

International Crime and Globalisation

Maureen Cain uses the drug trade as an example of how globalised crime has profound local consequences.

There has been smuggling at least since there were nation states and central taxation systems; at least since colonial powers drew lines across traditional trading routes. The speed of both symbolic and physical communications, however, has added vastly to the capacity for international crimes, while at the same time making some of them, such as cross border human rights violations, more visible. International fraud is aided by IT while commodities smuggled now include arms, people, and environmentally protected products (live animals, ivory) as well as art, vehicle parts (in the Caribbean, certainly) and narcotics. In the wake of the internationalisation of illegalities transnational policing networks have begun to emerge. And in the wake of all these late 20th century developments, 21st century criminologists now follow.

What I argue for here is the adoption of a global rather than an international or transnational approach to these developments. I use the example of the trade in illegal narcotics to illustrate the point, both because it has been well documented and because it is significant for the Caribbean region with which I am familiar.

Globalisation and 'glocalisation'

Globalisation as a concept and as a social process, involves relationships between multiple entities - from individuals to international agencies, - which are widely distributed in space. Relationships in time vary in duration, but may be instantaneous. These relationships are not, of course, innocent or power free. Rather, as Bauman (1997: 1998) has shown they affect all the participants' other relationships, both global and, importantly, local. Thus global capital, for example, internally restructures the states in which it functions. In the old democracies power shifts from territorially appointed legislatures to the more easily globalised executive; in the developing world structures of dependence and clientelism may develop. In the economic sphere too, and more notoriously, the 'freedom' required by global capital has led to massive IMF sponsored restructuring in parts of the developing world, accompanied by immiseration on a world scale (Robinson, 1996). Bauman has coined the term 'glocalisation' to encapsulate the intrinsic linkages between these global and local processes. They are not trans or international processes but processes embedded in and dependent upon changes at both 'ends' of the relationship, or perhaps at each node in the complex web, so that what is now linked is in each case different internally from what was there before.

And criminology? For criminology the lessons here are many. Perhaps the most important, from which the others follow, is that illegal global capital is structured in the same way, in a web of powerful relationships which cause internal change at each of the spatial points, in each of the territories, in which they 'touch down'. It follows, secondly, that the illegal relationship must be studied from both points of view, its effects on each place carefully analysed as they exist in a process of change. And finally it follows that if a decision is to be made about action in relation to the illegal practice, the potential consequences of the decision in each place touched by it must be explored from the varying standpoints of all those involved. This is not a matter of multiple perspectives on a problem or of 'soft' methodologies: it is a matter of recognising objectively different interests, and negotiating a way through them by the normal processes of (hopefully) peaceful politics.

Glocalisation: the case of the trade in illegalised narcotics

In the UK the debate about 'the legalisation of all drugs currently prohibited in the UK and international law' has been thoroughly aired and summarised by Stevenson (1994). Prohibition leads to gangsterism, the perversion of financial institutions and the expenses of enforcement at the societal level, as well as to theft, displacement use, and health problems at the individual level. Moreover prohibition has spectacularly failed to reduce narcotic use. Indeed criminalisation may actually increase user demand since it distorts the use and purchase patterns which apply to legal narcotic substances such as alcohol and nicotine or to prescription drugs such as barbiturates. As regards cannabis, it seems that the inability to police demand and the willingness of prominent people to admit their occasional use has made an ass of the law.

Most of the argument has been won, but two factors stand in the way of de-criminalisation / legalisation. One, as the Home Secretary has pointed out, is the UK's status as signatory to the 1988 Convention (United Nations, 1989). The other is uncertainty about the effect on demand. Some argue that it would shoot up, that only the criminal law holds drug use to its present level. Others, myself among them, argue that after a brief immediate rise, long term usage would probably stabilise or tail off, since the present high levels are maintained in part by supply side pressures which would reduce if there were no longer large sums of money to be made by the trade. But if the truth be told what would happen



Laundry, HMP Wormwood Scrubs.

to demand is anybody's guess, and that makes legalisation / decriminalisation seem too high risk.

Towards a non-western perspective

For people living in Latin America and the Caribbean region, the arguments look different because the social harms are different - and worse. The arguments for keeping things as they are: firstly, that the illegal drugs trade adds greatly to the liquidity and prosperity of the economy. Legal enterprises such as the building trade flourish. According to a Coopers and Lybrand study of 1989 (cited in Griffiths, 1996) there were then 525 international financial institutions in the Cayman Islands, including 46 of the 50 largest banks in the world. Secondly, the population at the individual level benefits from the trickle down effect of drug related wealth. In the sites of production, as opposed to transshipment and laundering, the coca plant and cannabis are more lucrative crops than any legal plant.

But what of the downside, the social harms? At the individual level, young men (particularly) are attracted to pushing if they have no other prospect of even a sufficient livelihood to set up home independently -- and unemployment, without benefit entitlement, is high. If they become addicted there is no adequate health care.

At the communal level the most vulnerable households are destabilised. Crimes of violence continue to rise (even when crime as a whole declines), and moreover a qualitative shift occurs. Harriott (1996) documents the moment between 1983 and 1993 when a shift occurred in Jamaica from 'emotive' to more instrumental homicides.

These changes induced by the amount of global capital invested in the drugs trade are further compounded at the societal level, where the state itself is de-stabilised, including the police and the courts (Griffith, 1996). Sovereignty is put in jeopardy (Vasciannie, 1997), and the very environment polluted by toxic crop spraying of the land and, inadvertently or carelessly, the rivers (del Olmo, 1998). Thus at the same time as these harms occur, the capacity of the state to address them is reduced as it is internally restructured by illegal global capital.

In this situation the massive price reduction and loss of drug-power which would follow de-criminalisation on a global scale would free existing drug capital for more creative purposes, such as health or development, save land, reduce the amount of money available for corruption, and take the pressure off the youth in the inner cities. What

might be done instead by way of development would still depend on international as well as local initiatives, and the international 'help' would be self interested. Of course. But the dual state would be brought to an end, resources freed for social welfare, and the other harms at least mitigated.

On the other hand, I know a Caribbean student who argues that the region would be impoverished without the drugs trade. She may be right. My case is not that a single western criminologist can come up with an 'answer', but rather that a debate needs to be started from and within the sites of production and transit, so that the politics of international illegalities can be better

understood, and, indeed, so that the outcomes too may be better. ■

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