Drugs Here and There
By Luis Rubio

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In the guise of Sherlock Holmes, many Mexicans ask, where is the narco-capo of the Potomac? The fact that the narcotics market in the U.S. is such an important and central factor in the flow of drugs through Mexican territory has led to the conclusion that the ways and means of narco functioning in both countries are the same. Thus the question, reasonable in appearance, of where is the kingpin there?

This is a moot point that derives from a mutual lack of understanding on the nature of the phenomenon. In both societies we tend to project our perceptions and characteristics onto the other. In our case, the presumption that there are great and powerful capos in U.S. like those here leads to the conclusion that the Americans don’t want to stop them and, therefore, that they are cynical and hypocritical. On their part, Americans assume that all of Mexico’s problems are the product of the reigning corruption and that Mexico could stop the flow of drugs if it truly proposed to do so. The enormous recognition showered on President Calderón because of his decision to combat organized crime derives from this reading: here we have, at last, a person who indeed understands and is disposed to act.

As always, the reality is more complex than the caricatures suggest, but in this case, it’s not so much that it’s about two incompatible truths, but rather distinct manifestations of one same phenomenon. Just as in Mexico, in the U.S. there’s a duality: a huge number of persons in jail accused of drug-related crimes (more than 2 million) vis-à-vis evident disinterest in ending drug consumption. According to some calculations, the U.S. government spends seventy times more on publicity against tobacco than against illegal drugs.

With regard to the “great” capos, the reality could not be more contrasting: here in Mexico everything’s big: bureaucracy, unions, political parties, companies; there’s no reason to suppose that narcotraffickers would be something distinct. In the case of the U.S., no company there is as big as, in relative terms, as Pemex or Telmex are in Mexico. Nor are there immense unions or political parties. While in Mexico great organizations manage the movement of narcotics shipments, there the drugs are distributed by gangs that corrupt relatively minor public officials. That is, there are no grand kingpins but instead many decentralized groups. It’s not that one’s good and the other bad, but rather it’s about structures that reflect their own political, economic, and cultural realities.

The Americans’ complaint resides in that Mexicans allow drugs to flow and that if there weren’t corruption there wouldn’t be drugs. The Mexicans’ grievance is that drugs not only arrive at the border but that they are distributed there: that they cross the border because there’s also corruption on the other side. The former ignore the laws of demand and supply, the latter the strength of the institutions. Drugs cross the border because there are individuals who allow themselves to be corrupted and let the drugs go through: the difference is that there it is the persons, not the institutions and structures, that are corrupted. Here we have entire entities —local governments, police corporations, the judiciary— that are infiltrated. U.S. institutions are so strong that, despite the presence of rotten apples, the whole is not undermined; Mexico’s are so weak that the relevant comparison is akin to a house of cards: remove one card and the entire building comes down.
Cynicism there leads one to conclude that it’s the Mexicans, and not their consumers, who corrupt their police officers and judges; cynicism here leads us to conclude that our problem would disappear if Americans would eliminate drug consumption. Others argue that legalization would cause the problem to wither away and still others suppose that the narcos would give up if offered amnesty, as if this were about freedom fighters.

Mexico’s problem lies in the weakness of its institutions, above all judicial and police. How, I ask myself, could we presume to make narco-amnesty work if we don’t have the judicial power to exact compliance with it? There is no doubt that, if all consumption and drug-related monies were to disappear, the corruption and killing capacity of the criminal organizations would diminish. However, without a fully functional judicial system and police structures, the problem of criminality would continue to exist. Once criminal organizations take hold, their business is crime, not drugs: drugs may be the most profitable business in the hierarchy of criminal values, but then there are extortion, abduction, and other lines of business that do not depend on U.S. drug consumption. The relevant point is that Mexico’s problem is internal.

The nostalgic ones affirm that in past times narcotrafficking was kept under control because, in one version, the PRlists were better rulers and because, in another, narcos were negotiated with. Although it is obvious that many governors, mayors, police officers, or regional army heads were corrupted over time, what really took place was that there was a strong government, with concentrated power and a great capacity to act that drew a very clear line in the sand: you better not go over that line or it’s curtains for you. In the last two decades is that, with the decentralization of power in Mexico and the growth of the country as a point of entry into the U.S. market, the capacity of the Mexican government to make this threat stick evaporated. The Mexican State has no alternative other than to strengthen itself because without this, it would be overwhelmed.

The recent events in Monterrey constitute a novel source of concern: some see this as the beginning of the end of criminal organizations, others as a new escalation. Time will tell what it was, but what’s certain is that it was not terrorism. Of course, the act caused terror, but it’s not about organizations that suddenly adopt political objectives, the essential characteristic of terrorism. If language itself frequently generates political crises (as the differences in perspective between Americans and Mexicans mentioned here illustrate), employing the term terrorism can propitiate an enormously grave crisis in the bilateral relationship (many in the U.S. would like to cancel out any relationship, beginning with the virtual closing of the border). The menace of organized crime is already sufficiently large for Mexicans to give the American Talibans a justification to appropriate the agenda.

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