

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism*, Oakland: AK Press, 2014. ISBN: 9781849351935 (paper); ISBN: 9781849351881 (ebook)

Telling stories that fall outside of official lines can be deadly. (p.36)

As its simple but bold title intimates, *Drug War Capitalism* explores US-led anti-drug state practice as an avenue for the expansion and hardening of capitalist social relations in Latin America. The book's central argument is also eminently simple and eminently bold: the war on drugs is a war on people—poor people and migrants in particular—with objectives that stretch far beyond the regulation of illegal substances. Across chapters on Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras, Paley links anti-drug programs of militarization such as Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative; terror and violence; conflicts over land and resources; and the re-configuration of justice systems.

Underpinning the war on drugs, Paley argues, is the “cartel wars discourse”, or the government framing of the drug war as apolitical, necessary, and natural. It is characterized by a vision of violence as *produced by* and *limited to* “cartels”, with police and military rarely, if ever, enmeshed in illegal activity or terror. This narrative defines a quandary (drugs/cartels) and structures a solution (deeper military and police presence in everyday life). To destabilize the “cartel wars discourse”—which not only dominates mainstream political discourse, I think, but also slips into social science that declares itself critical!—Paley turns to the workers, *campesinos*, families and children who have experienced drug war militarization and violence. Reading government ideologies in tension with the resonant stories of ordinary people is *Drug War Capitalism's* method.

Some of the most illuminating parts of the book are when Paley embeds herself in the geographies of violence she analyzes. One particularly memorable example is a scene where a

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highway overpass moves into Paley's line of sight as she and a local activist are driving through Nuevo Laredo in Mexico. The activist calls attention to the overpass, noting that bodies had been hung over it several times previously. Paley recalls the overpass from photographs she had seen online,

...but there was one big difference seeing it in person: behind where the photograph was taken, a Sony factory dominates the block, with Japanese, US and Mexican flags hoisted at the entrance. It seemed to me a crucial bit of context that Sony operates a factory literally a stone's throw from where human bodies have been publicly displayed. Knowing that the overpass isn't in some abandoned part of town, but rather is meters away from a bustling assembly plant, means knowing that the workers coming in and out of the factory at dawn, when bodies tend to be hung, would all have witnessed these gruesome scenes. (p.23)

Her point here—which courses through the entire book—is that the targets of those nefarious acts were not only those murdered; the bodies were displayed for vast numbers of working people to behold. It was an act of violence for public consumption, designed to make an imprint on local collective life. Thus, alongside the argument that the specters of drugs and drug cartels serve as a pretext for many different forms of enclosure, Paley shows the drug war to be shot through with more insidious modes of social control.

Rich in both evidence and vignette, *Drug War Capitalism* makes a crucial intervention in mainstream explanations of the US-led war on drugs and its concomitant violence in Latin America. It would be a potent teaching tool in undergraduate courses in economic geography, political geography, or the geography of Latin America. I now want to expand on two concepts of which Paley makes use throughout the text: paramilitarization and impunity. My hope in

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doing so is to assemble a case for these as objects of contemplation in future critical geographic research.

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Perhaps Paley's most provocative maneuver is to name the networks known as "cartels" in official discourse "paramilitary groups". Her rationale for doing so is threefold: these groups are often comprised of ex-military and police; drug trafficking only comprises a slice of their labor; and their actions can and do bolster state power. Think of the Zetas in Mexico, an organization "officially outside of state command, financed at least in part by direct proceeds from narcotics trafficking, but with deep roots in state military structures" (p.17). What does it mean that municipal police in Tamaulipas helped train the Zetas, that state police in Monterrey passively observed them slinging banners from the State Congress building (p.146), and that a great many have filtered through US police professionalization programs? *Drug War Capitalism* is bursting with examples of the state provision of *impunity* to organizations like the Zetas in realizing acts of extortion or terror. And Paley shows paramilitarization, or the intensification of paramilitary power, to be most acute in spaces of resource extraction, where it is employed to repress local resistance.

By replacing the "cartel" label with the "paramilitary" one, Paley rejects a clean division between "state" and "criminality". In doing so, she makes the crucial point that paramilitary impunity is *not* indicative of a weak state. Rather, state administration of impunity to and for paramilitary groups speaks to the untenability of the state/non-state binary when it comes to US-backed drug wars in Latin America.

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Paley asserts this binary to be “the central methodological weakness in press reports and mainstream analysis about the drug war” (p.220). This, in broad strokes, is what she suggests should supplant it:

An alternative framework through which to understand the drug war need not be revolutionary. Acknowledging how and when perpetrators of violence are linked to the state, as well as how structural impunity functions to permit terror and violence would help to clarify what is actually taking place in regions impacted by [drug war] violence. (p.221)

But I think the dominance of this binary in official drug war discourse is less a methodological weakness than a reflection of the structuring role it plays in liberal democratic society at large. Coming to grips with the range of ways murder, torture, kidnapping and extortion are linked to the state is a start, but I think what is needed is a radical *suspension* of the binary. I am reminded of the how difficult this might be by Pierre Bourdieu, who argued that “[t]o endeavor to think the state is to take the risk of taking over (or being taken over by) a thought of the state, that is, of applying to the state categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state and hence to misrecognize its most profound truth” (1999:53). But in explicating the geographical variation of both violence and state power in the contemporary war on drugs, critical geography could help show the “heterogeneous, constructed, porous, uneven, processual and relational character” (Painter 2006:754) of the states that put it into practice.

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By way of conclusion, I want to emphasize that the state's relentless proclamation of a clean separation between itself and criminality is much more than metaphorical. This is nowhere more evident than in the conflagration that has come to be called "Ayotzinapa". On 26 September 2014, student-teachers from Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teaching College in Ayotzinapa (in the Mexican state of Guerrero), staged a protest in Iguala over discriminatory hiring practices for teachers. Municipal police fired on the buses carrying the mostly indigenous student-teachers, killing six people. 57 students were detained with 14 later returned, but 43 remain unaccounted for.

The main storyline propagated by the Mexican government and mainstream media is that the disappearance of the students can be attributed to few corrupt individuals in Iguala, with drug trafficking organizations responsible for their deaths. But Ayotzinapa has provoked widespread questioning of the complicity of the Mexican state in political terror, and its tactic of blaming said terror on the specter of "drug cartels". A central catchphrase of the social movements it has sparked, "It wasn't narcos, it was the state", captures popular repudiation of the "cartel wars discourse".

Drug War Capitalism was written before Ayotzinapa, but foreshadows and contextualizes it in so many ways. It breaks through the mainstream media's twinned spotlights on inter-"cartel" violence and state "successes" over "criminals", and takes seriously the voices of people who have been subject to military, police and paramilitary violence. This is a tenacious book with much promise to rouse politically. It is also, as I have argued here, a provocation for deeper interrogation of boundaries—the conceptual ones between state and criminality, and the geographical ones between the US and Latin America—that liberal democratic society holds so dearly.

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