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Debt crisis and drug boom





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The worldwide drugs system

Pino Arlacchi

The worldwide diffusion of hard drugs and the ensuing problems in international relations have gone through three basic stages of development over the last few decades. In the 1950s and 1960s the problem of drug addiction was mainly an American one. After the end of World War II, the number of drug addicts in the United States began to grow at a fast and steady pace, passing from the few thousands of the 1940s to 200-250 thousand at the end of the 1960s. This fact created a justified and ever-growing alarm in American public opinion, to which the U.S. government responded by taking diplomatic action of various nature against several European governments that were considered in some way responsible for failing to do what could be expected from them in order to prevent the traffic that made drugs available on the American market. The Turkish and French governments were, in fact, accused of doing nothing at all, and of being lax with respect to the activities of the producers and dealers.

The evolution of trafficking

At the same time, however, the trafficking system itself was undergoing an upheaval, because of the changes that were taking place in the established division of criminal labour that had for a long time been based on three geographically identified crime groups. The source of raw materials was then in Turkey, where the poppy was cultivated to produce opium, and this was processed and refined into crude morphine. After this first production and transformation stage, French crime organizations of Corsican origin took over as heroin producers and exporters. Finally, the Italian-American mafia families operated, in conditions of virtual monopoly, in the field of large scale importation and distribution.

If we consider that in France, the punishment for peddling heroin up to the end of the 1960s consisted of only a few years of prison, and that the total number of local drug-addicts amounted to only a few thousand, i.e. to a trivial percentage of the population, it is easy to understand some of the reasons behind the French authorities' alleged lack of interest in the problem. In the U.S., however, the percentage of the population affected was much larger. The question did not occupy the same rank in the respective French and American lists of priorities, and thus diplomatic dispute between the U.S. and France assumed rather strong overtones towards the end of the 1960s.

The state of the question during the 1950s and 1960s can be summarized in the polemical declarations of the Murphy-Steele report, which represented the results of a research project officially commissioned by the American Congress in 1971.² This report bluntly confirmed in plain English that heroin addiction was seen as an essentially American problem, and that most other nations considered it in precisely these terms. As a consequence, a lot of lip service was paid to the principle of cooperation with the United States, but very little was actually done.

The epidemic

The second stage in the transformation of drug trafficking on a world-scale market may be considered to have begun in the early 1970s, when both the drug market and the problem of addiction also assumed European dimensions, and became a problem for the West as a whole. One after the other, all European countries, irrespective of their size, relative wealth and drug policy, saw their frontiers opened by the heavy artillery of the large heroin loads marketed by the mafia families and by other organized crime groups of both European and extra-European origin. In France, the first death that was officially attributed to heroin overdose dates back to 1969, and in Italy to 1973. The Dutch government found itself grappling with an epidemic of deaths due to heroin during the first half of the 1970s, and many countries followed with the same phenomenon during the second half of the decade. During 1983, 190 people died of hard drugs in France, against the 94 in 1980 or the 28 in 1977. A wave of cheap Southwest Asian heroin began to sweep through the British borders in 1980-81, thus showing that it was possible for drug dealers to overcome the defence of the European society, what used to be considered the best protected against the penetration of non-national crime organisations. The British system of controlled drug distribution could not prevent the estimated

drug addict figures from passing over a few years from 5-6 thousand to some 50 thousand today.³

The problem of drug abuse and addiction had therefore become common to all the developed countries of the West. Conversely, Third World and socialist bloc countries claimed, up to a few years ago, that they were largely immune to the problem of hard drug abuse. As far as statistics were concerned, this claim really seemed justified, even though some of them, especially in the Third World, happened to be the main producers of the raw materials.

Up until very recently, in the informal discussions during the UN Narcotics Commission meetings, the Western delegates at the United Nations would frequently hear the representatives of the Third World nations declare more or less explicitly that the problem of mass drug abuse was a problem of the developed free-market countries, these countries being the ones where the drug addicts were found, and which provided the demand for drugs. In the poor countries, as well as in the socialist world, the problem did not appear very serious. In effect, it did not exist as an important national issue.

The case took on an even more openly argumentative undertone when the representatives of Third World countries pointed out that their producers were poor peasants, who had always produced and consumed drugs in small quantities. The real problem of drug control therefore appeared that of putting a halt to the demand generated in the affluent countries of the West, because as long as heroin or cocaine could be exported there at high prices, it would be clearly impossible, and up to a point even immoral, to require from the extremely poor peasants of the South that they refrain from producing it. On

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the contrary, it was in the very economic philosophy to which the West had always tried to convert the entire world, that as long as there was a huge demand for hard drugs in the rich countries, the poor ones would continue to produce them. In the second stage of the drugs problem, it would therefore appear, to the minds of the rulers and international representatives of the developing countries, that the problem had an exclusively Western-capitalist background.

This state of affairs was, however, completely upset by the third stage in the development of the drug market - the one which has given birth to the present-day system of drug consumption and trafficking, a system characterized as it is by a shift from Europe and the U.S. to worldwide dimensions.

The 1980s are already being characterized by the rapid emergence of the Third World as an area of hard drug consumption, and by the appearance of the first symptoms of consistent drug demand even in the socialist bloc. For instance, the number of heroin addicts present in Thailand amounts to several hundred thousand, and according to some sources it might even equal the figure for the United States (500 thousand). Yet it must not be forgotten that Thailand has only 45 million inhabitants, while the U.S. has 230 million.

Tapping the poor markets

The young people who live in the urban areas of Iran constitute one of the largest heroin markets in Southwest Asia. The official number of drug addicts in this country has passed from the few tens of thousands of 5-6 years ago to above 100 thousand today. But their number is steadily increasing, despite the ferocious repression of individual consumption and dealing inaugurated by the Khomeini regime. In 1985 alone, there were more than 500 executions for offences connected with the use and trade of drugs.⁴

Serious drug addiction has also been reported in Mexico, Brasil, India, Egypt, Nigeria and many other large and important Third World countries. The growth of these different national drug markets seems largely unrelated to the degree of economic development of each individual nation. On the one hand, the phenomenon is spreading in a particularly worrying way in some of the Third World nations with more rapid and recent development; on the other hand, there are serious drug problems in Pakistan, Thailand and other Third World nations, where the average per capita income is certainly not very high, but

where the countries happen to be geographically located at the crossroads of worldwide drug routes. In Singapore, an Asian country where development over the last 10-15 years has been intense due to its free-market, export-oriented strategy, more than 6,000 drug addicts have been reported out of a population of 2.5 million. In Hong Kong, 41,900 drug addicts out of a population of 5 million provide the incredible proportion of 838 addicts per 100,000 inhabitants, almost four times the figure for Italy. Over recent years, Malaysia has witnessed the number of heroin consumers increase to the point of exceeding the 1983 figure of 70,000 out of a population of 14 million.

The growth of the extra-European drug market has gone hand in hand with the first symptoms associated with the birth of a "drug problem" in the socialist countries. According to United Nations data supplied to the Narcotics Commission by the various governments, Poland had 6,200 drug consumers in 1982, of whom 4,100 were opium users, against the 2,936 recorded for the same country in 1981. Furthermore, the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia have also informed the United Nations Narcotics Commission of the existence of a "reduced" number of drug users within their borders, while socialist Burma has reported the existence of 8,000 official heroin addicts for 1982 against the 5,700 for 1981. Most important, the International Narcotics Control Board reported two years ago that after an absence of more than thirty years, the People's Republic of China had established contacts with a view to participating in the activity of the United Nations Narcotics Commission.

This event lends itself to several possible interpretations. It is very likely that the initiative of the Peking regime is not due to the existence of a serious drug addiction problem within China itself, but rather reflects the latter country's fear of getting involved in vast international trafficking operations which in time could - especially after the imminent return of Hong Kong under the jurisdiction of the Communist Chinese - provoke a breakout of the drug addiction which the regime had eliminated immediately after gaining power, between 1949 and 1953-54.

Practically all the data supplied up to this point is based on the figures officially declared by the respective governments, and we must take into account the tendency of the latter to underestimate the size of the phenomenon. Every government in the world, with some exceptions such as Italy, the United States and the Scandinavian countries, does tend to minimize the problem,

especially during its initial stages of appearance. It is thus easy to deduce that in recent times, from the beginning of the 1970s up to today, the category of hard drug users might have grown to some two million people, spread out in almost all corners of the world.

The figures published by the United Nations Narcotics Division regarding worldwide drug confiscation allow some estimation of the expansion of the drug market. During the boom in the 1970s and 1980s, heroin confiscation passed from little more than one tonne to over six. At the same time, worldwide confiscation of cocaine rose from 2 to 12 tonnes. If one adopts the hypothesis that the quantities intercepted - considered on a worldwide scale and over the most recent years - represent a relatively constant proportion of the total volume of drugs present on the market, it can be concluded that supply and demand are today five times bigger than at the beginning of the 1970s.

This estimate is confirmed by the data, available for certain countries, on the number of users, the prices, and the turnover of illegal business. In the United States, the retail sales turnover for heroin rose from just over \$1,000 million in 1970,⁵ to some \$8,000 million in 1980,⁶ while wholesale heroin prices on the New York market passed from \$15 thousand to \$230 thousand a kilo in the same period.⁷ As far as cocaine is concerned, the sales turnover on the American market has more than doubled in three years alone, passing from \$13,440 million in 1977 to \$29,480 million in 1980.⁸ All these figures are consistent with the twofold increase in the number of users between 1977 and 1979.⁹ Over the five year span from 1975 to 1980, the number of Western European drug addicts increased threefold, rising from 86,000-103,000 to 276,000, according to two rather conservative estimates.

The invisible hand at work

This brief analysis of the changes which have taken place on the drug market over the last fifteen years is based on the data available at the present time. It clearly shows that the worldwide drug system is quite similar to that of any other commodity flowing more or less freely across national borders. The distribution of heroin and cocaine throughout Western and developing nations, and up to a point in the Communist countries as well, does not take place via secret channels. It is in no way mysterious, but - in spite of the inevitable peculiarities and anomalies - follows an industrial logic. It is an illegal, but real economic system. Analyzing the laws which govern the working of the world

system of the narcotics market constitutes one of the most urgent challenges to the economists and social scientists of the whole world.

Among the recent developments that have taken place in this market, an aspect that needs to be emphasized is the fact that the growth in the demand for heroin and cocaine has gone hand in hand with an equally rapid growth in drug supply, both supply and demand working as an engine behind the internationalization of the market on a global scale. Here it is possible to air only a few general considerations regarding the logic of supply and demand on a worldwide scale. The nature of the relationship between supply and demand is highly complex, and is still far from being analyzed in adequate terms by present-day theories. Research on this subject is extremely limited, and there is still no wide-ranging theoretical framework to explain the developments and apparent illogicalities and contradictions in the illegal drug markets.

The increase in demand mentioned above goes hand in hand with a phenomenon of accentuated rise in drug prices, in the sense that the expansion of demand has in certain cases preceded and spurred the growth in price and supply - as it happens in the market for any commodity - while in other cases the increase in demand has paradoxically followed price increase. As far as the wholesale heroin business is concerned, the price of this drug on the American market, which has long been and still is the largest illicit market in the world, has increased tenfold from the beginning of the 1970s up to today. And a similar pattern has been followed in almost all the European countries. The "captive" nature of the market for drugs can partly explain this paradox, in the sense that, while on the market for any normal good an increase in price tends to push consumption down, the addiction and dependence of the consumer on his daily injection makes the demand for drugs almost totally rigid. But the dependence of the consumer already addicted cannot explain the reasons why the demand has been growing, or why new and large numbers of consumers are attracted, in spite of rapidly increasing prices.

The increase in drug demand over the last fifteen years, at the same time as the huge increase in prices, can only be explained with reference to growing intensity in the relationship between supply and demand. In order to understand this relationship, one first has to understand the aspects that the well known phenomenon of an increase in investments in the industry (and therefore an increase in supply) has - in the case of drugs - when prices go up. One has to realize that where drugs are concerned, a price increase means the rupture of

Pino Arlacchi

the fence that usually separates the marginal minority of society accustomed to illegal activities, and the involvement in the market of sections of society which normally refrain from openly criminal behaviour. Drugs, having become an extremely attractive investment, draw into international operations the investment and the market-penetration capacity not only of illegal economic organizations of various kinds, but also elements which do not belong to the professional criminal world, the so-called "citizens beyond any suspicion."



ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLES LIM 1988.

On the one hand, therefore, we see the normal expansion in the economic and geographical dimensions of the market resulting from the increase in the numbers of consumers; on the other we see, vice-versa, an increase in the capacity of the interests and "respectable" social groups involved in this criminal activity to create demand, to disarm legal and police machinery, and to semi-legitimize the consumption and abuse of drugs. The nature of these social groups, who are not professionally criminal, therefore becomes an active

factor able to reproduce favourable market conditions in the most diverse geographical and cultural contexts.

Without this strict interaction between supply and demand, we would not have had the contemporary widespread “cultural” acceptance of drug addiction, just as we did not have it in the past. The young heroin or cocaine user, who is becoming a universal character in that he is reproducing with astonishing regularity from the U.S. to Malaysia or from Pakistan to Australia, is a direct result of the “banalisation” of drug addiction, that is in its turn related to the direct interest of otherwise “normal” economic and social interests in favouring the expansion of drug consumption.

Drug addiction thus becomes one aspect of worldwide “modernization.” The most up-to-date epidemiological analyses indicate that contemporary Third World drug users tend to show socio-cultural characteristics very similar to young drug addicts in the West. It is not the older opium smokers of Pakistan, Malaysia or India who become heroin users. The social figures concerned are different: opium consumers and smokers are often mature people who live in rural areas, whereas heroin users are young people in urban areas - students or workers from varying social classes, just as in the Western countries.

Drugs and traditional society

Before the 1970s and 1980s - before the birth of a real worldwide drug system - there was not such a strict relationship between the supply and demand of cocaine and opiates. For a couple of centuries, the trading of drugs across international borders had certainly existed, and by the eighteenth century, the opium circulating in Europe was already being produced in the Middle and Far East. But there did not exist a series of competitive national drug markets of any importance like those which have developed over the last twenty years, where powerful social groups tend to subordinate the whole of society to their market-expansion strategy.

The modern international system of drug markets constitutes something new in the history of mankind. It has not developed from from a slow, “natural” expansion of local market relations, first converted into regional systems and in turn transformed into still wider entities. Neither has it been formed out of expansion and unification of long-distance market exchange tendencies, gradually transformed into national, regional and local markets. The basis for

the development of the contemporary hard drugs world market is neither the local coca leaf markets in the Andes nor the opium trade and consumption areas in Asia. Few scholars have realized the absence of any relevant continuity between the contemporary drug trade circuit and the market circuits of traditional drug-consuming societies.

Traditional drug markets have existed for hundreds of years in certain parts of the world. They have performed an important role in allowing the supply of a material essential for the existence of thousands of people, a resource critical to their survival not, of course, for natural reasons, but because of historical conditions. For example, the consumption of coca became "essential" for the daily existence of the poverty stricken Indios as a consequence of the profound alterations introduced into their culture by the Spanish conquest.

It has been rightly emphasized that the critical point of the issue does not consist of calculating how widespread coca use was in the populations of the Andes before the arrival of Pizarro, but of remembering the fact that "... the conquerors had recourse to existing tradition - whatever its extent was - in order to exploit it as an instrument of domination. With respect to this, the sentiments and intentions emerging from the debate between prohibitionist and permissive factions (the debate which took place during the second half of the sixteenth century, author's note) assume some importance. The latter faction maintained that mastication was useful because if supplied with coca rations, the natives 'willingly worked in the mines,' requiring very little food (Agustin de Zarate). They warned that it would be dangerous to satisfy the requests of the prohibitionists because the disappearance of coca might lead to extinction of the native population...

At the beginning, the prohibitionist position was religious, humanitarian and related to the restoration of Catholicism. This was clearly expressed by Don Hipolito Unanue, who declared (in 1794) that the primary reason for total proscription of this tradition [of drug use] was the worry that its toleration might have favoured the natives' falling back into paganism, given that coca had been used in ancient superstitious practices ... A second reason was based on the fact that the uninterrupted expansion of the plantations, due to profit considerations, required abundant Indio manpower. The labourers were transferred from the colder mountain areas to the warm and humid altitudes where agriculture was carried out, and where they suffered and died in large numbers, also as a result of maltreatment by their new masters. Finally, a third

reason coincided with the idea that it was not morally acceptable to favour coca mastication to compensate for the lack of sufficient food...



The first round of the debate between prohibition and permissivity was brought to an end by Philip II of Spain. He supported the position of those missionaries and officials who appreciated coca as a beneficial stimulus and nutritive complement for the poor natives, and who were worried about the possibility that without their coca ration the latter would refuse to work in the mines. In a law dated October 18, 1569, Philip II recognized that coca was a necessary stimulant and pain-killer given the hard work the natives did, and declared the legitimacy of the tradition in question. At the same time, sharing the worry of the prohibitionists over the de-Christianizing value of coca, the king

recommended the missionaries to keep a *vigilancia constante* in order to prevent its use in superstitious practices.

It was thus that the habit of chewing coca spread to its greatest extent amongst the natives during colonialism, and continued to persist in the republican period, up to the present day. In 1825, Bolivia was separated from Peru, and it is in this region that coca cultivation and consumption are the most intense today. In the Bolivian mountains, the exploitation of the tin mines and the work of the Aymarà and Quecha Indios was still intense up to recent times; these populations continue to be extremely poor and to masticate coca on a widespread scale."¹⁰

However, in spite of this age old tradition, the traditional local drug markets have never shown any autonomous tendency towards expansion, being in this respect totally similar to the commercial exchange of other goods.¹¹ Unless one still wishes to believe in the fable of *homo oeconomicus* as having been present since the very beginnings of human civilization, it is necessary to recognize the basically static and limited nature of the ancient systems of drug production and exchange. It is not fortuitous, in fact, that many of these markets have definitively disappeared, or have been reduced to a minimum, only to be brought back into life under a different form in more recent times.

In traditional societies, there was no drug "culture" and "economy" separate from the rest of society. The relationships of exchange based on drugs were incorporated into much vaster social relationships and symbolical events which implied confidence and security. The drug markets were surrounded by an ample number of "defences" destined to protect social organization from market practices. Factors which limited the use and commercial exchange of drugs developed from numerous angles of the sociological framework: customs, laws, religion and magic all contributed in the same way to keep the acts of consumption and circulation of drugs safely circumscribed within established times and occasions.

The "banalisation" of addiction

For the majority of mankind, and up to only a few decades ago, drugs were not goods to be sold, bought, or exchanged like any other goods: cocaine, opium and *cannabis* were not commodities, but an integral part of ancient cultural equilibria. They were a part of the daily life or of the ceremonies of simple

farmers, shepherds, traders, priests, and public officials for whom these substances, which today we call drugs, were nothing more than some relief from the labours of life, an element in the celebration of the exceptional aspects of life, or a status symbol which "had some sense" in local life, and which always, however, received its significance within a definite cultural structure.

Outside this specific cultural context, then, the consumption of drugs lost any sense. It was sufficient to move only a few hundred kilometres within the traditional Mediterranean or Middle Eastern areas to perceive a continually changing picture of the relationship between a drug variety and a cultural system. Pure and simple availability - drug supply on the market - had no great significance, that is, it was not able to create demand. Drugs were still not a universal commodity. As long as they remained part of a cultural system, it was almost impossible to find their use reproduced elsewhere. It was sufficient to move from one culture to another for the consumption of one drug to have no more sense, and the following are only a few examples.

Western cultures have been acquainted with the use of *cannabis* since ancient Greek and Roman times, but have avoided its mass scale use up to only a few years ago, preferring alcohol instead. Japan had never witnessed the widespread phenomenon of hard drugs before the years following World War II, with the beginning of the amphetamine epidemic.¹² Even today, Japanese society is extremely resistant to the spreading of heroin and opiates, and it is still metamphetamines which are most widely to be found. Even though the Greeks have been surrounded since the earliest times by populations used to smoking hashish, they avoided use of this drug up to the middle of the last century.¹³ Their resistance to hashish originally was reasons connected to the Christian-Orthodox religion and to their traditions of political and cultural independence, both instrumental in their opposition to Turkish invaders who were classical hashish smokers. The use of alcohol by the Greek population had also assumed the meaning of a political and cultural alternative. A final and well known example is the scarce use of both alcohol and *cannabis* in China, despite the wide availability of both.

The first widespread phenomena of rupture in the cultural, political and social resistance of a national community faced with growth in both population and opium availability had already begun during the last century, and the cases of China and Iran are exemplary in this context.¹⁴ Yet many other national groups defended themselves from forms of uncontrolled drug spread thanks to their

traditional cultures, as in the case of Turkey, India or Afghanistan. The "automatic" mechanism of interaction between supply and demand which governs this market today - and which is responsible for having made it a real modern market based on competition - had not yet been established in most parts of the world.

All three countries quoted above - Turkey, Afghanistan and India - were, and today still are, traditional areas of opium cultivation. Up to a few years ago, none of these countries had ever had any problems of mass consumption of opium comparable to the situations in pre-revolutionary China or Iran.¹⁵ Those who recall what the spread of opium in China was, can well realize its extent: during the last century, some 60% of the Chinese population smoked opium, and when the Communist government took power in 1949, there were 20 million opium and heroin addicts and hundreds of thousands of people involved in trafficking. Finally, the example of Yugoslavia should not be forgotten: a country which had produced large quantities of legal opium for over a hundred years up to 1974, and which had had no serious problem of drug addiction up to the end of the 1960s.¹⁶

In conclusion, the production and circulation of drugs were drastically limited phenomena before they were isolated from their socio-cultural roots, and became a pure object for consumption by millions of people throughout the world. Recent enquiries into the use of drugs emphasize this new consumer aspect, as well as the tendency to use drugs like any other commodity.

The contemporary world drug market has been imposed upon a large part of mankind by the alliance between new criminal enterprises, some sectors - sometimes very wide - of government officialdom, and the international political and financial community. It is a revolution from above, just like that of some of the most recently successful middle classes, who have destroyed society and traditional equilibria, either explicitly, or by instrumentalizing traditions and emptying them of their original meaning.

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