



Drug-trafficking and organized crime in Mexico and Colombia: two cases of the history and politics of international drug control

In Mexico, Colombia, Brazil or Central America, not to mention the USA, the realities and sensational representations of drug-trafficking abound, in films, TV series, soap operas and daily news. It is the story that never seems to go away; one whose history is surprisingly little known or understood.

For over a century, the effects of narcotic drugs and their impact on consumers have been assessed by the medical and pharmaceutical professions. Their broader impact on society, what is commonly referred to the “drug problem,” has long been the object of study among sociologists and criminologists, while attempts at prohibiting and/or regulating their use have also occupied lawyers. The study of the evolution, widening scope and unintended effects of the international drug control regime has brought together experts from a number of disciplines, including International Law, International Relations (including International Political Economy) and, increasingly, Human Rights. What has been the role of this expert knowledge; what future impact might it have?

The course will examine drug-trafficking and organized crime in Mexico and Colombia within the broader context of international drug regulation.

Topics cover: Prohibition and the emergence of the international drug control regime; prohibition in the United States; the internationalization of prohibition, from the League of Nations to the United Nations; President Nixon’s war on drugs; the rise of illegal drug markets and drug-trafficking in Mexico and Colombia; the evolving character of drug-trafficking, including expressions of organized crime; double-edged responses: Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative; wars on drugs and human rights crises. Students will become familiar with the broad historical development of the drug problem in Mexico and Colombia, covering both the international and regional politics of illicit drugs, and the menaces for democratic governability.

The course will pay special attention to historical context, starting with the first efforts at drug regulation, in China and the Far East, in the early years of the nineteenth century. It will identify and explain the motivations underpinning the choice of restrictive and punitive options for control. Students will be introduced to the role that prohibition and supply control played in the creation of institutions, norms and rules that have sought to curb the availability of narcotic substances to “medical and scientific” needs. The way in which these drug control strategies, and their penal emphasis, in turn reconfigured states will also receive special attention. This includes the institutional legacies of prohibitionist laws and policies and the unintended effects of law enforcement. Geography, and international political economy dynamics are no doubt important, as are national political traditions. As this course will try to show, these factors help explain different state trajectories in Mexico and Colombia, but do not eliminate their exposure to international reality of illicit drugs and their control.

Organization of teaching

The themes will be introduced each session by the course provider. These presentations will be supplemented by a general discussion. Students are expected to read the bibliography assigned for each theme and to actively participate in the discussion. Those students taking this course are required to produce at least one piece of written work of approximately 3000 words.