

The Uninformed Merchants of Death
Exploring the Role of Consumer Ethics in the War on Drugs

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Follow the money, they say. See where it leads, the paths it takes. I believe there are rivers of money leading to places and towards people every day. Tendencies set the path for unlimited amounts of wealth that shift from country to country, from industry to industry. These rivers are set by geographical, demographical, technological, environmental and political tendencies. Globalization has made these underground rivers more evident: The Chinese are buying more meat. In marketing, it is good to be green. Avoid unsaturated fats. The market belongs to fuel-efficient cars. Two planes crash into the World Trade Center and those who can, invest in gold. The rest buy bottled water and gas masks. We go to war. The rivers shift like railroad switches and people grow rich or miserable depending on which side of the cash flows they are on. It would be pointless to argue that these rivers of wealth are independent from the actions of individuals within economies. These rivers *are* made out of individuals, more specifically, out of individual's hard cash or credit. These rivers represent the purchasing power of billions of consumers who decide what to eat, where to live, how to work.

The influence that societies hold within their consumer imposes a responsibility that has seldom been seen at another time in history. The free market allows our few dollars to weigh like millions, because after all, markets are hundreds-of-million-strong. This presents an ethical dilemma in which our individual sense of influencing the world is watered down because our consciousness of playing a small part—a seemingly insignificant one—in an overarching play. That is not the case. Our purchasing power is the most direct tool to trigger change, and it should not only be used to foster development but first of all, to prevent suffering. In this essay, I will explore how this feeling of insignificance as a consumer, accompanied by a lack of education, presents a heavy toll on the countries that are participants in the war on drugs, specifically Mexico. The American people are the single biggest consumer of drugs worldwide, and this

appetite has a toll not only the United States, but in the countries that satisfy its huge internal market. The billions of dollars spent on drugs in the United States finance the drug cartels that perpetuate a devastating war that threatens the lifestyle of millions of people in the neighboring country of Mexico—my home country. To not discuss this issue is equally as negligent as to enforce the consumer dynamics that perpetuate the cruel and systematic attacks on human dignity south of the border.

For the last five years more than 45,000 people have been killed in Mexico due to the war on drugs—more than six times the number of coalition soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan (Eleazar, 2011). Although I have not personally met any victims, this number has changed my life, my perception of justice and my lifestyle altogether. In the past twenty years, Mexico has gone from being a distribution stop for psychotropic drugs to becoming one of the strongholds of drug manufacturing. If it were not enough, complete cities like my hometown have become war zones. In 2010, more people died in Ciudad Juarez, a Mexican city in the border, as a result of the drug war, than in the entire territory of Afghanistan in the same year (Mora, 2010). Moreover, the United States holds the number one spot on firearms sales and exports, which undoubtedly fuels the murderous ranks of the Mexican drug cartels (Catholic Online 2010). According to data from the Mexican government, “85% of the weapons seized from the drug cartels are bought in the United States,” where buying an assault rifle is protected by the constitution (Catholic Online 2011). The drugs and the people go up. The money and the guns go down. The same country which manufactures sells and exports the weapons that are triggered to destroy my community is the same country that now gives me shelter.

I am writing this in the southwest of the United States, far from my home and old friends. I am amongst those who have escaped from the violence and the chaos that permeates Mexico.

Waiting for me was a collection of family friends and acquaintances that arrived to Texas from Mexico only few years before me seeking shelter in the U.S. This growing community of exiles comes here with very different short-term goals than the average migrant worker. They set up businesses with money from well-established fortunes in Mexico; their kids enroll in American universities and high schools. Their priorities are to become members of certain country clubs, take care of the assets at home, find a good immigration attorney, secure the investor's visa and most important: stay in the United States. These people cross the border to escape from a very different poverty than the millions of undocumented workers that enter the United States every year escape. The poverty these people run from, nostalgic well-to-doers, is more complex, harder to define, but very real. Back in Mexico, living-it-large in a country where wealth is badly distributed, in a nation where 44% of the population lives below the poverty line, life has become too much of a liability (Population 2010). Those who are poor are resented. Those who hold a fortune—may it be self-made or inherited—have survivor's guilt. The more socially conscientious businessmen feel responsible, moral stakeholders, the others don't care. This fuels the mechanisms of injustice towards poor Mexicans, uneducated, unemployed but most important, furious towards the Mexican elites. Today, the southwest of the United States is booming with the help of both types of immigrants, while Mexico falls into mayhem, once again.

I remember the first time I heard gunshots. They woke me up in the middle of the night. They were machine guns, cutting dark pieces of December air like a knife, waking ourselves and our neighbors, making us realize how petty our past problems now seemed. BRA-TA-TA-TA-TA—and all our worries were quickly gone, the memory slot was now full with some others, more sinister ones. My father, a journalist and director of a local network knocked on my door, opened it and asked, "Did you hear that?"

We stood there for a while, then came downstairs to double-check that the doors were closed. I looked for my dog, hoping he was not outside the house. I found him and returned to my bed, still not believing what I had heard. How easy it is to forget those fears once somebody crosses the border. I know it myself, but neither me nor the rest of the exiles speak about it. It is unfit, improper, what-a-way to spoil the fun. Let us celebrate youth, our parents, health, the Lone Star state and the United States. But that is not enough, and while all the Mexican princes celebrate, we know. We know that a couple of hours south the world is burning. There, good friends, teachers and family sleep, work and dream for a better life to which we no longer belong—for we are on other side, “where things are much better,” as our friends and family say to us. “Stay there, don’t come back. But if you do, do it quickly and don’t stop here to long.” Not even the great Texas skies make us forget.

The war continues with all its horrors. In Acapulco, one of the hotspots of Mexican tourism, 15 beheaded bodies were found near a shopping mall on January 8th 2011, four other bodies were found in different parts of the city (BBC, 2011). All of the victims were men between 25 and 30 years old (BBC, 2011). No heads. In April, more than 190 bodies were discovered in mass graves in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, two hours away from the United States border (El Universal, 2011). The victims were kidnapped from passenger buses, indiscriminately. The mass graves were discovered not far from where nine months before, 72 bodies of undocumented workers were found, most of them from Latin America and the Caribbean (El Universal, 2011). In August, gunmen bursted into a casino in an affluent neighborhood in Monterrey, a city of 4 million habitants, spilled gasoline inside, locked the doors, and set it ablaze (Peninsula, 2011). More than fifty people were killed in the fire, most of them housewives. This was the response of the cartels when the owner of the casino refused to pay his monthly

quota—whatever the price might have been. Where the housewives to blame? That is the chaotic element in the drug war that tears societies apart, it cripples communities with fear. How can one be protected from being in the wrong place at the wrong time? How can somebody be wealthy with a murdered daughter, or with a mother incinerated by rapacious criminals? The answer is that no one can. That is the poverty of the soul from which Mexican businessmen run from. That is the poverty I run from. It is mindless, it is absurd but most frightening, it is unforeseen.

Despite it being a Friday night, I did not go out that day. Mainly because the places where the parties were happening were too far away and driving from there to my house at night would be dangerous. There was a bar opening two blocks from my house but I did not know that at the time, if I had known I would have probably been there for the inauguration. I stayed home and while talking over the phone I heard the now too familiar unmistakable sound of gunshots from an assault rifle. One time, two times, three times—a pause—and then again four times. I hung up because my sister came to me, trembling. We got into my parent's room, which fortunately were home at the time. The gunshots seemed too close, too menacing, unlike the distant gunshots that still frightened us but were less threatening, those that thundered in the poor neighborhoods at the city's periphery. After the sirens resonated throughout the streets we decided to sleep together in the same room. The next day, I passed next to the bar that was having the inauguration. It had countless holes made by the high caliber rounds shot unto the young people inside it—all of them customers to a bar that happened to be owned by a drug cartel. The bar, named Las Juanas, was attacked by the rival drug cartel. Eight people died, all of them between the ages of 20 and 30, nineteen more were shot but survived (Milenio, 2010). The murderers arrived in three large SUVs. They positioned themselves outside the place, fired their rounds upon the building, entered the bar and shot the crowd that was taking cover under tables

and behind the bar. Survivors identified several of the attacker as being very young, some of them among the ages of 16 to 18 (Milenio, 2010).

Every murder committed by the drug cartels is a message, some more literal than others. The messages are directed towards rival cartels or the law enforcement agencies and are written over corpses with black permanent markers. They are daunting, or excusatory. Some warn of coming dangers, others are direct threats to people—city officials, rival drug dealers, priests, chiefs of police. There is a common element in these messages that is pervasive in all forms of their written statements. The messages are full of spelling mistakes, which evidenciate the poverty in the background of the killers. Wrong letters in wrong places tell more than what the drug traffickers ever wanted. The violence that borders sadism is the result of a striking poverty that starts in childhood; the same people who dissolve corpses in acid do not know how to write—not even dead-serious threats. The messages send a chill down my spine; those who kill brave journalists or honest police officers seem oblivious to the most basic elements of culture. They show themselves as barbaric as they are. There is no excuse for such gruesome killings, but most certainly, causes exist.

What compels young and poor men and women to join the cartels? It begins with the recipe of the desperate young adult. No jobs, no justice, no education. Everything else can be justified. Young people get paid a minimum salary of somewhere around three dollars an hour—those who are fortunate to have jobs (Population 2010). They, who have ambitions as young people everywhere do, understand that there is little hope to escape the neighborhood they live in, or to provide a honorable living to their wives, parents and children, with that kind of salaries. It is then when they hear, when they understand why joining a murderous cartel might be the option—since many see it as the only one.

A friend of mine, who I will call Alberto, was kidnapped while we were close to graduating high school, only to be returned two weeks later. Alberto spoke to me recently—three years after his captivity. He told me he did not hold any grudges against his captors, that he had forgiven them. When we spoke, he had a serene tone, as he who has achieved an uncontestable truth. “If I were in their position I would not do what they do, but I would consider it, at least for a brief moment,” my friend told me, “these people are used to adversities neither you and I, or anyone who has not lived under their circumstances, can understand.” We were in a restaurant, and we were the only ones there, as it had become common in hometowns like mine, where people grew increasingly worried of going out at night. “The cell phones you and I use are worth their monthly paycheck. Our cell phones!” Alberto said. “They are faced with what seems like endless poverty. Run the numbers, a little more than \$800 worth of heroin or cocaine in Mexico will bring in as much as \$100,000 on the streets of Atlanta or Houston, much more if the city is up north” (Alberto 2011). When men and women who earn \$20 dollars a day are faced with those kind of tax-free profits, many of them decide to risk it all so they and their families can live decently, even when it might not last long. The fact that the drugs are illegal allows such an obscene profit margin—one that no government can compete with. The cartels find the way to get into the United States, always and somehow. I believe there is no number of policemen, judges, drug-enforcer agents that can compete with Adam Smith’s mythological invisible hand: If the market is with them, who is against them?

Medium sized submarines, tunnels wide enough to transport containers, planes landing in dark runways, drugs carried in capsules by foot soldiers, bribes to border agents, catapults: Drug dealers use any way they can to ride the river of money that generously spurs from the wallet of meth-addicts, well-to-do cocaine addicts and young people who smoke marijuana. Alberto and I

had finished our dinner, paid the check and left. On my way home I automatically checked rear mirrors to ensure not being followed, and when stopped at traffic lights, I would very carefully pass them—avoiding being stalled in the middle of the street in the first hours of the day, like a sitting duck. It is not that I am paranoid: that is the way people conduct themselves in a crime stricken town.

When I came to the United States I realized how pervasive drugs were in the college environment. It seemed to me that many people my age held it as a lifestyle. It was not that they had a smoke every week or two; their dorms and apartments were shrines dedicated to weed. Bob Marley loomed over every wall on every apartment—not that there is anything wrong with that. Truth be told, after a couple of months in the United States I identified myself as a libertarian. To each his or her own, the government has no business in the personal lives of citizens. As many others, the legalization of marijuana seems to me an important step towards the fight against the failed war on drugs. Its consumption seems almost harmless, but even so I would not go near marijuana for two reasons. First off, regardless what I or anybody could say, the consumption of marijuana is a misdemeanor in Texas that can—and almost surely—might lead a Mexican international student to a cell in a Texas county jail, if not out of the country. Second of all, I was absolutely convinced, as I still am, that smoking marijuana without it being locally grown, or consuming hard-drugs, contributes to one of the worst social problems Mexico has ever experienced. Regardless of where the product comes from, either Colombia, Jamaica, Hawaii, or California, it is very likely that the drugs were processed and handled by the same people that are shooting casinos and kidnapping young men and women, the Mexican drug cartels.

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (2010), "Marijuana use is now ahead of cigarette smoking on some measures; in 2010, 21.4 percent of high school seniors used marijuana in the past 30 days, while 19.2 percent smoked cigarettes." In the same vein 1.6 million people aged 12 or older are addicted to cocaine while more than 114 million Americans have tried drugs at least once (NIDA, 2010). Information obtained from cartel's bank accounts suggests that marijuana is the liquid cash of the organization, along with cocaine sales in bulk. Most of the cocaine sold to individual consumers are receivable accounts, because of the different nature of the customers and of their addictions.

People who buy drugs without knowing their origin are responsible for the slaughter of thousands of innocent parents, sons and daughters. The mindless consumerism that is behind the acquisition of drugs enforces suffering and injustice. Human rights are being violated every day by gangs of criminals financed by consumers throughout the United States: college students, young couples, the occasional pot smoker. This cannot stand. There is a moral imperative that if we are not going to benefit source countries, we should at least cause no harm with our choices. If consumers were giving the money to rapacious Mexican drug traffickers they would think twice. The reality is that they do so, but not directly. Drug dealers act as middlemen. They supply drug-addicts with their fix and are members of the community, in many instances even friends, that mask an overarching problem. Money given to them for drugs of unknown precedence should be taken as blood-money.

While talking to my friends and family that are still in Torreon, my hometown, I am overwhelmed by the impression that slowly, people have been accustomed to massacres and heinous crimes. Young people do not go out at night, neither do the adults. Bars and restaurants are imposed heavy quotas from drug dealers despite the fact that many customers stopped going

because of fear of being caught in a cross-fire, or being in an establishment that is at odds with the criminals in question. Policemen and judges that try to resist the cartels are given backhanded job offers: they must agree to be in the cartel's payroll, or else. Who do you call when you are threatened if you are a policeman in a country where drug traffickers have such a tremendous corruptive power? You call no one—since you cannot know if your superior has taken the deal or not. Homeless and mentally-ill men are tortured and brought to drug-traffickers parties for amusement. In the rural areas, priests that advocate for the defense of indigenous tribes, also menaced by drug dealers, are threatened or shot. Journalists are buried alive under the Mexican desert. These people are good people. I know them. They are somebody's sons, fathers, mothers and daughters. All of them belong to a community devastated by what seems an uninterrupted demand for drugs that brings exorbitant amounts of money to criminals. The innocents that die every day are human beings that deserve dignity and the chance to live without the terror that the drug dealers impose indiscriminately with the implicit support of the American drug consumer. This is an impending ethical dilemma of our time. Consumers need to understand the impact of their expensive power as if acquiring a good would be an ideological question. All consumers, even those who dwell in illegality, might not subdue to the laws of their country, but they might just agree to the higher rights of peace, justice and over all, life.

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