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Naturalizing Insecurity: Resilience and Drug-Related Organized Crime in the Americas

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Abstract

This article critically interrogates the political effect of portraying drug-related organized crime in the Americas as a resilient market phenomenon. It works out how both drug demand and supply are constructed as immune to repressive policy interventions of the War on Drugs. Drug demand is seen as a pathologic consumer habit which is inelastic to price changes brought about by interdiction. Drug supply, in turn, cannot be permanently suppressed as the 'balloon effect' ensures that trafficking routes merely shift from one country to another. In this discursive framework, policy making is consigned to perpetual adaption rather than purposive social transformation. In consequence, the political horizon of international policy making is limited to living with danger. This discursive move is facilitated by the resilience approach which consigns human communities to coping with threats and upheavals they can no longer have any hope of overcoming.

Keywords: Resilience, security, organized crime, Latin America, drug economy

Introduction

This article is about the way in which the increasingly influential resilience discourse is limiting politics to adaptation, rather than purposive social transformation. In the case of the illicit drug economy in the Americas, the prevailing analytical framework is one of resilient demand and supply. As the National Research Council put it in a comprehensive report on U.S. drug demand, U.S. policy initiatives – from prevention and treatment to law enforcement and interdiction – 'have met with little success' (2010, 8). Rather than understanding drug use as a social problem rooted in economic exclusion, racial inequalities and urban decay, it is framed as a pathologic consumer habit immune to policy change. Drug supply, in turn, is seen as resilient to top-down policy interventions of the so-called War on Drugs. Law enforcement and interdiction efforts in one location merely shift the problem somewhere else. In the resilience framework, there cannot be any lasting success in the fight against drug-related organized crime. In response to drug demand and supply being framed as resilient market phenomena, the policy focus has increasingly shifted towards building adaptive capacity at the community level. While policy makers no longer aspire to actually solving the drug problem in the Americas, they claim that local communities can live better with the accompanying violence and disruption by being more adaptive and self-reliant. In a cynical twist of perspectives, human suffering and trauma turn into valuable opportunities for learning and self-growth (Evans and Reid 2014). This is the unique contribution of this article: It applies the biopolitical reading of resilience (Evans and Reid 2014) to the drug problematic in the Americas, working out empirically how it facilitates a passive and de-politicized governance ethos. As a paradigmatic example of the new governance ethos of resilience, the article discusses the work of *Las Buscadoras* (the searchers) in Sinaloa – a grassroots organisation dedicated to the search of abducted children. Here, the traumatic human experience of

loss is reframed as a great opportunity to increase social capital at the community level. As a possible alternative to the new adaptive governance ethos of resilience, the last section suggests a return to political economy and a critique of neoliberalism. Rather than framing drug-related organized crime and its accompanying violence as somehow beyond human control and intervention, crime and violence are seen as rooted in growing social inequalities brought about by neoliberalization since the 1980s.

The War on Drugs in Crisis: Drug Demand as Inelastic Consumer Habit

The War on Drugs paradigm, focused on law enforcement and interdiction, is increasingly problematized as ineffective and even counterproductive. As leading policy analysts Luis Astorga and David Shirk put it, after almost forty years of waging the War on Drugs, 'drugs are more accessible, more widely utilized, and more potent then ever before' (2010, 32; see National Research Council 2010, 8). Similarly, critical NGO activist Laura Carlsen claimed that the War on Drugs approach has proven 'historically ineffective in achieving the goals of eliminating the illegal drug trade and decreasing organized crime' (2008). Although the U.S.-led prohibition regime is still in place and considerable financial resources are being invested in police training, equipment and increased border controls, there is a growing realization among policy thinkers that 'tougher security measures have borne less than satisfactory results' (Astorga and Shirk 2010, 57). While 'billions' have been spent on law enforcement and interdiction, 'there is no indication that illicit northbound flows of drugs […] have been significantly diminished as a result of these efforts' (Astorga and Shirk 2010, 57). What is called for is a fundamental re-evaluation of traditional approaches.

The most commonly cited reason for the failed policies of the War on Drugs is continued U.S. drug demand. The supply side approach 'fails for one obvious reason: where there is a buyer there will be a seller' (Carlsen 2008; see Shirk 2011, 16–17). The root cause of drug-related organized crime in the Americas seems to be the steady demand from consumer nations like the United States. There can 'never be a final 'victory' in a war with drug trafficking': As long as there is an unsatiable demand for drugs in the United Sates some people 'will always compete to control the trafficking of drugs into the U.S. and the vast riches that go with it' (Bow 2013, 92). Importantly, the demand for illegal drugs is largely inelastic. Demand elasticity refers to the percentage change in total consumption which results from a 1 percent prize increase. According to the Organization of American States (OAS), cocaine has a demand elasticity of around -0.5 (Insulza 2013, 12) . This means that demand falls by only 0.5 percent if the prize increases by 1 percent which 'implies that a prize increase more than compensates for the reduction in demand and results in higher overall drug revenues' (Insulza 2013, 13). Given the demand inelasticity of cocaine, raising its market prize through law enforcement and interdiction only has a limited effect on the revenues of trafficking organizations.

The key thing about drug demand is that it can be 'curb[ed], but never fully eradicated' (Abu-Hamdeh 2011, 48). According to U.S. Assistant Secretary for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs William Brownfield, there will always be a market for drugs. As he put it in a congressional hearing:

> Obviously, it is a very simple matter to say if there is no demand, there is no supply because you are not supplying any demand. It is much more complicated than that [. . .]. We have been addressing this internal drug consumption problem in the United States in a serious way for nearly 50 years. [. . .] Let us not assume that when the day arrives that we have solved our drug [demand] problem it is going to disappear. It will not. [. . .] U.S.

> cocaine demand has [been] reduced some 50 percent over the last 6 or 7 years. Has the production of cocaine disappeared 60 percent? No, it has not. The producers have sought out new markets and it goes to additional locations. They are in it for the money and they will create markets if markets are denied to them (in U.S. Congress 2011, 42).

Notably, U.S. drug demand is seen as a 'deeply embedded pathology' against which policymakers are largely powerless (Brands 2009, 38). There is an infantilising social psychology at work here portraying drug demand as a misguided 'consumption habit' (Engel in U.S. Congress 2009, 3). It is naturalized as an 'American appetite' deeply engrained in society (Rohrbacher in U.S. Congress 2007, 36). The bottom line is that drug demand is a resilient social phenomenon, unamenable to policy resolution: 'While this effort [demand reduction] has achieved significant successes, the reality is that this societal ill will bedevil the United States for the foreseeable future' (U.S. Congress 2012, 6).

The Balloon Effect: A Supply which Cannot be Suppressed

Today, there is broad agreement that illegal drug markets are able to bounce back 'fairly well' after law enforcement shocks (Bouchard 2007, 343; see Ayling 2009). They are 'resilient systems' in which market participants demonstrate a 'high adaptive capacity' (Bow 2013, 343). The 'balloon effect' metaphor has popularized this view. According to this metaphor, trafficking routes naturally shift in reaction to law enforcement and interdiction efforts: Successful interdiction in the Caribbean in the 1980s and 1990s merely displaced the problem to Mexico in the 2000s. The balloon effect is widely recognized in academia. For example, Stella Rouse and Moises Acre have found that U.S. military assistance to the central Andean countries of Peru, Bolivia and Colombia has not reduced the overall production of cocaine in the region (2006). It merely shifted cultivation from Peru and Bolivia to Colombia (Rouse and Arce 2006, 547). Their general finding supports the resilience thesis suggested in this article: '[D]ecreases in production in some countries lead to increases in production in other countries' (Rouse and Arce 2006, 554). Importantly, when drugs move, they produce other negative side-effects in their wake: 'After all, displacement is a catalyst for other problems. When drugs move, violence, corruption, AIDS, and other problems move along with them' (Friesendorf 2007, 13). Nowadays, even military-minded policy analysts, like Robert Bunker, believe that 'even a well thought out strategy' will only displace the problem into new areas or 'create [. . .] fundamentally new problems in its wake' (in U.S. Congress 2011, 40). For the critics of coercive drug control policies, the issue of negative side-effects is absolutely key (Friesendorf 2007, 15). Cornelius Friesendorf, for example, has convincingly demonstrated how 'short-sighted' U.S. enforcement policies have 'co-creat[ed] a world of drugs' (2007, 170).

While the balloon effect has been widely discussed in the policy and advocacy world, there has been little theoretical reflection on it. A reference to Michel Foucault's work on political economy seems highly germane in this context (see Finkenbusch 2017). In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault draws out how political economy introduced the 'economic question' into government: 'What are the real effects of the exercise of governmentality?' (2004, 15). Asking the question of the real effects is important because it 'reveal[s] the existence of phenomena, processes, and regularities that necessarily occur as a result of intelligible mechanisms' (Foucault 2004, 15). That is, political economy naturalizes the objects of government:

> The objects of government have a specific nature. [. . .] Nature is something that runs under, through and in the exercise of governmentality. It is, if you like, its indispensable

> hypodermis. It is the other face of something whose visible face, visible for the governors, is their own action. Their action has an underside [. . .] a permanent correlative (Foucault 2004, 15, 16).

In the context of drug-related organized crime in the Americas, the so-called balloon effect or displacement effect is a powerful way of articulating the idea that the drug market as an object of governance has its own nature which needs to be respected if policy is to be successful. The notion of balloon effect tells policymakers unmistakably – as a matter of 'fact' (Laffiteau 2011, 14) or truth – that no matter how hard they fight drug trafficking through law enforcement and interdiction criminals will always find enough clandestine routes to deliver their goods to their destination countries. This is seen as a natural phenomenon which cannot be avoided and, therefore, has to be respected. There is a wide range of civil society actors in the United States which are now campaigning for an end to the failed War on Drugs due to its negative unintended consequences. For example, the Open Society Foundation has highlighted the negative unintended consequences of harsh law enforcement policies: mass incarceration, wide-spread public insecurity and violence as well as health epidemics (Open Society Foundation 2021). As they put it, '[i]nstead of making people safer, punitive drug policies often stimulate more violence and instability' (Open Society Foundation 2021). The balloon effect is a key metaphor for demonstrating the futility of repressive supply-side policies.

In theoretical terms, Foucault worked out how political economy enabled government to limit itself by referring to the nature of the object of governance. His discussion on 'desirable limits' speaks directly to a resilience approach on drug-related organized crime in the Americas:

> [I]f there is a nature specific to the objects [. . .] of governmentality, then the consequence of this is that governmental practice can only do what it has to do by respecting this nature. If it were to disrupt this nature, if it were not to take it into account or go against laws determined by this naturalness specific to the objects it deals with, it would immediately suffer negative consequences (Foucault 2004, 16).

In other words, the 'balloon effect' metaphor is a way of 'distinguish[ing] those things that it would be pointless for government to interfere with' (Foucault 2004, 40). Foucault's discussion of political economy puts the critique of interdiction and law enforcement into a larger neo-liberal context. According to Foucault, the 'economic grid' 'make[s] it possible to test governmental action, gauge its validity, and to object to activities of the public authorities on the grounds of their abuses, excesses, futility, and wasteful expenditure' (Foucault 2004, 246). What Foucault calls a 'permanent market criticism' fits perfectly to the current critique of the War on Drugs: 'It involves scrutinizing every action of the public authorities in terms of the game of supply and demand, in terms of efficiency with regard to the particular elements of this game, and in terms of the cost of intervention by the public authorities in the field of the market' (Foucault 2004, 246). The 'balloon effect' metaphor forces policymakers to realise the futility of their law enforcement and interdiction efforts in the context of the regional drug economy in the Americas. In this way, it helps naturalise drug supply at a resilient social phenomenon. This is now even recognized by U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO): 'Although U.S. heroin control programs […] have had some limited success, U.S. efforts have not reduced the flow of heroin from the region because producers and traffickers shift transportation routes and growing areas into countries with inadequate law enforcement capacity or political will' (Government Accountability Office (GAO) 1996, 2).

Living with Crime and Violence

The main implication of drug demand and supply being framed as resilient social phenomena is that policy is reoriented towards adaptation, rather than purposive social transformation. The reasoning seems to be that if the drug economy is resilient, societies and governance structures need to become resilient as well (see Finkenbusch 2017). As Jonathan Joseph argues, the resilience discourse posits that 'even if we cannot change the world, we can survive better through knowing how to adapt. [. . .] [The] main effect [of the resilience discourse] is to emphasize the need for adaptability at the unit level' (Joseph 2013, 43). The shift towards adaptation can be seen as a consequence of resilience having assumed the status of a common-sense policy framework. Over the last decade or so, resilience has moved from the 'periphery to the centre of governmental fields of vision' (Coaffee 2013, 242). It is now commonly referred to as '*the* organising principle in contemporary political life' (Brassett, Croft, and Vaughan-Williams 2013, 222 original emphasis). Myriam Dunn Cavelty et al. even argue that resilience today 'enjoys the status of a superhero' – a policy approach said to be able to tackle a wide range of international governance issues, from security and development to climate change and global health (Dunn Cavelty, Kaufmann, and Søby Kristensen 2015, 4). And Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper famously called resilience a 'pervasive idiom of global governance' in a much-cited critical article on the topic (2011, 144).

The only obvious alternative to adaptation would be legalization. However, this option is generally rejected because even that would not put an end to violent organized crime. In an interview at the Woodrow Wilson Center, David Shirk formulated nicely the view that even legalization will not put an end to violent organized crime:

> Even if we could legalize drugs - let's say tomorrow you legalize everything, just anything goes – this will likely lead to unexpected problems. What happens to Chapo Guzmán [then head of the Sinaloa cartel]? Does he start working at a McDonald's or does he find a way to make money that is even scarier than just selling drugs, such as kidnapping, extortion, or robbery? The problem is that, when legalization or other market changes cut into their business, drug traffickers will move into other kinds of illegal activities which are likely to have much more direct effects on ordinary people in Mexico and maybe even in the United States (Interview with Eric Olson and David Shirk, Wilson Center, Washington, D.C. 2010).

Given that the U.S.-led prohibition regime is here to stay, and that drug demand and supply are now considered immune to eradication, making society and governance structures more adaptive is seen as the only viable policy option. Society and governance need to mimic the adaptive capacity of drug users and criminals. In this way, the violence and trauma associated with the drug economy in the Americas are portrayed as an inevitable, natural part of life.

The naturalization of trauma and suffering associated with the regional drug economy reflects a passive and depoliticised political ethos. Brad Evans and Julian Reid's analysis of the resilience discourse as a form of biopolitics seems highly germane here. In their 2014 book *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*, Evans and Reid argue that the resilience discourse disarticulates the political aspiration of people to secure themselves against threats (2014; see 2013). According to Evans and Reid, the resilient subject is an adaptive one who does not 'conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility' (2014, 42). Resilient subjects have internalized the 'imperative not to resist or secure themselves from the dangers they face' (Evans and Reid 2014, 42). The biopolitical argument on resilience clearly echoes the critique of the War on Drugs sketched above in that it emphasizes the 'necessity of life as a permanent struggle of adaptation to dangers' (Evans and Reid 2014, 63). Because the resilience discourse portrays danger as endemic and unavoidable, it

involves the explicit disabling of people's aspiration to security and replacing it with an adaptive governance ethos: 'Resilient subjects have accepted the imperative not to secure themselves from the dangers they are faced with but instead adapt repeatedly to their conditions' (Evans and Reid 2014, 63). Rather than attempting to secure herself, the resilient subject is interpellated to think of life as a 'process of continual adaptation to threats and dangers which appear outside its control' (Evans and Reid 2014, 68). The peril of this biopolitical approach is that it ultimately transvalues danger from something negative to something positive. Exposing oneself to danger and trauma becomes a way of partaking in the world. Resilience claims not only that security is a myth, but that exposure to danger is a necessary condition for life to prosper. Trauma and suffering are seen as a way of 'becom[ing] more reasonably human' (Evans and Reid 2014, 58). The attempt to secure oneself against threats is not only doomed to failure, potentially throwing up negative unintended consequences, it also blocks the creative potential of life. The resilience discourse ultimately calls upon subjects to grow and prosper through trauma and suffering.

This cynical celebration of human pain and suffering has not (yet) taken root in the policy discourse on the Latin American drug economy. Gruesome murders of civilians, public displays of extreme violence and the intimidation of public officials, journalists and civil society actors are still seen as unacceptable threats to public security. However, the tendency towards adaptation is there and, I argue, needs to be countered by a more purposive, active notion of the subject. Again, Evans and Reid are useful in this regard. They call for a 'reconstituted understanding of the human as a fundamentally political subject; one empowered by its hubristic belief in an ability to secure itself from those elements of the world it encounters as hostile' (2014, 43). This subject is a fully agential self who rejects the disastrousness of the world and actively conceives of an alternative, better world.

Resilience discourse posits that international governance problems – from economic underdevelopment and violent conflict to organized crime – cannot be solved, only better adapted to. The resilient world is one of constant upheaval and painful adaptation. What this means in policy terms comes out nicely in a recent report by the Geneva-based Global Initiative Against Organized Crime on *Resilience in Sinaloa* (Felix 2017). The starting point of resilience is to abandon any promise of state-led public security for those regions affected by violent organized crime[1]. Instead, resilience is an invitation to 'organize ourselves into more effective networks' when faced with disruption and violence (Felix 2017, 1). It is seen as an 'alternative to traditional security-driven responses' to crime and violence (Felix 2017, 2). Rather than trying to punish and repress illegal behaviour, let alone work on the socio-economic causes of crime and violence, resilience works to 'mitigate the effects of criminal networks' at the community level (Felix 2017, 2). Resilience accepts violence as a fact of live in certain parts of Latin America and asks what local resources are available to allow communities to prosper anyway: 'By tapping into these communities' own sources of resilience, we can build sustainable responses to organized crime and develop their capacity to thrive' (Felix 2017, 2). Here, policy is less concerned with enforcing the law or overcoming obstacles to legal economic development, but with enabling local communities to better cope with disruption and the breakdown of public order. In fact, the exposure to danger might stimulate new social relations of reciprocity and support at the local level.

[1] According to a recent study by México Evalúa, over 90% of crimes in the country remain unpunished (Monroy 2020). Mexico has a serious organized crime problem. In 2020, the murder rate was 29 per 100,000 (Romero 2021). The year 2017 saw a record number of murders with 29,158 homicides (Cole 2018).

Las Buscadoras: Suffering as Social Capital

By way of example, we may focus on *Las Buscadoras* (the searchers) – a group of bereaved mothers who dig up to the Sinaloa countryside in Mexico in search of the bodies of their abducted children (Felix 2017, 16–20)[2]. The environment in which the women of *Las Buscadoras* operate is one of 'profound distrust in the justice system' (Felix 2017, 20). Their search activities fill the void left by a corrupt and ineffective legal system. They are a bottom-up, society-based response to 'institutional inefficiencies', receiving 'null institutional support' by the local authorities (PBI Mexico 2021, author's translation; Felix 2017, 19). On the contrary, when the mothers of *Las Buscadoras* file police reports they are 'usually re-victimised and humiliated' because forced disappearances – or 'levantones' as they are commonly known – are put down to rivalries between drug-trafficking organizations (Felix 2017, 18). In this way, *Las Bucadoras* are a paradigmatic example of national and international policy discourse abandoning vulnerable social groups to their own devises. It is an extreme case of the political abandonment brought about by the resilience discourse. As one activist put it, 'we are doing this because there is no state, because they left us alone' (cited in Silvestre 2019, 27, author's translation).

The problem with praising local initiatives like *Las Buscadoras* as a model for the future is not so much that it is seen as 'fill[ing] the big void [left] by an ineffective justice system', but the fact that trauma and loss are seen as somehow producing positive social outcomes (Felix 2017, 18; see Silvestre 2019). Faced with generalized insecurity and the complete failure of the Mexican state to provide basic services, local groups like *Las Buscadoras* are not only forced to 'take matters into their own hands', there is even a positive spin-off: 'The task of 'searching' requires a whole set of capacities that reinforces social capital' (Felix 2017, 18). Rather than calling for a state-led public security response, ubiquitous violence represents a great new opportunity for local communities to come together and increase their social capital. Similarly, social anthropologist Carolina Silvestre praises the work of *Las Buscadoras* because it 'points towards local notions of reparation, truth and justice' beyond state responsibility (Silvestre 2019, 35, author's translation). Cynically, it is the most 'vulnerable' and 'marginalis[ed]' who are expected to demonstrate the necessary agency to cope with violence and insecurity (Felix 2017, 19)[3]. Notably, the resilience of these communities is celebrated for its explicitly 'apolitical' character (Felix 2017, 19). The women of *Las Buscadoras* are celebrated because they ask not of the social but look to themselves for help. *Las Buscadoras* are seen as a template for resilient community action precisely because they limit themselves to 'function[ing] as a support group to vent pain and angst of their ordeals' (Felix 2017, 19). It is the fact that they deliberately avoid any larger political claims and work on themselves as a self-help group that makes *Las Buscadoras* so attractive for the advocates of resilience. They do not even ask for justice (Elizalde 2022, 132). The women of *Las Buscadoras* are entirely 'focused on themselves' (Elizalde 2022, 132, author's translation). As one woman put it: ' We are not looking for those who did it nor why they did it […] we only want to find him' (Elizalde 2022, 133, author's translation). Explicitly political framings of *Las Buscadoras* as

[2] There are currently more than 90,600 *desaparecidos* in Mexico (Urrutia 2021). There are more than sixty dedicated groups of trackers (*rastreadores*) in Mexico (Zatarain 2020). The issue of forced disappearances in Mexico gained international attention after the abduction of 43 school children in Ayotzinapa (Guerrero) in 2014 (see, for example, Committee on Enforced Disappearances 2015).

[3] Likewise, the victims of disappearances are usually marginalized and lower-class people: 'poor men and women, low-ranking delinquents, disposable manual laborers' (Elizalde 2022, 131, author's translation; see AFP 2021). What is more, the victims of disappearances are often stigmatized as 'linked to illegal activities and victims of the settling of scores' (Martos 2017, 22, author's translation).

following a collective strategy of protest are side-lined[4]. Instead, as a neoliberal policy framework, the goal of resilience in the case *of Las Buscadoras* is ultimately to 'extend the responsibility to search and protect life to the Mexican population' at large (Palacios and Maroño 2021, author's translation). In a society that has largely become 'accustomed to living with violence' (AFP 2021, author's translation), it is a way of responsibilizing individuals and local communities for things that used to be public responsibilities (Welsh 2014).

In this way, the policy rationality behind *Las Buscadoras* is in line with broader Mexican and U.S. government attempts to foster community resilience in the country. As U.S.AID and the Mexican Interior Ministry claim, community resilience needs to be 'promoted, developed and consolidated as one of the main response mechanisms to the violent situation and crime which exist in Mexico' (U.S. Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación 2015b, 39, author's translation). Importantly, community resilience in Mexico is meant to put local actors and their creative bottom-up agency centre stage. It is geared towards 'strengthening the protagonism of those who participate', rather than improving state-led public policy (U.S. Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación 2015c, 18, author's translation). In leading U.S. and Mexican policy documents, this is framed positively as a 'self-directed' process in which the community demonstrates its own autonomy and capacity (U.S. Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación 2015a, 61, author's translation). In a cynical twist of perspective, those who have been most 'damaged by violence' are now expected to turn 'disgrace into hope' and 'silence into positive proposals' (U.S. Agency of International Development and Secretaría de Gobernación 2015a, 79, author's translation).

An Alternative to Adaptation: Critiquing Neoliberalism

The evidence presented in this article suggests that a resilience framing of the drug problematic in the Americas is becoming increasingly influential in the policy world. Drug demand and supply are framed as natural market phenomena which cannot be eliminated. The only viable option, it is argued, is a turn towards adaptation at the community level. This argument goes against recent claims that the resilience discourse is 'exhausted as a governmental or analytical framing' (Chandler 2019, 304). Resilience does not offer 'an adequate agential or transformative aspect'; it is too focused on 'sustaining what exists' (Chandler 2019, 304). However, it would seem as if this lack of transformative potential did not prevent resilience from becoming a prominent policy paradigm in international development, security and climate change mitigation over the last two decades. As David Chandler rightly points out, the question is 'whether more agential […] alternatives can emerge' (2019, 311). A reconstituted politics of social transformation would have to start from the notion that security threats and dangers are not naturally given. They have historically specific roots which can be worked on and overcome. In Mexico, for example, the growing violence in the drug economy can be directly linked to economic liberalization policies implemented in the 1990s, effectively 'abandoning the state's capacity to intervene in the national economy' (Solís 2013, 11, author's translation). Narcoviolence is 'driven by political economic processes that promote social exclusion' (Herrera 2019, 130). What this perspective suggests is that we should understand the regional drug economy in the

[4] For a feminist reading of *Las Buscadoras* as women moving beyond passive, domestic roles, see Nadejda Iliná (2020). Iliná argues that the women of *Las Buscadoras* challenge their traditional gender roles and actively defy the state (2020, 133). In equally positive terms, Cynthia Bejarano calls the women of *Las Buscadoras* 'super mothers' (2002). She sees them as resisting state control and gendered citizenship roles (Bejarano 2002).

Americas as part of a new political economy characterized by neoliberal policy reform from the 1980s onwards. Not to mention the directedly 'symbiotic relation between the neoliberal political regime and organized crime' (Solís 2013, 19, author's translation). This is a view which opposes the naturalization of violence and insecurity under the resilience banner. It argues that violence and crime can be usefully understood as socio-economic problems open to purposive policy intervention and changes in the politico-economic regime. Social exclusion is at the heart of contemporary drug-related violence in the Americas and the former has clear historical roots in neoliberalization in the 1980s and 1990s. This is a context shaped by growing wealth disparities and the rolling back of state responsibilities in the economy (Portes and Hoffman 2003). In Mexico, for example, the evolution of the drug trade can be clearly placed 'within the country's experience with economic liberalization' (Herrera 2019, 130). Similarly, Ana Sam puts *Las Buscadoras* directly into a context of economic neoliberalism (2021, 100). She speaks of

> 'an economic system which, in the case of Sonora, has generated the perfect conditions for displacing the state and strengthening extra-state forces, which, on the one hand, are functional to the accumulation of capital and, on the other, co-opt marginalized and peripheral subjects into [illicit] organizational structures' (Sam 2021, 100, author's translation).

Similarly, José Solís links the rise of the 'narco state' in Mexico to the rise of neoliberalism globally (2013). The general point I wish to make is that the rising level of violence has its origins in social exclusion and inequality which have greatly increased since neoliberalization in the 1980s. The opening up of Latin American economies to the world market and the rolling back of the state have arguably had a negative impact on employment opportunities in the licit economy and promoted the growth of the illicit sector. Neoliberalization has significantly helped to make informal workers the largest class throughout Latin America. These people have to 'survive through unregulated work and direct subsistence activities' (Portes and Hoffman 2003, 53). Drug-related organized crime and the violence that go with it have to be put into this context[5]. The story of the drug trade in Latin America is a story of underdevelopment and social inequality. As Alejandro Portes and Kelly Hoffman argued, neoliberal adjustment policy and its 'free-for-all market' have pushed 'the most disadvantaged members of society [to] seek redress by ignoring the existing normative framework' (Portes and Hoffman 2003, 66). Given that access to employment is more difficult today and that compensatory state schemes are no longer forthcoming, it comes as no surprise that 'a minority of the poor have concluded that the only means of survival consists of appropriating resources through illegal means' (Portes and Hoffman 2003, 69). The shift towards violent, illegal income generation by the lower classes in Mexico demonstrates another dark side of resilience as adaptation: Market liberalisation and neoliberal restructuring of the state push economic 'outsiders' to act as entrepreneurs. What this critique calls for is a 'social development approach to curtailing violence' in the region (Herrera 2019, 146). Instead of fostering adaptive capacity at the community level, the policy priority should be social welfare[6].

[5] In the case of Mexico, Ted Enamorado *et al.* have found a clear causal link between economic inequality and drug-related homicides. According to their quantitative study of Calderón's War on Drugs, a 'one-point increase in the Gini coefficient raised the number of drug-related deaths per 100,000 inhabitants by 36%' (Enamorado et al. 2016, 135). This causal link between inequality and crime is confirmed by comparative cross-country analysis (Fajnzylber, Lederman, and Loayza 2002). Pablo Fajnzylber *et al.* find that 'an increase in income inequality has a significant and robust effect of raising crime rates' (2002, 7).

[6] In contrast, Marcelo Bergman has argued that rising crime in Latin America is, in fact, a consequence of growing prosperity (2018). He sees no empirical evidence for the claim that growing inequality and lack of

Conclusion

This article has worked out the policy implications of framing the regional drug economy in the Americas as a resilient social phenomenon. Once drug demand and supply are seen as immune to policy resolution, the imperative becomes one of adaptation rather than social transformation. Rather than thinking about how to solve the drug problem in the Americas, the discourse revolves around how to live with the issue better. The notion of overcoming crime and violence is discarded as unrealistic because demand and supply are natural phenomenon akin to gravity. The increasingly prominent resilience discourse has taken the place of progressive social transformation, the idea that humans do not have to passively endure the conditions of their suffering. This is a biopolitical approach which separates those who are self-reliant enough to survive on their own from those who are tragically maladapted (Evans and Reid 2014). In fact, human suffering and trauma are repackaged as great new opportunities for learning and self-growth. The celebration of the work of *Las Buscadoras* in Sinaloa clearly demonstrates how the human experience of loss is transformed into an opportunity to increase social capital at the community level. It is praised as 'an example of dignity in the absence of the authorities' (Pradilla 2021, author's translation). While the urge to find the remains of one's loved ones is an understandable human instinct, the 'pragmatism' (Pradilla 2021, author's translation) of *Las Buscadoras* should not fill in for purposive social transformation. As a possible alternative to the cynical ethos of adaptation put forward by the resilience discourse, the article suggested a return to political economy and a critique of neoliberalism. Drug-related organized crime and the escalating levels of violence in the region over the last decade or so are not natural, God-given phenomena. They have their roots in specific socio-economic policies adopted since the 1980s. Economic liberalization and the rolling back of the state in many Latin American countries have led to growing social inequality and shrinking employment opportunities in the licit sector. Crime and violence are ultimately rooted in underdevelopment and social exclusion. Therefore, our policy priority should be social welfare rather than community resilience. As Ana Sam argues in the case of the *Las Buscadoras* in Sonora, we need a 'profound and systematic transition process in order to guarantee the reconstruction of the social fabric' (2021, 103, author's translation).

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economic development lead to violent crime. However, he concedes that the Washington Consensus of the 1990s has produced more social exclusion, unemployment and inequality in the region (Bergman 2018, 104). Contra Bergman, I argue that reducing violent crime in Latin America *does* require 'fundamental social or structural changes' (Bergman 2018, 307).

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