

Introduction

Militarization, Perfect Protectionism, and Assemblages for Transdisciplinary Dialogues

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For over a century, the international community has maintained a policy of prohibition of the production, distribution, and consumption of drugs. The prohibition regime is anchored in international conventions,¹ and the “war on drugs” is its militarized strategy targeting the supply side of illegalized substances. This central component of global drug control strategies determines the ongoing challenges of how to address the issues related to drug trafficking. Even though the “war on drugs” is commonly regarded as a failed public policy (Geffray et al., 2002; Germes et al., 2023; Labate et al., 2016; Rolles & Slade, 2023), security policies continue to dominate drug policies. The global punitive framework has produced devastating repercussions for local communities in many parts of the world, while leaving the demand and circulation of drugs relatively unchanged. The core of this volume shows that the phenomenon of violence or insecurity in the Americas cannot be reduced to rivalries within the context of the drug trade. Instead, violence is shaped by state-society relations, multidimensional structural inequalities, and persistent intersectional power asymmetries.

1 The main conventions comprise the triad of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, and the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988.

Since the early 2000s, the global security regime has expanded from organized crime to the triple axis of drugs, terror, and borders. Basically, any social policy claim that can be narratively attributed to one of the three spheres automatically activates the other two, constructing them as general national security threats. Especially in times of authoritarian political practices, the counter-measures to this nexus focus on more high-tech surveillance, militarized police, and include the criminalization of specific groups associated with illegal practices. The most extreme example of this ongoing historical dynamic represents the decision of the U.S. administration under President Trump in early 2025 to equate drug trafficking groups with terrorist organizations. Since September 2025, the U.S. Navy has repeatedly bombed private ships and killed their entire crews along the Venezuelan coast due to alleged drug trafficking activities. These operations violate every basic understanding of human rights, maritime law, and international law (BBC News, 2025). However, they successfully legitimize martial solutions for public issues and instrumentalize the “drug trafficking problem” for geopolitical interests.

While militarized counter-narcotics operations reach a new phase, the global prohibition regime has also experienced significant changes since the 2010s. Many countries of the Western hemisphere carried through the legalization, decriminalization, and regulation of the medicinal and/or recreational use of cannabis. An examination of recent developments in the Americas offers a valuable perspective for ongoing regulation initiatives in Europe. The state of California has a long-standing history of legally distributing cannabis for medical purposes. California, currently the world's fifth-largest economy when compared to countries, has three decades of experience with cannabis production and administration, dating back to the 1990s. At that time, the U.S.-backed militarization of the international prohibition regime in Colombia reached its first peak, which then spread to Mexico from 2007 onwards. In 2012, the state of Colorado initiated the most recent wave of legalization of recreational use of cannabis in the U.S. By 2024, the use of cannabis for private consumption among adults has been legalized in 24 states, with six others having enacted policies of decriminalization

(NCSL, 2024). The paradox of U.S. drug policy in recent decades is characterized by waves of legalization of internal markets while maintaining the federal prohibition regime that serves as the basis for international economic relations. This approach effectively implements a form of “perfect protectionism” (Wolfesberger, 2021), impeding competition on the global stage while concurrently fostering the consolidation of the domestic market. Although this development may not adhere to a master plan, it is the expression of the condensed phase of the economization of drug policy. After the period of moral and military prohibition, the focus has expanded to dominating the legalization debate. High-level expert commissions and popular documentaries have highlighted the adverse consequences of criminal prosecution, illegal markets, and the valuable properties of cannabis for years. The prevailing liberal discourse on this matter typically alludes to a singular model of legality, namely market-driven commercialization.

In contrast, Uruguay took a more progressive step in 2013 by legalizing cannabis for recreational use and regulating its production and sale through designated pharmacies and registered growers. The legal status of cannabis in Canada changed at the end of 2018, allowing for its use by adults. However, it had been permitted for medical use since 2001. Mexico’s decision to legalize medical cannabis in 2017 is noteworthy, even though the North American market has been dominated by publicly traded companies based in Canada and the United States. It is evident that major companies in the cannabis industry, like Canopy Growth, The Green Organic Dutchman, and Medical Marijuana, are strategically expanding into global markets. However, this effort comes with strings attached, as these enterprises are effectively sustaining existing structural inequalities in agricultural production and trade relations.

Despite the recent legal changes, in practice, market power and the narratives of legalization already lie with the United States and Canada. The current strategic emphasis is directed towards capital-intensive research initiatives and the trading of cannabis funds on the stock market. The transition of drug users to sought-after customers has led to the rise of the plant as a medium for commodity speculation. This development signals the conclusion of the process of economization and

endangers the prospect of an emancipated health policy. In the context of the German regulation process, the potential benefits of legalization – including alleviating pressure on the judicial system, protecting young individuals, and weakening illicit markets – initially avoided neoliberal commercialization strategies. Nevertheless, the mounting influence of financial motives within the cannabis industry poses a significant challenge to this objective, as it prioritizes the pursuit of economic growth over the implementation of harm reduction policies. The effects of securitization, the presence of criminal groups, and the impact of changing trafficking routes continue to shape the lives of broad segments of society.

In the context of fluid legal frameworks and social orders, the prospect of violence appears to persist, but it is more complex than a polarized friend-enemy construction. This volume examines the concurrent ruptures and encounters of drug prohibition and reform, integrating conceptual critiques with local histories and regional studies. How can we counter the entrenched problem definitions of drug economies? How do the changing actors within it relate to one another? Interdisciplinary counternarratives provide new insights into the diverse histories of the drug trade, the political challenges it faces, and the vanguard of drug policy projects. The chapters also share the commitment to public regulatory and harm-reduction strategies tailored to the specific needs of local or regional contexts.

The conceptual guideline for this collection is the abstract notion of *assemblages* that highlights fluid entanglements without unidirectional relationships. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) introduce the concept of assemblages primarily to explore power, identity, politics, and creativity in non-totalizing, nonlinear ways. “[I]t is not the *arrangement* or *organization* but the *process* of arranging, organizing, fitting together.” (Wise, 2011, p. 91, original italics) This process demonstrates the transdisciplinary research requirements for developing counter-studies and alternative knowledge production in response to a securitized canon.

An assemblage is not a set of predetermined parts (such as the pieces of a plastic model aeroplane) that are then put together in order or into an already-conceived structure (the model aeroplane). Nor is an assemblage a random collection of things, since there is a sense that an assemblage is a whole of some sort that expresses some identity and claims a territory. An assemblage is a becoming that brings elements together. (Ibid.)

Assemblage theory has been effectively expanded into biopolitics and the life sciences. Related topics such as social control, health discipline, and institutional power are most prominent throughout all drug-related issues discussed in this volume. The sociologist Nikolas Rose (2006) reminds us that “[t]he regulation of life forms a biopolitical assemblage, a network of relations between practices, institutions, and discourses that shape the conditions of life itself” (Ibid., p. 94).

Furthermore, assemblages stand for the heterogeneity in the presentation of the selected works in this volume. They differ in length and writing style, but through their relationship, they should contribute to an assembled critical analysis and knowledge production. The authors draw on historical research, media studies, political science, criminology, bioethics, and sociology. They offer incisive and interwoven analyses of key concepts, unpacking the intertwining of violence and drug economies. An inter-American perspective is always present, as the topic cannot be understood in isolated national containers. In addition, the volume aims to bring together studies on drug trafficking and drug policies for future conceptualizations of transformative politics and links to current cannabis legalizations elsewhere. Hence, it is crucial to maintain an open debate, avoiding the closure of one-sided problem definitions that rely solely on militarization or economization as interpretative frameworks.

The authors discussed most of the contributions of this volume at the workshop “Entanglements of (Il)legality and violence: Drug trafficking and drug policies in the Americas” in June 2024 at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research at Bielefeld University. The interdisciplinary encounter focused on two multidimensional research axes of (1) violence

and drug trafficking, and (2) inquiries of the local and regional. Both require interdisciplinary approaches from the social sciences and humanities that integrate conceptual and empirical studies.

The volume is divided into three sections. The first part focuses on the conceptual panorama of the late “war on drugs”. The opening chapter by Oswaldo Zavala critiques how the U.S. security state expands military and surveillance power by redefining threats, like “cartels” and “terrorists”, to justify transnational control. It argues that this “border industrial complex” masks state violence in regions such as Ciudad Juárez and Gaza through similar securitarian narratives. In the same line, Philipp Wolfesberger traces how definitions of organized crime, rooted in Western colonial frameworks, have historically reinforced power asymmetries and biased law enforcement practices. He calls for a decolonial rethinking of criminology that contextualizes organized crime within Latin American realities and challenges universalist, colonial conceptions shaping global policy.

The second part groups histories and sociologies of the drug production, consumption, and their criminalization. First, Lina Britto reinterprets Colombia’s internal conflict by linking it to state formation – rather than state weakness – shaped by internal colonialism and U.S. influence. She shows how these dynamics turned marijuana production from a harmless, informal economy into a violent one, while emerging cannabis movements now seek to promote peace and social reconstruction. Second, Jakob Krusche uses a socio-historical case study of a rural Mexican municipality to explore how its integration into the global drug economy reshaped local society over the course of five decades. He investigates to what extent the ensuing societal developments are uniquely caused by this economic activity. Long-term effects include the prevalence of a pragmatic, economically driven habitus among the local population. The third chapter analyzes how Argentina’s punitive drug policies disproportionately criminalize poor women, revealing deep class and gender inequalities. Through statistical data, interviews, and court rulings, Martina Lassalle shows that judicial practices focus mainly on minor, non-violent offenses, exposing the “war on drugs” as a war against marginalized women.

The third section, “Frictions, Perspective, Encounters,” opens the debate on drug policies through the eyes of bioethics, rural peace activism, and legal studies. The authors propose and test hypotheses about current events and prospects in Mexico, Colombia, and Ecuador. The chapter by Jorge Lineares argues that while states must inform citizens about the health risks of cannabis and other psychotropic drugs, they have no justification for criminalizing consumption or prohibiting regulated production. Within a bioethical and cultural framework, the author defends the individual right to drug experimentation, paired with personal responsibility and state obligations to provide accurate information and harm-reduction support. Estefanía Ciro examines Colombia’s current drug policy under President Gustavo Petro, highlighting tensions between ending prohibition and transforming illegal markets. She introduces the concept of “armed regulation” of cocaine and cannabis markets, critiques their militarized control, and proposes shifting from prohibitionist enforcement to alternative forms of regulation. The volume closes with an analysis of Ecuador’s evolution from a peripheral “drug transit country” to a central hub for cocaine trafficking to Europe. Jorge Paladines highlights how Ecuador’s geography, port accessibility, use of the U.S. dollar, and integration into legal trade networks (notably banana exports) have facilitated the emergence of illegalized economies. The text analyzes the resulting surge in violence, institutional challenges, and human rights issues, while emphasizing the prominent role of European criminal groups in establishing dominant positions over trafficking operations in Latin America.

The presentation of this volume advocates for transdisciplinary dialogues that bring together academic and non-academic knowledge. The fight for open debates is crucial for this effort. The complexity, regional scope, and powerful socio-economic entanglements make drug policy and related issues a valuable area for reshaping broader paradigms. The assemblages of drug policies and trafficking are never final, so although this volume offers new insights, it is only another step toward emancipatory politics.

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