

Drugs in Southern Africa: business as usual

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Introduction

When a more peaceful Southern Africa¹ opened up to the world in the 1990s, it quickly became a transit hub and consumer market for international flows of illegal drugs like cocaine, heroin, hashish, and “club drugs”, mainly ecstasy and LSD. The region also started exporting locally produced marijuana although, it seems, on a small scale since regional markets absorb most of the cannabis produced there.² Part of the explanation of this apparent burst of drug activities may be an artefact of a change in focus of local and international law enforcement agencies, which became more willing to scrutinise the pacified region. Yet, there is no doubt that more drugs are traded and consumed there now than before. In 1995, a year where the usually patchy statistics on Africa are almost complete, about 50% of the total heroin seized in the continent was taken in Southern Africa. Additionally, almost 9% of the marijuana seized worldwide, and 48% of the methaqualone (locally known as “Mandrax®”), were confiscated there. While cocaine seizures were small in Africa in the mid-1990s (they have grown significantly since), in 1995 73% of them were in Southern Africa.³

This seems paradoxical, for the drug phenomenon, especially in developing countries,

is frequently depicted as a consequence of exceptional circumstances – for example war, the absence of the rule of law, or conversely, the rule of some dictatorial or oppressive regime. However, the end of apartheid and of the Cold War put a stop to most large-scale military operations and guerrilla warfare in Southern Africa, while the international embargo against the RSA was lifted. Commercial, diplomatic, cultural, and political relations between Southern Africa and the world, which during the conflicts had been low and/or carried out secretly (in breach of UN resolutions), were normalised. In South Africa itself, the region’s economic and political powerhouse and the ultimate stake of most regional conflict, peace installed a democratically elected government that has enjoyed strong domestic and international support and great legitimacy.

And yet, the new South Africa has become so worried by the growth of illegal activity, including drugs, and the violence associated with it, that its authorities have called for US assistance to combat it (Departments of Correctional Services, etc. 1996). How can we explain this boom in drug activities after “normalisation” allowed Southern Africa to join the much-heralded “globalisation”, rather than when it was prey to institutionalised racism and war?

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This article attempts to provide elements for an answer by suggesting that, at present, drug activities are one of the modes in which substantial, historical, political, social, and economic arrangements are expressed and reproduced within Southern Africa, as well as between it and the rest of the world.

The drug phenomenon is a complex web of social activities, notably the production, transfer and consumption of illegal psychoactive drugs, money laundering, and their control by state agencies. It also involves representations, or collective meanings ascribed to drugs. Human activities are carried out on geographic and historical scenes, which shape the political, economic, cultural, and psychological contexts. In particular, they shape the representations and strategies of the social actors – individuals, groups and organisations (e.g., farmers, police forces, banks, and mafias) – involved in the drug phenomenon, and broadly explain the form, nature, and outcomes of drug activities, including their effects on society.⁴

Compounding matters, some drug activities (trafficking, laundering, etc.) can be implemented across several settings, involving distinct social actors in various parts of the world, with distinct mixes of political, social, cultural, and economic capital, and for different stakes. In turn, the drug phenomenon contributes to shape contexts and actors through its effects. There is thus a dynamic process of mutual influence and constraint between settings, actors and drugs – none can be explained separately from the others.

Ideally, research should bring out all the complex, ambiguous and overlapping processes borne by the multidimensional encounters of a vast range of social players acting in, across and on a wide array of intermingling settings. However, due to the limited space allotted to this article and the limitations of the empirical data on which it is based, only some processes relevant to the Southern African drug phenomenon are analysed briefly here.⁵

The first section focuses on the current global setting, attempting to identify three important factors that contribute to explain the drug phenomenon in Southern Africa. The second section examines an important internal setting in Southern Africa – the “ethnic” divide – in an effort to shed light on some of the

processes and representations of drugs characterising Southern African societies. The third section reviews a significant mode of interaction within Southern Africa and between the region and the rest of the world – barter – arguing that drugs have become international currencies.

The global setting

In the 1990s, Southern Africa did not open up to the same world it had gradually been shut out from by international sanctions in earlier decades. The bipolar logic of the Cold War in which regional conflicts had been framed, had given way to the current phase of “globalisation”, with the United States as the only superpower. Three features of the “global village” are central to our subject, although they are rarely mentioned in the abundant literature on globalisation.

- (a) *The US-led and inspired, but largely consensual, “repressive prohibition”.* This is a global drug prohibition regime, aiming at the total suppression of some plants and substances (mainly by means of law enforcement), and has been in force in most states of the world since 1945. It reached its apex with the signing of the United Nations Vienna Convention in 1988, followed by gradual passage into national legislations around the world. Most states are parties to the Vienna Convention. Repressive prohibition is a salient feature of the modern drug phenomenon, and it has recurring outcomes, two of which seem essential. Firstly, prohibition makes the trade in certain drugs extremely profitable – far more so than most legal activities anywhere in the world. Secondly, with few exceptions, global prohibition has entailed that drug activities are carried out in secret and involve more violence than do lawful activities. The super-profits and violence resulting from drug prohibition are possibly the strongest and most direct effects of the drug phenomenon in the present day.
- (b) *The simultaneous rise to hegemony of the so-called “free market” ideology and the negative outcomes of neo-liberal economic policies implemented in most of the world.*

Among other developments, this has entailed the privatisation of state-owned assets, more economic dependency on international markets to the detriment of domestic productive arrangements, structural unemployment and underemployment coupled with fewer distributive policies and social programmes. These have led to increasingly unequal wealth and income distribution both within and among countries while private profit appears as the ultimate objective of most human activities. As a result, there have been higher incentives for poorer sectors of world societies to rely on alternative, “informal”, trafficking and predatory activities for survival or status improvement. Concomitantly, members of the elite have endeavoured to offset a loss of access to shrinking state resources by investing in illegal activities, including drugs. In the case of political elites, criminal proceeds have been used to continue bankrolling large patronage networks, which used to be fuelled by appropriated state funds, now less available following privatisation. Thanks to elite control over national justice systems and/or the support of foreign partners, impunity has largely prevailed so far, with spreading corruption, social unrest and the weakening of state authority and legitimacy. This drift is particularly blatant in Africa, although it is not restricted to it (Bayart *et al.* 1997).

- (c) *The explosion of drug production worldwide since the mid-1980s, especially that of opium and coca leaves, the raw materials for heroin and cocaine.* According to UN estimates, Afghanistan’s opium output quadrupled between 1985 and 1995, from 500 tons to 2,000 tons (UNDCP 1997: 20). In 1999, some 4,581 tons of opium were harvested in Afghanistan, the world’s largest opium producer (OGD 2000: 52).⁶ Burma, whose own estimated output was 1,200 tons in 1999 (2,500 tons in 1998), is the second largest (OGD 2000: 16). One ton of opium yields roughly 100 kg of heroin. Afghanistan and Burma are the world’s leading exporters of heroin. Meanwhile, the Andean countries’ aggregate output of coca leaves has more than doubled between 1985 and 1995, and an estimated 300,000 tons of coca

leaves were harvested in 1996, yielding a potential 1,000 tons of cocaine (UNDCP 1997: 18). These huge stocks of opiates and cocaine, alongside equally large outputs of cannabis, (meth)amphetamine, “club drugs”, etc., testify to the abysmal failure of the current drug “control” regime to meet its stated objective so far. Their strongest effect globally is to generate a “pressure of supply”, which, combined with other factors, results in the rapid and steady growth of drug consumer markets, especially in the developing world. In order to supply these markets, an infinity of new, “alternative”, trafficking routes and methods have emerged alongside the “traditional” ones, while increasing amounts of drug money are searching for a “Laundromat”. This process is facilitated by the development of international trade, transportation, and financial transactions associated with globalisation (Keh & Farrel 1997), and by the much-less noted entrenchment of drug interests worldwide through investments in the legal sector, which facilitate money laundering and provide a façade of respectability.

“Ethnic” divides

While global factors are important for understanding the modern-day drug phenomenon, they tell only part of the story. The other part lies in the local settings that combine and interact with the global one. Indeed, drugs are tangible, earthly objects that *must* be located somewhere; unlike money they cannot take the form of blips on a computer screen. Drugs are also tied to the actors that produce, transport, use, and *think* about them, and to the societies from which these actors arise.

In the Southern African case, one of the settings that influence the drug phenomenon the most is the complex, evolving, relational concept of “ethnicity”. Indeed, Southern African societies seem to view themselves as being made up of distinct ethnic communities that live side by side but do not mix. These perceived ethnic divides result from a long history of migrations, conquests, including colonisation,

and official (political) and unofficial (socio-economic) segregation, which have shaped representations of the self and the other. Recent history has left a particularly deep mark. Until the early 1990s, some regional governments overtly instrumented ethnic differences in order to perpetuate systems of unequal distribution of land and other resources to the benefit of one community against the others.

In the Republic of South Africa (RSA), such a system was institutionalised as *apartheid*, and determined just about every aspect of people's lives. The ethnic-based socio-economic segregation implemented by "Whites", who controlled the state, translated into politics as disenfranchised "Blacks" and "Coloureds" organised to fight the system.⁷ Similar forces were at work in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, South-West Africa, now Namibia, and in the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique.⁸ Thus, the border between cultural, socio-economic and political differences became somewhat blurred, in what could be viewed as a real-life version of "The Clash of Civilizations", Huntington's proposed agenda for US strategic planning in the twenty-first century (Huntington 1993). Among other results, the regional struggle over South Africa has strengthened the barriers dividing communities, fostering distrust, hate, and violence. War, staged in an environment where segregated communities often found support in diasporas, underground networks and survival strategies, has strengthened in the minds of many the idea that "the others" – the members of another ethnic group, political organisation, or the state – are an obstacle to, even an enemy of self-development.

Fear and distrust of "others", combined with the sudden influx of imported drugs seem to have structured new social roles as scapegoats. It appears that the more recently a community has become established in the region, the most likely it is to be blamed for the drug trade. The simultaneous influx of drugs and immigrants has given rise to a new local conventional wisdom that associates specific drugs with specific communities. Although some such perceptions are based on facts, they tend to generalise the involvement of some individuals in drugs to entire ethnic groups. This situation appears to have an especially strong impact on the way in which drug laws are enforced in

Southern Africa. Law enforcement is a complex social activity, and as such it is not immune from the settings in which it takes place.

In a formal interview, a police officer in Lesotho, a small landlocked country peopled almost exclusively by ethnic Basothos, went as far as denying, despite compelling evidence to the contrary, that his compatriots had anything to do with drug trafficking, and saying that it became a problem after "the opening of borders to foreigners". Thus, he accused South Africans of fomenting cannabis production in Lesotho and Nigerians for the growing (if still limited) domestic use of cocaine and also of "club drugs" (in which Nigerian involvement is highly improbable). The Indian community, meanwhile, was suspected of trafficking Mandrax, and the Chinese of importing amphetamine. Similar comments were made in Swaziland and Zimbabwe.

Throughout Southern Africa, "Nigerians", or West Africans labelled as Nigerians, have become everyone's favourite scapegoats, especially the police. Nigeria's bad international reputation, as a "drug dealers' haven", has greatly contributed to this situation. The following statement by a Boer officer of the South African Narcotics Bureau (SANAB) sums up the general feeling. Interviewed during a rather brutal drug raid in the Johannesburg districts of Hillbrow and Berea (nicknamed "Little Lagos"), "Wiese says over 80% of dealers are from Nigeria. 'It is only them, who else? When South Africa opened up to the rest of the world, the Nigerians started to bring the drugs.'" (Amupadhi & Com-mandeur 1997).

In 1993, "Nigerians" were accused of importing more than 50% of the cocaine seized in the RSA. About two-thirds of the illegal immigrants serving jail sentences in South Africa are "Nigerians". Despite this large-scale imprisonment, cocaine and crack continue to be easily available in the country, and although Nigerian traffickers are importing and distributing cocaine and crack in South Africa and elsewhere, they are not the only ones. But as politically and socially neutral "outsiders" deprived of a locally valid form of "protective capital", they have become convenient targets for the police, themselves influenced by the negative social representation of "Nigerians" currently prevailing in Southern African societies.

The second-most popular group of scapegoats in the region, especially among ethnic African police officers, are people of Indian and Chinese backgrounds. Indian and Chinese communities are present throughout Southern Africa, mostly as traders and in business, and Africans generally resent them. On the other hand, in Mauritius, where most politicians and civil servants are of Indian background, most of those arrested for drug use and minor dealing are Creoles (i.e., Blacks), who are poor.

While the police tend to target entire communities because some members are known or suspected to be involved in drugs, traffickers from communities that are not “suspect” have more freedom to act. The relative impunity enjoyed by traffickers from some ethnic backgrounds has led members of targeted and/or mostly economically deprived communities to view the police as an oppressive force, and they are reluctant to collaborate with it. Many even view “crime” as a way to offset differences in wealth, which are viewed as resulting from the system of apartheid. An Ovambo diamond smuggler and former freedom fighter told this writer that stealing from “big diamond companies” was not a moral problem for him – “they are owned by rich Whites who have stolen the land of my ancestors and [prospered] thanks to apartheid, while I have a family to feed”. In South Africa, non-whites often refer to those who held political power during apartheid, and retain much economic and administrative power nowadays, as the *Boere Mafia* expressing the perception that what bonds them together is ethnicity and crime. Boers are in a majority among the officers of SANAB, where corruption reportedly runs high.

The drug phenomenon in Southern Africa seems to be influenced by a principle adapted from Sartre’s famous words: “*la drogue, c’est les autres*”. The sudden development of the drug trade is perceived, rightly it seems, as a direct consequence of the recent opening of regional societies to overt outside influence. But alongside drugs, Southern African societies also have imported and rapidly integrated the representation of drugs as absolute evil, a representation that they have translated, as it were, into their own “social grammar”, in which ethnic divides hold centre-stage. It is as if two distinct symbols of evil, a comparatively new one –

drugs, which seems to be more exogenous – and an older and more locally entrenched one – the threatening ethnic “other” – are being processed into one *syncretic* representation of evil.

To an extent, therefore, it appears that drug enforcement is presently reproducing some of the features of apartheid. If this tendency is confirmed, drugs may soon become a surrogate for ethnic discrimination – a way to perpetuate prejudice now that overt racism has become politically incorrect. This situation, especially in South Africa, is reminiscent of the United States, where the vast majority of those imprisoned for drug offences come from the Black and Latino communities, the poorest in the country.

Barter: drugs as “currency”

One of the peculiarities of the Southern African drug trade is barter, an age-old method of merchant transactions. Indeed, it seems that many of the drug deals carried out in the region take the form of an exchange of local goods or services for drugs. In a region rich in illegal trading and inflationary trends but poor in cash, where all national currencies except the South African rand are unconvertible, substances such as marijuana, Mandrax, heroin and cocaine may sometimes serve as a means of payment for other legal or illegal goods. As in the Brazilian Amazon for instance (Geffray 1996), barter seems to be an important macro-factor accounting for the spread of drugs in Southern Africa.

It seems that illegal drugs have become part of the range of products traded by some of the networks managing high-value flows (of legal or illegal goods) in and out of Southern Africa. Drugs are well suited to play the part of a “hard currency”: they are fairly cheap to produce, command a high sale price, are not subject to inflation (prohibition maintains floor prices and regulates over-production), are fairly easy to transport because of their small volume, and they can either be disposed of, for cash or other goods, on a growing regional consumer market or used in other regional or international transactions. Drugs are flexible high value-added commodities, easily available and disposable on the world market given adequate

connections. Through bartered deals, drug sellers not only dispose of their drugs, they also launder money. Drugs have comparative advantages provided that actors are able to circumvent or overcome law enforcement. This suggests that the drug trade relies heavily on the “protective capital” of its actors for impunity.

Drugs have become part of a regional dynamics involving arms and stolen goods, especially cars and rustled cattle. Here drugs spread in the region by hooking on highly localised illegal predatory activities, which frequently require arms to be carried out.

Thus a practice that first appeared in the late 1980s has gained much ground since the mid-1990s: bartering stolen vehicles or rustled cattle for drugs or arms. As Ellis explains in the case of South Africa: “At local level, armed militia and the gangs try to control a piece of territory to make a profit from it. Some of them [...] forge alliances with parties or individual politicians, and with businessmen who know how to import what they need most – arms and ammunition – and who buy what they have to export, especially marijuana and stolen automobiles” (Bayart *et al.* 1997: 97).

Cattle, which are an essential element of the Basotho culture, can be stolen in South Africa and bartered in Lesotho for local *matekoane*, or marijuana. Conversely, cows stolen in Lesotho are sold for *dagga* (cannabis in Afrikaans) produced in South Africa. Throughout the region, it seems possible to barter drugs or diamonds for almost anything, especially other stolen goods, such as shipments of beer, video machines, and stereo equipment.

In one rural cannabis-producing region of southern Zambia, local sources said that large-scale cannabis production for sale on urban markets was begun by urban dwellers who came to the area in order to barter locally produced marijuana for basic goods such as radios, clothing, bicycles, etc., which farmers needed but could not find in the shops or which were too expensive for them.

Although the profits arising from cannabis bartering can occasionally be significant, it seems that in most cases they are not, involving small networks made up of local players with no access to the outside world, and they rarely reach the banks. However, there is a barter variant using similar

methods, by which far larger amounts of drug money are laundered through their introduction into the international banking system. Here, drug money buys high value-added goods, which in turn become currencies. Such goods – gold, diamonds, non-ferrous metal, and in some cases cash crops such as coffee and tea – have been involved in high value-added transactions for a long time, and their well-oiled networks are often protected by state interests, highly placed individuals, and interests located in other continents such as Europe and America. To give just one example, several African countries appear as diamond exporters while they are not producers. In others, there is a gap between the amount of carats they claim to export and the carats actually registered as imported on the diamond market in Antwerp. The international community seems to accept this state of affairs as a fact of life. However, back in Southern Africa, drug traffickers buy diamonds on the black market and then sell them to licensed dealers who usually buy stones from independent producers and diggers. Both practices use barter but at completely different levels, and they have an infinity of variants within which a high value-added good plays the role of a currency every time it is part of a network or an industry enjoying relatively good protection from law enforcement.

While regionally produced cannabis serves above all for intra-regional exchanges and low-level money laundering, cocaine, heroin, and Mandrax are increasingly used within large-scale money laundering schemes or as payment for Southern African commodities, such as gold, diamonds, ivory, rhino horns and even tobacco and tea. The map of trafficking activities that OGD has drawn from field information clearly shows that drug trafficking networks have followed in the steps of older channels.

The Southern African drug scene can be broken down into three broad drugs-for-regional-commodities “areas of influence”. They are: the “East coast”, which is characterised by the prevalence of Mandrax/heroin-for-gold barter deals (Mauritius, Mozambique, and Tanzania); the “West coast”, which is the cocaine-for-diamonds area (Angola, Bots-

wana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe); and the “mixed countries” (Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa, Swaziland, and Zambia), which, due to a number of factors including their geographical location, the resources they have available, the infrastructure they possess and their trafficking networks’ access to “Asian” and “Atlantic” drugs, export both gold and diamonds in exchange for both cocaine and heroin and/or Mandrax.

On the East coast of Southern Africa, heroin connections seem to merge into gold and methaqualone smuggling networks that link Africa to Southwest Asia via the Arabic peninsula. From Zanzibar to Durban, the Africa of trading posts and Indian Ocean ports is now taken advantage of by drug traffickers. The latter use the “services” available in Southern Africa and benefit from its “free ports”, which have been outlets for commodities exported from the eastern coastal region of Southern Africa and its hinterland ever since the Arabs established trading posts in the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba (now part of Tanzania) around the twelfth century. As a result, Tanzania, Mozambique, Mauritius, and, to a lesser extent it seems, South Africa today act as transit countries for hashish and heroin from the Indian sub-continent. At the same time, in the three former countries heroin has become the most widely abused drug with a very low street price, comparable to street prices in Pakistan and India.

By contrast, cocaine trafficking activities seem to be more linked to routes, networks and trafficking structures originating in the Americas (particularly Brazil) and Europe. Thus, Angola, Namibia and South Africa seem to be as involved in international cocaine trafficking as they are in diamonds, arms, rhinoceros horns, and ivory. Because of this, wholesale and “street-level” cocaine prices are much lower than those on the East Coast and closer to those prevailing in some West African cocaine hubs such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal.

Conclusions

In view of the elements reviewed above, the sudden break of the drug phenomenon into the Southern African scene does not seem so paradoxical after all. Drugs appear to merge quite easily into some of the pre-existing representations and trading channels that structure Southern African societies. This article suggests that drugs do more to perpetuate than upset significant social and economic arrangements, both inside the region and between it and the rest of the world. However, due to the limitations of the empirical data, it must be stressed that this conclusion remains highly tentative and subject to confirmation by further research.

Perhaps the only general conclusion that can be drawn from this effort is that much of the talk about drugs as a “global threat” misses the crucial, if simple, point that, in spite of globalisation, world societies are not the same everywhere. The drug phenomenon is a striking illustration of the tension between the global and the local that characterises the present phase of globalisation. It would seem more appropriate to describe it as a “*glocal*” phenomenon – its global reproduction depends each time on deeply idiosyncratic, highly historical local settings. Conversely, its global reach has geographically and socially differentiated effects. Among other things, these historical local settings, and the ways in which they interact with global settings, seem to explain the formation and distribution of the “protective capital” that provides the impunity necessary to carry out most drug activities.

Further, it would appear that much of drugs’ present “glocality” arises from repressive prohibition. Indeed, although drug prohibition can now be truly qualified as global, since the same model of prohibition appears in the law in the vast majority of states, nevertheless on the ground it is not enforced uniformly everywhere.

Notes

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1. Here “Southern Africa” or “the region” means the following 12 countries, which were all members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in mid-1997: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

2. Multi-ton shipments of Asian hashish and Latin American marijuana also transit the region.

3. The sources of these figures are a variety of reports from Interpol and the World Customs Organization.

4. In this connection, see the concepts of “set and setting” developed by the American psychiatrist, Zinberg (1984). A recent application of Zinberg’s concept to a social history of cocaine is Gootenberg (1999).

5. Most of the empirical data presented here are drawn from “The Drug Situation in Southern Africa”, a study carried out by the Geopolitical Drug Watch, or Observatoire Géopolitique des Drogues (OGD), a Paris-based, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, for the European Commission. This writer was one of four researchers who carried out the 45-day field research in the summer of 1997. Although this is too short a time to record and analyse in detail the secretive drug

phenomenon in such a vast region, the OGD study was the first, and to date, the last, of its kind ever implemented in Southern Africa. OGD went bankrupt and closed in March 2000.

6. OGD quotes a UNDCP report titled *Afghanistan, Annual Opium Poppy Survey 1999*.

7. These broad ethnic categories are themselves made up of distinct cultural groups – Boers, Portuguese and British; Xhosas, Sothos and Zulus; Indians and Malays etc. – that are stratified along socio-economic lines.

8. Although not to the same degree of acuteness, Mauritius also qualifies.

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