

Essay Review

Illicit Drugs and Internationalism: The Forgotten Dimension

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Carl A Trocki, *Opium, empire and the global political economy: a study of the Asian opium trade 1750–1950*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999, pp. xiv, 208, illus., £17.99 (paperback 0-415-21500-5).

David R Bewley-Taylor, *The United States and international drug control, 1909–1997*, London and New York, Pinter, 1999, pp. xi, 242, \$45.00 (1-85567-610-9).

Kathryn Meyer and Terry Parssinen, *Webs of smoke: smugglers, warlords, spies, and the history of the international drug trade*, Lanham and Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield, 1998, pp. xx, 313, illus., \$29.95 (0-8476-901604).

William B McAllister, *Drug diplomacy in the twentieth century: an international history*, London and New York, Routledge, c. 2000, pp. xvii, 344, £16.99 (paperback 0-415-17990-4).

Students always look surprised when, lecturing on drug policy, I state that the international aspects of drug control policy are more significant than the domestic ones. People know about the history of the mid-nineteenth-century Chinese opium wars and Britain's apparent "foisting" of opium on the Chinese. But the rest is a blank. The existence since the First World War of a system of international regulation of the trade and use of narcotic drugs; and the political dimensions of that control system, do not enter public perceptions of the drugs issue. Recent *Guardian* articles on crop

substitution in Bolivia and the international drug trade made almost no mention of it.

This is not for lack of published work on the subject. As far back as Owen's *British opium policy in China and India* published in 1934, scholars have been looking at aspects of the Far Eastern opium trade.¹ The 1960s saw work on the system of international control, with books by Lowes on the origins of international narcotics control and Taylor on American diplomacy and the narcotics traffic.² Bruun, Pan and Rexed's work on *The gentlemen's club* in the mid-1970s, although not strictly history, opened

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¹ D E Owen, *British opium policy in India and China*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1934.

² P D Lowes, *The genesis of international narcotics control*, Geneva, Librairie Droz, 1966; A H Taylor, *American diplomacy and the narcotics traffic*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1969.

up the contemporary political aspects of international control.³ Stein's research in the 1980s looked historically at international control into the 1920s, while more recent work has opened up diverse aspects, from the role of European trafficking in the interwar years to Japanese involvement in the morphine trade in the Far East.⁴ The very diversity of the intellectual origins of this work and the fragmentation of research endeavour into different schools of scholarship have to some degree limited its impact. As Trocki notes in an appendix, Owen's interwar study of the opium trade cross cuts areas which are now subdivided in terms of academic interest. And of course, there is also a strong tradition of investigative journalism to take account of as well, as in the classic study by McCoy *et al.* of the opium trade in South East Asia during the Vietnam war.⁵

The four books under review here exemplify this diversity of approach. They focus in empirical terms on the control system at various chronological stages (McAllister and Bewley-Taylor); the role of opium in trade, prior to international regulation (Trocki), and the role of narcotics as illicit trading substances after international control was put in place (Meyer and Parssinen). Theoretically, their perspectives range through international relations/history; the history of empire and of trade; and American studies. It is significant that Routledge, the publisher of two of the books, has them in completely different series—history/politics and sociology; and Asian studies.

The books are very different in approach, although a common core of archival material runs through several of them—in particular the Foreign Office 371 series (FO 371) and the Anslinger archive for insights

into American involvement in drug control. Trocki's book on opium and the rise of empire focuses on the years when the drug was a legal commodity, tracing the creation of what he calls a "new and increasingly pernicious drug culture" in South East Asia and China, where opium came to be smoked by large numbers of users. This in turn impacted on administrative and economic structures in India, Southeast Asia and China. Trocki, who has previously written on opium in Singapore, argues for a significant link between the international drug trade and the rise of empire. Without opium, in his view, there would have been no British Empire. This is a controversial thesis, but there is no doubt that opium was one of the substances, along with tobacco and sugar, on which the colonial economies were founded. Opium, Trocki argues, prepared the ground for capitalism "by creating mass markets and proletarian consumers while undermining the morale and morality of political elites throughout Asia" (p. 53). In South East Asia, the colonial states were mostly financed by opium revenues. The opium farming systems supplied the hard currency for colonial administration and were major props of the colonial states. Opium was vital to the capitalist transformation of local economies as well as to the colonial administrative structures which protected those structures. Trocki's thesis needs more empirical examination than it gets in his book—which is in part a survey of the secondary material. It takes the traditional view that opium was forced on the Chinese, although some recent work has tended to place greater emphasis on existing indigenous demand for and cultivation of the drug.⁶

Trocki's tone is one of hostility to the

³ K Bruun, L Pan and I Rexed, *The gentlemen's club: international control of drugs and alcohol*, University of Chicago Press, 1975.

⁴ S D Stein, *International diplomacy, state administrators and narcotics control*, Aldershot, Gower, 1985.

⁵ A W McCoy with C B Read and L P Adams, II, *The politics of heroin in South East Asia*, New York, Harper and Row, 1972.

⁶ R Newman, 'Opium smoking in late imperial China: a reconsideration', *Mod. Asian Stud.*, 1995, 29 (4): 765-94.

Essay Review

traders—although, as he notes almost as an afterthought (pp. 164–5), the use of opium was quite legal for much of the nineteenth century both in Britain and America. Opium was a normal trading commodity at the time. To write otherwise is to some degree hindsight history—always a problem for writing about drugs. McAllister and Bewley-Taylor’s books, both based on PhD theses, take the story further, on into the twentieth century and the establishment of a system of international regulation which vastly curtailed the legal global economy and tried to confine it to “legitimate” (i.e. medical) usage. The origins of that system in the Shanghai Opium Commission of 1909, the Hague Convention of 1912 and the post-First World War peace settlement are relatively well covered in the existing literature. Regulation at the international level through the League of Nations was the basis of much new drug control law nationally in the 1920s, including Britain’s raft of dangerous drugs legislation. McAllister’s impressive work (supported by over fifty pages of footnotes) is particularly valuable for the under-researched inter-war and immediate post-Second World War years of international control. He lays out the detailed negotiations which went into the 1924–5 Geneva conferences and the 1925 Convention which created the Permanent Central Opium Board, the system of import and export certification, restrictions on coca and marijuana and further control procedures. By the 1931 Convention on the Limitation of Manufactured Drugs, the basic elements of what McAllister calls a “remarkably resilient” (p. 79) international control system were in place, with increased restrictions on the manufacture, trade and distribution of illicit drugs. Manufacture was to be limited to legitimate medical needs, the open market was to be retained, but illicit trafficking eliminated. Above all, the system functioned through control of supply; there were restrictions on domestic demand legitimated by the rise of the

concept of addiction and the addict as threat. McAllister skilfully recreates the elements at work throughout the history of international drugs control—the role of imperial governments, with both colonial and domestic interests; the pharmaceutical companies, who had played a key role in the pre-First World War focus of control and who have continued to do so; the medical profession; the growing national and international bureaucracies of drug enforcement, and, above all in the early days, the relationship of individual personalities. McAllister’s text is peppered with inserted biographies of some of the “grand old men”, the gentlemen’s club of international drug control. Harry Anslinger from the US Federal Bureau of Narcotics is a well-known bogeyman in the present day legalization debates, but others have had a lower historical profile. McAllister rightly credits the British representative until the early 1930s, Sir Malcolm Delevingne, with considerable influence (although his assessment of him as a “loveable curmudgeon” (p. 51) is not one which would be accepted by this reviewer. Curmudgeon, maybe—Sir Malcolm appears to have been a good example of the dessicated bureaucrat, who, as one contemporary remarked, appeared to think that most problems could be solved by the issue of detailed regulations, preferably drafted by himself). McAllister, in a footnote, discusses the use of the international relations term “epistemic communities” to categorize this constellation of interests which did so much to determine the focus of control. This links with the political science use of the “policy community” to analyse domestic groupings with policy influence in these areas.

The edifice established by 1931 was under strain during the 1930s as some governments ignored their obligations and the threat of war undermined the influence of the League of Nations. The very existence of international control fostered excess production, illegal manufacture and

Essay Review

illicit trading. By the outbreak of war the future of drug control appeared to be uncertain. In fact drug control emerged from the war greatly strengthened and more closely allied to US interests. Harry Anslinger, the US FBN chief, became, as McAllister recognizes, *de facto* global drug czar and used the opportunity to promote enhanced drug control measures worldwide. This influence permeated the continuation of the League of Nations' drug control machinery through the United Nations in the immediate post-war period. New drug control organizations like the Division of Narcotic Drugs (DND) were set up. American emphasis on prohibition vanquished the colonial powers' support for opium smoking and the opium monopolies. Drug control remained, as it had done in Britain after the First World War, located in a bureaucracy which emphasized police, criminal and supply considerations. The role of health organizations within control was limited. The 1953 Opium Protocol represented the high point of hard line responses to drug control and was ultimately replaced by the 1961 Single Convention, which appeared to offer a more flexible agenda no longer focusing solely on supply control. Both the 1971 Psychotropic Convention and the 1972 amendment of the Single Convention began to mention demand as well as supply—not surprisingly, considering the rapid expansion of demand in consumer countries in the 1960s. But the traditional focus of control remained largely intact at the international level, and has been only gradually eroded since. McAllister rightly credits the international control system with a massive expansion of the illicit market as well as with an inextricable involvement with issues of national and international security.

The politics of drugs at the international level and in terms of US foreign policy are given greater attention in Bewley-Taylor's book. His work is less sensitive, more determined by contemporary drug politics than McAllister's. The international control

system is one of "prohibition" from the start, rather than what it actually was, a system of regulation of trade and manufacture. The focus is on Anslinger and American interests, which tends to distort the picture of the interwar period. (Delevingne's name is wrongly spelt throughout). The book's value is complementary to that of McAllister for it places greater emphasis on American politics at the international and foreign policy level in the post-war period. It describes in some detail how Anslinger's influence permeated the personnel of the post-war UN drug control bureaucracy; his opposition to the 1961 Single Convention and attempts to have it replaced by the more stringent 1953 Opium Protocol; and his vehement opposition to Communist China, which he accused at every opportunity of flooding the US with drugs—despite the Chinese Communists' own stringent policy of prohibition of domestic opium use. In a change of emphasis, the last section of the book deals with the way in which US anti-drug efforts have developed since the 1960s within the context of the "global prohibition regime". In particular, Bewley-Taylor draws attention to the well-known conflict between drug control objectives and the wider aims of US foreign policy, which have often led to other state agencies such as the CIA actively promoting organizations which are involved in the illicit trade. Support for Chinese nationalist trafficking in opium was only the first example, to be followed by support for the trade in the Golden Triangle of Laos, Burma and Thailand during the Vietnam war and by further active involvement during the Iran-Contra affair. Drug control efforts have also been the ostensible rationale for achieving foreign policy and national security objectives, especially in Latin America, as the controversy over Clinton's policy towards Colombia and cocaine demonstrates. Bewley-Taylor's work is more polemical, less theoretically oriented and more overtly anti-US than

Essay Review

McAllister's—but the two books are usefully complementary.

Meyer and Parssinen move away from international control and back to the trading issues initially raised by Trocki. By the period they are covering—interwar and post-Second World War—this is an illicit trade. Their book focuses on two geographical areas, which perhaps represent the authors' division of research interests. These are the UK/US location of the illicit trade, and its development in the 1920s and 1930s; and the development of Far Eastern involvement, in particular by the Japanese. Here Meyer's obvious mastery of Japanese sources offers a dimension which is not apparent in the other books covered here, although at times the thickets of detail are difficult to penetrate. The authors usefully delineate changes in the illicit trade in the interwar years. After 1933, the supply line which had run between European pharmaceutical manufacturers and Chinese consumers, and had functioned, both legally and illegally throughout the twentieth century, effectively closed down. League of Nations' control brought traditional supply to an end. But action shifted instead to the Far East. Drug trafficking itself changed. As it became more dangerous, the age of the individual entrepreneurs gave place to a more integrated and organized business. The traffic came to be dominated by Asian men who could put together the sorts of complex organizations which were needed. Japanese-owned morphine and heroin factories began to spring up in their concessions on the Chinese mainland. By the late 1920s, the Japanese product had all but pushed European brands out of China and the Japanese were heavily involved in opium production in Manchuria. Meyer and Parssinen note how profits from the opium trade supported both the Japanese militarists and the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-Shek, despite their official anti-opium rhetoric. Thus was cemented in an association between opium and the financing of political insurgency which has

continued to the present day. After the war, China was no longer the centre of the drug traffic and America emerged into the spotlight as the main trading destination. The authors dispute one oft-repeated contention—that the Mafia boss Lucky Luciano was released from wartime imprisonment by US intelligence and deported to Italy, thus enabling him to rebuild the heroin trade. They argue that it suited FBN politics to have the trade and their fight against it represented as a battle against one "Mr. Big". The book contains vignettes of individual trafficking cases which give a flavour of those days and its discussion of interwar control is succinct. But it seems episodic and would have benefited from a more analytical style in the Japanese/Chinese sections which, although full of interest, are too empirically detailed. Its discussion of business development and trading patterns could have been deepened by relation to a body of economic theory which could explain organizational development and trade.

Mr T Hutson, the UK representative to the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in 1948 commented that "The world drug problem has two fundamental aspects. Consumption of drugs, in an indigenous manner, by indigenous people (opium smoking in the near and far East and coca leaf chewing in South America); and consumption of drugs, chiefly alkaloids, by elements of the populations of civilized states but chiefly the USA and to a lesser degree Canada. It is this which has tended to make the USA the world task master in the field of narcotics."(Quoted in Bewley-Taylor, pp. 69–70.)

More than fifty years on, it is no longer simply the US and Canada which are involved. But these books, taken together, provide valuable insights into what has constituted the current situation. Similar core material has produced books which are very different in emphasis, deriving from different intellectual traditions. Some are obviously more committed in a policy sense

than others and this can detract from scholarship. International drug control and its foreign policy dimensions are complex issues drawing on interests which range from agrarian economics to international relations theory. It would be impossible to encompass all this even in four books, although it should now be possible to produce an overall synthesis and analysis of the secondary literature taking account of the different perspectives. I would have liked to see more discussion of the role of the pharmaceutical industry in international control—and also of the World Health Organization, which, through its expert committees and international definitions of drug use, has provided a scientific rationale for regulation as well as a focus for efforts to regulate demand rather than supply. These are topics for further work. If there is any overall criticism, it is the failure of the authors to be sufficiently bold, both in their theorizing about trade and regulation, the international political economy of the trade, and in linking the historical material to the contemporary politics of international control. A system which was founded initially as one of regulation of supply, operated pre-war by powers with colonial interests and with limited domestic demand, changed after the Second World War. The emphasis on supply reduction remained central, but within a global economy of vastly increased demand in the western nations and a strong prohibitionist regime led by the US. This pattern of events, the abolition of colonial based regional and local opium control/supply systems and the rise of strong American prohibitionist influence is also supported by Paul Gootenberg's recent study of the Peruvian cocaine industry, which shows how plans for a Peruvian-run cocaine monopoly were defeated after the war.⁷ Most of the books here argue that the control system, and in particular the strong post-war US

prohibitionist influence within it, has at least contributed, if not been the major cause of the current situation of international crime round drugs and its impact on national security. It has contributed to a major expansion of illicit trading and supply. Some commentators have looked to the old examples of the Far Eastern opium farms and monopolies for the way in which regional and local systems of regulation could operate.

We also need some counter-factual history here to argue what might have been the picture without regulation. The historical examples of domestic control systems do not lead to the conclusion that these alone determined patterns of drug use. Can the same be said at the international level? The balance of control however, is a significant factor; and it is clear that the heightening of international criminal justice-led efforts after the Second World War had an impact, in conjunction with a complex matrix of other issues. It would be helpful to have a wider discussion of how regulation fitted into other factors such as decolonization; changing balances of power within international relations and so on. The operation of international control and its impact on the indigenous and culturally sanctioned use of drugs like opium and coca in Asia and South America remains a murky area of US foreign policy. International drug control is still dominated by its original colonial control of supply emphasis and its adherence to crop substitution as a policy has been severely criticized.

Nearly a century on from the Hague Convention, narcotics are still the only substances regulated at the international level. But moves for an international framework convention on tobacco are gathering pace. This will, it is argued, end the growing illicit trade in tobacco: curtail expanding markets in the Far East;

⁷ P Gootenberg, 'Reluctance or resistance? Constructing cocaine (prohibitions) in Peru,

1910–1950', in P Gootenberg (ed.), *Cocaine: global histories*, London, Routledge, 1999.

Essay Review

encourage crop substitution; and will undermine legitimate tobacco industry interests. The pharmaceutical industry is again a player, this time through the existence of replacement medical products. Taking “lessons from history” is a risky

business. But it seems that the advocates of regulation would do well to take some lessons from the history of international drug control and its outcomes, as underlined by these four books.