

**Sáenz Rovner, Eduardo. *La conexión cubana: Narcotráfico, contrabando y juego en Cuba entre los años 20 y comienzos de la Revolución*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas/Colección CES, 2005. 278 páginas.**

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While investigating the beginnings of Colombia's involvement in drug-trafficking, historian and economist Eduardo Sáenz Rovner discovered, in the United States National Archives and elsewhere, a wealth of hitherto unused documents that led him to very different shores. The result of this investigative detour is a densely packed and highly readable book on the Cuban role in the narcotics trade between the 1920s and the early days of the Revolution. Populated with colorful actors –not limited to Cuba's corrupt officialdom, but including Chinese opium dealers, Corsican smugglers, well-heeled Colombian traffickers, prominent North American Mafiosi, and their “legendary”, if rather “obsessive”, antagonist, the chief of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Narcotics, Harry J. Anslinger (p. 26)– this account aims not just at a small circle of academics interested in the intricacies of *narcoeconomics*, but at a larger audience.

The shipments of marijuana, opium, heroin, and cocaine that found their way into Cuba and from Cuba into the United States were, by today's standards, rather small. Measured in grams, pounds and kilograms, rather than in tons, they nevertheless triggered an increasingly irritated response from U.S. officials who viewed the island as one of the main culprits in the supply chain fueling addiction and loose morals in the United States. Anslinger and his colleagues at the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) tried their best in pressuring Cuban governments into rigid drug enforcement policies, but to little avail. The Cuban police and judiciary, where they did become active, limited themselves to harassing the poor and marginalized, such as prostitutes consuming marijuana, Chinese immigrants addicted to opium and minor drug dealers, rather than trying to get hold of the bigger fish (pp. 53-55, 94-97, and 196-197). The latter were comprised, as Sáenz Rovner shows, of well-to-do businessmen, often of immigrant stock, who had the contacts, capital, and know-how required for a successful engagement in international commodity trading (pp. 17-19). This picture changed dramatically after the Cuban Revolution. Highly repressive policies put an end to drug trafficking, but this did little to endear Castro's regime to the United States. On the contrary, as Cuban-American relations became increasingly tense, the FBN soon turned to charge the revolutionary government with deliberately fostering the narcotics trade as a weapon to corrupt U.S. society (pp. 222-225).

Why then did Cuba develop into a base for drug trafficking during the *ancién régime*? Consumer demand in, and geographical proximity to, the United States may be important aspects, Sáenz Rovner argues, but these factors on their own explain very little (pp. 24-25). He points to political turmoil, weak judiciary institutions, and high levels of corruption in order to explain why drug enforcement policies remained rather ineffective (p. 25, chapters 2, 4, and 6). More so, this account suggests that only highly repressive anti-narcotics policies, such as pursued by Castro or by the Maoists in China, would show the results expected by the FBN, that is, a repression that is incompatible with core values of liberal democracies.

Equally, Sáenz Rovner's narrative runs counter to widespread notions linking the rise of drug economies to backwardness and underdevelopment. On the contrary, he argues, it was Cuba's relative advancements that facilitated the rise of the narcotics trade. The latter developed as part of an economy that was rapidly integrating into the world markets, and it emerged in a society that came to be characterized by a substantial middle class and a cosmopolitan, urban culture as it absorbed successive currents of immigrants from various parts of the world (pp. 19-24).

Much of the book, therefore, is devoted to an exploration of the general political, socio-economic and cultural environment surrounding the early drug trade. In fact, hallucinogenic substances were not the first illegal commodities to be smuggled from Cuba into the United States. A much more significant and voluminous trade with rum and other spirits paved the way, or rather: the shipping routes, during the times of the U.S. Prohibition (chapter 1).

Much of the internal consumption and petty drug trade was to be found among segments of the island's sizeable immigrant communities, specifically among the Chinese (chapter 3). As to the major players in the fields, confusion seems to have reigned among anti-narcotics officials in the United States: Anslinger and the FBN suspected Lucky Luciano and fellow Mafiosi residing in Havana to have a hand in the business, and engaged in a veritable crusade to have him expelled from the island. Yet, as Sáenz Rovner shows, this was a rather mistaken strategy (chapter 5). To be sure, the mafia was gaining control over much of the island's casinos and hotels catering to tourists from the United States. As chapter 7 suggests, however, this business seems to have been far too profitable for the mafia to also develop an interest in the comparatively small and illegal drug trade.

Chapters 8 and 9 explore the supply routes, linking Cuban and immigrant traffickers with Andean producers and European-based laboratories. In chapter 10 the author analyzes the anti-drug efforts of the Batista regime. Under increasing pressure from the United States, the dictatorship seems to have somewhat intensified efforts to put an end to the drug trade, but due to widespread corruption and a weak judiciary such efforts proved to be little effective. As mentioned before,

this picture was to change only after the Cuban Revolution, as chapters 11 and 12 explain in greater detail.

*La conexión cubana* is largely based on fresh evidence culled from various Cuban Archives and from the U.S. National Archives. It deserves mentioning that the U.S. sources informing this study include not just the commonly used collections held under Record Group 59 and related headings, but also lesser-known holdings pertaining to U.S. District Courts and to the Department of Justice, including the Federal Bureau of Narcotics.

Those readers interested in systematic aspects of *narcoeconomics* would probably have benefited from a concluding chapter highlighting the significance of the book's findings for current discussions about the intricacies of the drugs trade. Yet, the *narcobusiness* has undergone major changes in the decades following the *conexión cubana*, and not just in terms of volume. This may render rather difficult any search for lessons to be drawn for today.

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