

Book Review

– *Marijuana boom. The rise and fall of Colombia's first drug paradise*, by Lina Britto. University of California Press, 2020

In the fall of 1971, the UN Commission of Narcotic Drugs met in Geneva. At the time, Colombia only played a minor role in the global heroin and cocaine trade. According to Interpol, Colombia was not a major player in the worldwide cannabis trade either. However, only a few years later, Colombian marijuana was considered the best in the world, catering for a large share of US consumption. In November 1974, the Colombian government sent the army to destroy marijuana crops in the Sierra Nevada, near the Guajira peninsula. In 1976, the DEA had hundreds of agents stationed in Colombia. This spectacular change, a genuine boom, is the central topic of Lina Britto's wide-ranging book. As countercultural demand for marijuana soared and harsh US policies since the late 1960s prevented Mexican marijuana from entering the country, opportunities emerged for the Colombians. The pioneers of the drug trade from Colombia's northern Caribbean peninsula, popularly known as the *marimberos*, surely knew how to capitalize on them. *Marijuana boom* provides the reader with compelling insights into the prehistory of Colombia's cocaine-driven narcoeconomy of the 1980s and 1990s. Critical components of the US-Colombian 'war on drugs' were already assembled in response to the 1970s marijuana boom. The response to the marijuana boom was a laboratory of what was to come.

The book's historiographical and analytical richness results from situating the peninsular marijuana boom in broader histories and debates. First, this book makes a strong case for examining (subnational) drug histories as profoundly embedded in and shaped by histories of economic and social development (failures), state formation, and international (Cold War) geopolitical interests. Instead of seeing illicit drug economies and their sociocultural manifestations as antithetical to 'ordinary' socioeconomic processes, Britto places the marijuana boom in a long regional history of agrarian modernization (bananas and cotton booms), and of smuggling networks, which, interestingly, often ran through Aruba and Curacao towards the United States. In fact, marijuana export started as an addition to massive coffee smuggling. In similar vein, there is ample attention for nation-state formation and the complex political and cultural

negotiations between the peripheral peninsula and the Colombian Andean heartland. Finally, the analysis of the repression and decline of the marijuana boom in the late 1970s makes clear how the Colombian and US governments engaged in a process of ‘consensus-making’ that eventually rendered a combination of counterinsurgency and antinarcotics policies.

Second, Britto makes a critical contribution to the methodological and conceptual debates concerning drugs history. There are studies that document the social, economic, and cultural features of illicit drug cultivation and trafficking. Others argue that the secrecy and mythology surrounding drug trafficking prevent making meaningful and empirically grounded claims about its social organization, and that analysis should focus on the discourses and cultures of the trade. *Marijuana Boom* proves that both can and should be productively integrated. Part Two of the book condenses this convincingly: a truly fascinating chapter examines the social organization of marijuana cultivation, commercialization, and exportation, the different actors involved (cultivators, intermediators, exporters, smugglers, and many others), and their networks, hierarchies, and moral values. The next chapter studies the cultural manifestations of the rise of the *marimberos*, and their claims of social status and cultural recognition through performances of masculinity, *vallenato* music, and boisterous partying, lavishly bankrolled by their business successes.

Third, Britto employs an approach to illicit economies, drugs, violence and the state that goes beyond simplistic interpretations of illicit activities and the people involved in them. A key argument is that marijuana cultivation and trafficking were socially legitimate, certainly during the boom’s heydays (between 1972 and 1978). Deeply embedded in local social relations and value systems, marijuana cultivation and trafficking materialized through networks of community, kinship and *compadrazgos*, nourished by values of solidarity, reciprocity, trust, and codes of honour. *Marijuana Boom* shows that violence only became a key feature of the trade when regional economies and societies became the targets of criminalization and militarization. Illicit economies and violence are not the outcome of the absence of the state, but of a particular state presence (truncated agrarian and social reform, militarization). At the end of the book Britto concludes how the transition from a ‘social regulatory authority’ of the marijuana trade (legitimate, but illegal) towards a ‘political regulatory authority of the state’ (illegal, and criminal) introduced state violence into the equation, which undermined the ethical codes that for long checked coercion and brute force (p. 209).

Marijuana Boom is an important book that foregrounds a regional history eclipsed by the subsequent cocaine industry that ‘car-bombed’ Colombia (p. 3). It is a significant book because it approaches this history from multiple thematic angles and diverse geographies of power, with the help of diverse archival sources, newspapers, and interviews. While some readers may find it engages too many fields – political, social, cultural, and diplomatic history, political

economy, cultural analysis and international relations – , I would conclude that it works and that Britto has written a sophisticated piece of scholarship.

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