The definitive tendency of the dominant is to appropriate the emergent — Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

The global drug war: beyond prohibition

Juan Gabriel Tokatlian

A failed model must be replaced by a "coalition of the healing", says Juan Tokatlian.

4-12-2007

The 2007 world drug report from the United Nations office of drugs and crime (UNODC) estimates that there are approximately 200 million consumers (ages 15 to 64) of naturally-based and synthetic drugs. The figure of individuals with a serious drug problem, 25 million, corresponds to 0.6% of the world's inhabitants between 15 and 64, and it represents 0.38% of the whole global population.

Marijuana is used by some 158.8 million people; thus the percentage of users of hard drugs worldwide is even smaller. Therefore the crucial questions are: should we continue fighting a punitive, failed "war on drugs" in the name of a very limited number of persons who consume cocaine and heroin? Is not the consumption of drugs a health issue which does not demand such a coercive strategy to cope with it? Should the international system continue to pay and suffer for an American-led prohibitionist Kulturkampf that chases the ever elusive chimera of abstinence?

The facts regarding the "war on drugs" are staggering. For example, in 1990 the Latin American countries eradicated 23,080 hectares of illicit crops while in 2006 they destroyed 280.694 hectares of coca, marijuana and poppy plantations. In the last seventeen years the total area of illicit crops that were fumigated, both by air and manually, is the equivalent to four times the size of the state of Delaware in the United States (see Ben Wallace-Wells, "How America Lost the War on Drugs", Rolling Stone, 27 November 2007).

In Colombia, the drug barons of the 1980s are mostly dead or
imprisoned, but the country is witnessing the proliferation of small, more sophisticated, cell-like "boutique" cartels; Mexico has close to 40% of its territory under the direct influence of organised criminal organisations; Brazil is suffering an unprecedented level of urban violence linked to the drug business; and some Caribbean islands are on the verge of collapse due to the combination of the narcotics trade and gang crime.

In 2001, the last year of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, the production of heroine was seventy-four metric tonnes; in 2006, under the no control of the US-led "coalition of the willing", the production of heroin in Afghanistan reached 6,100 metric tonnes. In the early 1970s, Mexico was the leading producer marijuana, by the early 1980s it was Colombia; by 2007, the United States is the producer of marijuana, with approximately 10,000 metric tonnes.

Even though harsher penalties on money-laundering have been imposed almost everywhere since 2001, the seizure of assets related to money-laundering in the United States and the rest of the world are insignificant. Millions of people are jailed in the industrialised nations and the underdeveloped countries because of minor offences related to drug consumption, while violent organisations grew stronger and more virulent. Thanks to the current futile policies of leading governments and state agencies, al-Qaida and related armed groups are becoming richer as well as more effective and powerful.

By 2008, the United Nations, under the auspices of its office on drugs and crime, must assess the record of the last decade in the fight against narcotics as determined by its special session on drugs in 1998. As of December 2007, none of the targets the session outlined has been attained. In view of this repeated global failure it is time to rethink the “war on drugs” (see the International Drug Policy Consortium).

A broad alliance - a sort of "coalition of the healing" - in favour of bold ideas may lead to a more enlightened path beyond the current failed model on narcotics (see Ethan Nadelmann, "Think Again: Drugs", Foreign Policy, September-October 2007). What is clear is that the current prohibitionist Kulturkampf needs to be replaced by a comprehensive harm-reduction policy: in terms of health and of law individual and community level, and on the local and the international scale. What might look like, after so many decades of frustration, pain and ineffectiveness, should the primary focus of a new debate on drugs.

Average rating Rate this: