then the union would shut it down and expel them from the community.

While equivalence and fair play between unionized growers is strong, there are also hierarchies and exploitation. The principal cleavages are access to land and gender. People who are resident in the Chapare but do not own land are excluded from the exchange networks. As they do not own the means of production, they can only ever work for day rates as paid farm hands and drug processors or earn performance related pay as smugglers (normally this is paid by the kilo transported). Women can and do occupy roles in the drug

[14] Interview, taxi driver, Chapare, 24th December 2019.

commodity chain, as farmers, merchants, and financiers, and have authority as the matriarchs of large families. But this is not the whole story. Women are more likely than men to be poor and landless and have less access to stable jobs with decent pay (World Bank 2015). Facing the challenges of single parenting, some women are driven into the drug trade out of economic necessity (Ledebur and Youngers, 2018: 6). If they have no land then they remain at the lowest rungs – sometimes recruited by urban gangs as human couriers, for cross border smuggling. They risk arrest, but also robbery and sexual assault at the hands of the traffickers (El Deber, 2018).

CAMPESINO UNIONS AND THE INFORMAL GOVERNANCE OF THE COCAINE TRADE.

The unions are not directly involved in the cocaine trade,[15] and repeatedly oppose illicit cocaine production in their official proclamations. With the MAS in power, they have collaborated with state agencies to restrict coca cultivation (Grisaffi et al., 2017). And yet, union hegemony unwittingly provides a framework that enables the drug trade through its provision of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, suppressing the possibility for outsiders to enter the trade and, to some extent, excluding the state.

Even though coca growers are embedded in complex networks of kinship and exchange involving labor, coca, chemicals, and cocaine paste, debts are not always repaid in a timely fashion, and people do come into conflict. Normally, disputes are resolved in a pragmatic rather than violent manner, for example by talking through the problem and splitting the costs of any losses (Grisaffi, 2019: 82).

If people cannot resolve a problem, they can turn to the union for arbitration. Ongoing disputes, such as debts are addressed at the monthly union meeting with the participation of the entire community. Both sides present their version of events and call witnesses. The emphasis is on reconciliation rather than punishment and during fieldwork I witnessed the peaceful resolution of debts on many occasions. Even if one of the parties was dissatisfied, they had to follow the union's decision or risk sanctions. If a debt was linked to drug trafficking, its origin was not acknowledged, as talking about drugs at union meetings is taboo. This is not because involvement in drug production and trafficking is stigmatized.

[15] Leadership positions are filled by grassroots members, most of whom hold onto their position for no more than a couple of years. This means that just as union members are directly or indirectly involved in the drugs trade, so too are the leaders.

Rather, leaders are cautious to distance the unions from any activity that could undermine their political position.

From the cocaleros' perspective, the state lacks a legitimate monopoly of violence, giving local unions the authority to use it to meet their own goals, an example of what has been termed 'violent pluralism' (Arias and Goldstein 2010). The unions play an active role in policing their own communities, and outsiders (known locally as *Phistakus*) are treated with the greatest suspicion. Anyone perceived to be acting against community interests faces the possibility of corporeal punishment, including beating, burning, and being buried in sand. This is different from generic 'drug' violence, as it is enacted by the community according to their laws and customs, involves the entire community and is highly regulated, replicating systems of community justice widespread across the Andes (see Goldstein 2012). Given union territorial control, it would be difficult if not impossible for an external criminal organization to take control of the local cocaine paste trade.

Just as the unions keep DTOs out, a reality confirmed in police interviews, they also exclude the state. If the police enter coca growers' territory without first asking permission from a union leader, they run the risk of violent assault or being taken hostage (see for e.g. Los Tiempos, 2014). One police official[16] told me '…here the police, well we have the law on our side, but they have more power … they decide who comes and who goes …we just stay at the margins.' He referred to the Chapare as a 'no man's land' where '(the state's) law and order are not worth anything'. By excluding external criminal actors and the police, the unions not only maintain the cocaine trade in the hands of locals, who share a common set of expectations regarding exchange practices, but also reduce the possibilities for competition and therefore violence. Put another way, union action contributes to the stability of the local drug trade.

COCAINE REFINERIES AND THE DIS-EMBEDDING OF THE COCAINE ECONOMY

In 2013, while on a fishing trip in the Isiboro Sécure National Park (known locally simply as 'Isiboro') located in the northern Chapare, I visited Santa Rosa, a small village accessible only by canoe. The houses were basic, made from wood and thatch, but each had its own generator, satellite dish, large modern television, refrigerator, and sound system, unexpected

[16] Interview, Police officer, Chapare, 31st January 2014.

items in such an isolated place. My travelling companion, Daniel Claros[17], whose uncle lived in the village, explained that the land was owned by a Colombian rancher, who also refined pure cocaine. Small planes carrying drugs and money landed in fields normally used for grazing cattle, and boats brought in the necessary chemicals. The villagers were well paid by the rancher for processing drugs, securing the area, and tending cattle, he said.

To make pure cocaine (known as *la fina*), a higher value product, cocaine paste passes through a second and more complex stage of processing. It requires skill, equipment, and chemicals, such as acetone, potassium permanganate, and ether that are difficult to obtain. Start-up costs are high, according to Dávila,[18] FELC-N director, between $150,000 and $300,000. When the police shut down the Santa Rosa laboratory in May 2021, they discovered it could produce up to 100 kilos of cocaine hydrochloride per day. Given the large investment, some refineries have armed guards for protection (El Deber, 2021). These operations are very different from the coca grower run artisanal workshops that process low value cocaine paste.

Retired police official Zambrana[19] explained that cocaine refineries have expanded because of the MAS's decision to expel the DEA in 2008, which he believes, had made the country safer for drug traffickers. He explained that for the Colombian emissaries of DTOs, who finance drug operations from the comfort of luxury hotels in Santa Cruz, Bolivia represents an 'acceptable level of risk'. Having paid off the judiciary and police, they are unlikely to be arrested and if they are, they know they will spend no longer than six months in jail. He also said that they like doing business in Bolivia precisely because it is peaceful – for them 'this really is a business,' he said.

Within Bolivia refining mostly takes place in the Beni department, but according to the police, over recent years crystallization labs have creeped south into the state of Cochabamba. Locating a lab in the Isiboro Sécure national park (and the expanding coca growing area known as Polígono-7) has two advantages, first the dense forest, and lack of roads and bridges means that it is difficult for the police to enter. But second, well-organized peasants help keep the state out. Dávila told me that traffickers pay villagers up to $500 a week, in return they offer protection. Just this happened in February 2019, when fifty peasants faced up to UMOPAR on a drug interdiction mission (Sanchez, 2019).

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[17] Interview, farmer, Chapare, 16th October 2013.
[18] Interview, Coronel Maximiliano Dávila, FELC-N, La Paz, 29 July 2019.
[19] Interview, retired police official, Cochabamba 15th July 2019.

Because the cocaine refineries are in remote areas, most coca growers and low-level cocaine paste processors do not directly encounter them. Even so, some people worried about their impact. During a 2019 fieldtrip, paste producer Ivan Choque[20] explained: 'Violence is reaching us, bit by bit…. If you saw what goes on in Isiboro your jaw would drop.' He, and others, warned me not to travel there as it was now 'too dangerous.' They told me stories of decapitations, disappearances and random violence that goes on *adentro* (deep in the jungle). Ivan explained that the armed guards who protect '*la fina'* (pure cocaine) will not hesitate to silence anyone who threatens to 'step on the hose'.

According to Ivan's analysis, the refineries have started to rupture the long-standing reciprocal relationships that characterize everyday life, in some areas (even while the owners look after their own people, like Daniel's uncle). Ivan stressed that 'before drug trafficking was communal. We all shared the benefits, but it is less like that today.' He claimed that a powerful '*rosca'* (a clique) has taken over part of the local trade, setting prices, and eliminating competition and in so doing, distorting the moral economy of peasant communities.[21] Despite these developments, for most people, life remains much the same. For now, the impacts associated with refineries are restricted to isolated areas, far from the main agricultural zone. As such, in most of the Chapare, the local moral order of paste production and trafficking built on solidarity, reciprocity, and equivalence, endures.

CONCLUSION

The dominant commentary on drug trafficking in Latin America, promoted by the US, assumes that the drug trade is characterised by competition between different actors, who do not shy away from using lethal violence and that the state including the military and police must intervene to contain this violent disorder (for a discussion of US foreign drug policy see Tate 2015). In the Chapare none of these assumptions hold true. Not only is there a notable lack of criminal organizations dominating the drugs trade at the local level, but there is also a remarkable absence of lethal violence — although other forms of violence prevail in these

[20] Interview, farmer and drug worker, Chapare, 23rd July 2019.
[21] The influx of cheaper Peruvian cocaine paste, to supply the refineries, has had a destabilizing effect on the local drug market as it put a downward pressure on prices. Traffickers smuggle cocaine paste from Peru to supply Bolivian refineries because it is much cheaper, around $800 per kilo as opposed to as much as $1800. The price difference is down to the high cost of coca in Bolivia. In Bolivia, refined cocaine changes hands for around $2,500. It doubles in price once it crosses the border to Brazil (see Grisaffi et al, 2021: 5).

communities. And finally, state repression of the illicit trade is limited. In the Chapare the local drugs business is highly organized, it is peaceful, and it directly contributes to maintaining social order. This seeming paradox can be understood to be a result of three key features of life in the Chapare.

First: At the agro-industrial stage of coca growing and processing paste, participation in the illicit trade is widespread, as such there is no negative stigma attached with it, nor is it seen as socially disruptive. The drug trade supports many people in low-skilled positions, stabilizes families' livelihoods, enables them to stay in rural areas rather than migrating to cities as vast numbers of rural Bolivians have done, and supports small businesses. While Chapare farmers do not get rich, engagement in the cocaine trade represents an avenue for unparalleled social mobility. The illicit economy can be understood as a form of autonomous grassroots development that emerges within a context of prevailing inequality.

Second: The cocaine paste trade is entrepreneurial in spirit: farmers and low-level illicit entrepreneurs grow a cash crop (coca); commercialize precursor chemicals (gasoline); produce a value-added product (cocaine paste); and they might sell their labor as drug processors or smugglers. And yet, it cannot be understood exclusively through a rational economic lens; people simply do not act as self-maximizing individuals. Rather, the drug economy forms an embedded economy, it is part and parcel of people's everyday social relations and rooted in collective sociocultural practices of solidarity, reciprocity, and redistribution, with coca leaf a critical component in making these systems work. The community works together as a corporate unit, to ensure the steady production of coca and cocaine paste, for the benefit of all. In Umberto's words 'we look after each other.'

Third, the trade's stability is due to the influence of the unions. In a place where state presence is patchy, the unions, act as the preeminent authorities, regulating relations between union members and even non-members who reside locally. Thus, when business agreements are not fulfilled, such as when debts go unpaid, unions provide non-violent ways to resolve the dispute. Unions enact performative violence against 'criminal' outsiders: this is part of the local moral order and is distinguishable from the less (locally) regulated forms of violence linked to the growing dis-embedded economy of drug refineries. By excluding the state and keeping criminal organizations at bay, the opportunities for external actors to take control of the trade and provoke competition are diminished.

Taken together, these factors mean that far from generating chaos, disorder, and inequality, the drug trade contributes to the region's prosperity and social and political

stability. Some farmers see a gradual weaking of this local moral order, however. As drug refineries expand into Isiboro, local people worry about increasing levels of violence, driven by larger investments, concentrations of capital in fewer hands, and the armed defence of laboratories. This represents a gradual dis-embedding of the economy: menacing actors unknown to the community, who do not operate according to local values and who are difficult to control, exert increasing influence. And so, just like the enclosures of the commons during the British Industrial revolution discussed by Polanyi, or the shift to market prices as opposed to fair prices analysed by Thompson at the wake of industrial capitalism, when the cocaine trade becomes detached from everyday social reproduction and local moral orders, the threat of danger looms large.

There are many types of violence that are linked to the drug economy as well as to broader processes of development (see Pearce, 2019). If the definition of violence is opened to questions of structural violence, then the drug trade can be understood as a reaction to the violence and dispossession enacted by neoliberal reforms, endemic racism, and social marginalization (see Koch, forthcoming, Bourgois et al., 2019). The illicit drugs economy provides poor people with livelihoods and counts on strong local support. As such, the drug trade is resilient, and this has implications for drug policy. While US officials might claim the successes of the 'war on drugs', repressive policing, crop eradication, and mass incarceration, exacerbate the 'neoliberal penalty' on marginal communities (Auyero and Sobering, 2017), and have little impact on the drug trade (Cepeda and Tickner, 2017). Likewise, alternative development projects that further integrate peasant producers into global markets on unequal terms, have limited success (Paredes and Pastor, 2021; Meehan, 2021). The only way to make people less dependent on illicit economies then, is through state investment into relegated urban and rural spaces, to enable citizens to build dignified lives. In this regard, Bolivia has important lessons to share with the world.

Thomas Grisaffi is Associate Professor in Geography at the University of Reading (UK). He is the author of 'Coca Yes, Cocaine No: How Bolivia's coca growers reshaped democracy' (Duke Univ. Press, 2019) and co-editor of 'Cocaine: From coca fields to the streets' (Duke Univ. Press, 2021). t.grisaffi@reading.ac.uk.

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