Indigenous Peoples of Latin America in the Light of Drug Trafficking and Counterinsurgency

Organized crime pressures communities to grow poppy and marijuana. The strategy of "combating drug trafficking" militarizes territories and dispossesses Indigenous peoples of their natural resources. In addition to the cases of Colombia and Mexico, there is drug trafficking in Central America and on the borders between Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. The Bowman Expeditions and the mapping of regions for U.S. strategic purposes also demonstrate the complicity of academia with neocolonialism and dispossession.

By Gilberto López y Rivas - April 1st 2022

Territoriality, natural resources, physical and cultural integrity, and the forms of collective organization of Latin American Indigenous peoples are permanently harassed by the corporations of neoliberal capitalism. Among them, one of the most aggressive and least mentioned is drug trafficking, which penetrates day by day into the Indigenous territories, the forest, the bush and the jungle. At the same time that the narcos force the people to cultivate poppy and marijuana, the Indigenous youth are recruited for labor by the drug cartels.

Widespread unemployment in the rural world and the debacle of agricultural production caused by free trade agreements, which benefit the United States and condemn peasants to misery and exodus, are reasons for many communities to be penetrated by organized crime. While drug trafficking expands, the strategy of "combating drug trafficking" has served as a pretext for militarization and the violation of human rights in Indigenous territories. Added to this are the counterinsurgency tasks of the armed forces against paramilitary and guerrilla groups.
Drug trafficking in Latin America

Colombia is the clearest case of how Indigenous peoples are caught in the crossfire between the military, narco-paramilitaries and guerrillas. In northern Cauca, the Nasa people were forced to implement an ordinance for their Indigenous Guard, armed only with their brightly colored batons, to expel drug traffickers from their territory. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were operating there and the Nasa also had to negotiate a halt of the recruitment of young people. In other territories, the confrontation between the Colombian army and the paramilitaries generated the forced displacement of thousands of Indigenous people who decided to flee the violence.

In Mexico, drug trafficking operates in Indigenous territories located in Michoacán, Jalisco, Sonora, Guerrero, Durango, Chihuahua, Oaxaca, Chiapas and Veracruz. Hundreds of Indigenous prisoners are being held in prisons accused of crimes against health, while at the same time there is particular concern about growing rates of drug addiction, as is the case in the Raramuris community in Chihuahua. It is estimated that around 50,000 Indigenous people have fallen victim to drug networks in at least 60 communities in the country. Thus, the fight against drug trafficking criminalizes Indigenous peoples and covers up human rights violations committed by the military, the police and the judicial system.

The Indigenous people of Central America also suffer from drug trafficking. In the Mayan villages of Guatemala, Mexican cartels have set up criminal structures and control transportation to North America. In the Honduran city of Puerto Lempira, the Indigenous Miskito are besieged by drug traffickers. In Nicaragua, drug trafficking networks have penetrated the Miskito communities of the Caribbean Coast and the multi-ethnic cities of Bilwi and Bluefields. In the Darién Gap, as the thick jungle on the Panama-Colombia border is called, the drug trade has a network that extends from Central America northward.

For its part, the United Nations expressed concern about the situation of cross-border Indigenous peoples who fall victims of militarization and drug trafficking in the border regions between Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru. In the latter country, it was reported that
settlers from the Andean region of Ayacucho invaded Indigenous territories located in the central jungle to grow coca leaf – one of the crops that has expanded the most in the Amazon region as a result of deforestation and violence.

**Capitalism and drug trafficking**

While logging, mining and tourism companies seek to take over the resources of Indigenous peoples, drug traffickers seek to dispossess them of their territory – the material basis of their livelihood and reproduction, and the strategic space of their struggles. In this way, legal and illegal capitalist corporations expropriate Indigenous peoples from their lands, resources and labor force. At the same time criminalization facilitates the activities of the army and paramilitary groups (the clandestine arm of the Armed Forces) in their repressive and counterinsurgency tasks.

This description makes it clear that militarization does not bring a decrease in criminal activities. Globally, Afghanistan is a case in point, as the neocolonial occupation by the United States more than doubled the planting and sale of drugs. Canadian economist Michel Chossudovsky states: "It is a bitter irony that the U.S. military presence has served to re-establish, rather than eradicate, drug trafficking. (...) Intelligence agencies, big business, drug traffickers and organized crime compete for strategic control of heroin routes. A large part of the multi-billion dollar drug profits are deposited in the Western banking system. Most of the large international banks and their subsidiaries in foreign tax havens launder huge amounts of narco dollars."

For several decades the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other intelligence agencies have been denounced for drug trafficking to finance their military expenditures in Central America, Vietnam and Afghanistan. There is no need to recall the allegations by U.S. congressmen that the CIA financed the Nicaraguan guerrillas, the Contra, through the trafficking and sale of cocaine in the poor neighborhoods of Los Angeles.
Journalist Michael Gallant Smith rightly argues that drug trafficking provides the United States with a flexible internal control mechanism, gives it pretexts to pressure other nations, especially in Latin America, and strengthens its economy by exporting inflation through money laundering: "Occasional narcotics seizures, spectacular arrests of drug kingpins, shootouts with deaths, poignant images of young addicts and violent drug-related robberies are just part of the spectacle with real actors staged by the Washington regime's propaganda.

Today's organized crime is the clandestine face of the neoliberal capitalist system and its inherent violence. Drug trafficking is a highly profitable industry. In addition to the money laundering economy, it also finances the legal and illegal sale of narco arms, where the United States is the main supplier. Already in 2004, The Independent reported that "drug trafficking is the world's third largest cash-generating commodity after oil and arms trafficking".

**U.S. geopolitics in Indigenous territories**

The *Bowman Expeditions* is a program that involves the use of geography to map regions of strategic interest to the United States. Ten years ago, Zapotec leader Aldo Gonzalez denounced the *Indigenous Mexico Project* for "geo-piracy" and funding from the U.S. Office of Foreign Military Studies. The project was coordinated by University of Kansas professors Peter Herlihy and Jerome Dobson, who accused González of false community representation, being "politically motivated" and making unfounded allegations.

Ten years after this controversy, with numerous articles and the book *Oaxaca, Militant Empiricism and Geographical Thought*, we can confirm that Aldo’s accusations were true and had a solid basis: the *Indigenous Mexico Project* is part of the well-known *Bowman Expeditions*.

One of the most important "theoretical" assumptions, *a raison d'être* of the Bowman Expeditions, comes from Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey B. Demarest. Before becoming one of
the main analysts of the *Indigenous Mexico Project*, the military officer had been trained at the School of the Americas and was the military attaché of the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala during the height of the massacres against Indigenous populations. During his time in Colombia, Demarest wrote an essay that was published by the Office of Foreign Military Studies: *Mapping Colombia: Geographic Information and Strategy*. In this essay he relates his geographical studies to the development of a successful counterinsurgency war.

The main hypothesis of this military expert is that communal property is the matrix of criminality and insurgency. In *Geoproperty: Foreign Affairs, National Security and Property Rights*, Demarest points out that informal and unregulated land ownership "favors illicit use and violence", and proposes privatization as "the only path to progress and security in Latin America". For this U.S. Army researcher, the disappearance of the forms of collective property that sustain Indigenous autonomous processes is fundamental, since "strategic power becomes the ability to retain and acquire property rights around the world". The defense of private property is key to understanding the Pentagon's interest in land tenure.

**Neocolonialism, dispossession and drug trafficking**

Professional colleges, faculties, departments and researchers opted for a complicit silence to projects such as *México Indígena*. Along the same lines, the Department of Defense financed the *Minerva Initiative* with more than 3,000,000 dollars: a series of investigations in Central America in conjunction with local academia. As happened in Mexico with the Universidad Autónoma de San Luis Potosí, Latin American authorities and professors tend to participate in this extractivist research that is part of academic coloniality: stays in foreign universities, acceptance in indexed journals and participation in congresses.

Both the *Indigenous Mexico Project* and the *Minerva Initiative* demonstrate that science is not neutral and that primitive curricular accumulation is at the service of neocolonialism over Indigenous territories. In fact, no professional association has spoken out about the United States' use of their respective disciplines in counterinsurgency efforts. Nor do
colleagues seem to be too concerned that another *Bowman Expedition* is about to begin in some "dark corner" of Our America.

Meanwhile, investments and public policies that effectively curb the expansion of drug trafficking in Latin America remain absent. Although the "fight against drug trafficking" has worsened the situation, it is the only tool used by States.

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Gilberto López y Rivas holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Utah, is a Research Professor at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (National Institute of Anthropology and History, INAH-Morelos) and a columnist for the newspaper *La Jornada*. 