

Damned if You Don't: Bolivian Coca

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Read at the "World's Worst Plant" session, meetings of the American Anthropological Association, 2009

Until the early twentieth century cocaine was legal. It was used in commercial products, especially in the popular Martini, a blend of wine and cocaine. Coca-cola was originally laced with cocaine. Malinowski kept a generous supply of cocaine on hand



Coca seedlings growing as a display in the town square, Coroico, La Paz, Bolivia

(Taussig 2004). If cocaine were still legal, today coca might be grown in a band along the eastern foothills of the Andes from Colombia to Bolivia. The forest would have been largely cleared and today we might be reading papers about the exploitation of workers on factory farms to mass produce cocaine for world markets. However, even though cocaine is not legal, there are still problems linked to it, including the military repression of coca.

We all associate coca with human misery, especially of a commodity chain stretching from coke-snorting Americans to violent drug lords and peasant producers in Colombia. Bolivia has its own story, less violent than Colombia's but miserable enough. From the 1980s until 2006 Bolivian coca producers suffered brutal repression at the hands of state narcotics police, armed, trained and goaded into action by the US. The coca growers responded by becoming increasingly well-organized and politically astute.

Jeffery Sachs claims that when the US asked Bolivia to eradicate coca it led to poverty. Bolivians responded with programs, which led to fiscal crisis. Sachs along with some anthropologists and agronomists helped to design a development program as an alternative to narcotics. The US government slashed the program's budget by a factor of 10, so it was not big enough to work. This failure led to civil disorder and instability (Sachs 2005).

Whether you agree with Sachs' analysis or not, roadblocks did become part of life in Bolivia by the late 1990s. Coca-growers would pile up rocks and debris every few hundred meters, over 200 kilometres of highway, and then wait for the army. The protests over the right to produce coca merged with other concerns, such as the rights to natural gas, and a clumsy attempt by the government to hike the price of urban water and to appropriate peasant irrigation water as well. The protests erupted into week-long civil wars, with colourful names like "the Water War," "Black February" and "the Gas War". By 2003 the Bolivian president, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, was willing to allow coca growers to tend a *cato* (a quarter hectare) of coca

each, but the US pressured him not to (Sivak 2008). During the Gas War of October 2003 the president drove to an Air Force base near La Paz and fled the country as protestors thronged onto a nearby pedestrian overpass and tried to hack their way through the fence. This was followed by two short-lived interim presidencies, and the election of Evo Morales, national leader of Bolivian coca growers, as the president of Bolivia in December 2005.

Morales has been a popular president in western Bolivia, but not in the east and now for the first time the country has threatened to split apart. This is not entirely the president's fault. But my point is that US efforts to break the production and marketing of coca led to the beatings and deaths of producers (and soldiers) which fuelled long-lasting political instability. Currently the Bolivian and US governments have an icy relationship, which is certainly not what US policy makers intended.

Damned if you do, or even if you don't. Producing some plants has been linked to the abuses of plantation agriculture, but as with Bolivian coca, forcing people to stop producing plants can also have an ugly side.

Coca-growing in Bolivia. There are two coca growing regions in Bolivia, the Yungas of La Paz, where coca is 'traditional', grown to be chewed, or made into tea and other products. According to the infamous narcotics law 1008, it is legal to grow coca in the Yungas.

The second coca growing region is the Chapare of Cochabamba, where law 1008 forbids the crop.

Coca is native to both of these regions, in the foothills of the Andes in the Amazon Basin. The coca plant has bright little lance-shaped leaves. It grows in heavy rain and light shade. It is domesticated, but barely, and coca requires little care (Cárdenas 1989). It must be planted and weeded, and then the leaves can be picked three or four times a year. After a few days of drying they are ready to be sold. And while the price fluctuates, there is always a buyer, even if the coca leaves are too dry, too musty or broken.



Coca is sacred, as in this *q'owa*, a mix of candy, aromatic herbs, llama fat, a cigarette and some coca leaves, among other things, to be burned as an offering to Mother Earth, the Pacha Mama

Jesuit missionaries grew a few coca plants in the Chapare in the sixteenth century, but before them the native Yuqui and the Yuracaré Indians grew little or no coca. They certainly didn't sell any coca (Cárdenas 1989: 306).

For centuries the Quechua and Aymara-speakers in the dry mountain valleys and high Andean plains chewed coca and held it sacred. They imported the leaves from the Yungas, not from the Chapare.

Settlement. The Amazonian Yuquis and Yuracarés lived more or less undisturbed in the Chapare rainforest until well into the twentieth century. Then in the 1930s Bolivia suffered the disastrous War of the Chaco with Paraguay, and some of the veterans were given land grants on the edge of the forest (Jones 1990). Colonists continued to seep in, but then in 1960 USAID commissioned a study and recommended that the government of Bolivia settle the Chapare with Andean smallholders. USAID contributed by building roads and financing colonists, deep in the forest. USAID thought that the colonists would be able to produce coca as a cash crop (*Estudios de Colonización* 1962, Weil and Weil 1993).

That was an understatement. The colonists were soon producing coca and little else as a cash crop, and growing much of their own food locally. They also kept their plots back home, in the Andes. Many of them travelled back and forth every year, to tend a farm in the highlands and one in the Chapare.

By the 1970s a new highway was built through the middle of the Chapare, as a second route between two major cities, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz. Cocaine was being produced and exported from Bolivia. Much of the traffic was in the hands of a group led by General Hugo Banzer, the military dictator of Bolivia (Buzzone Pizarro & Clavijo Román 1990, Sivak 2001).

The coca boom. 1984 was a bad year for the Bolivian economy. The price of tin collapsed. This was a long story in and of itself, but in a nutshell, the US had imported tin ore from Bolivia at rock bottom prices during World War II, and then in 1952 Bolivia nationalized its tin mines. US president Nixon eventually sold off the tin stocks and the price plummeted. By 1984 Comibol, the Bolivian state mining corporation was in crisis and thousands of mine workers lost their jobs (Dunkerly 1984).

The crops also failed that year in much of Bolivia, thanks to El Niño floods and droughts, adding to the miners' misery, since many of them were also part-time farmers (Blanes 1983).

These workers were organized and used to hard labour. Many of them migrated to the Chapare and found work on coca farms. A little deeper in the forest there was more land waiting for the chain saw (Painter and Bedoya 1991).



A small batch of coca drying in the sun in the Chapare

The Quechua and Aymara-speaking colonists grew the coca, but the wealthy Spanish-speaking military and business elite of the Eastern lowlands oversaw the industry that produced and exported the cocaine (Buzzone Pizarro & Clavijo Román 1990, Sivak 2001).

Colonization surged and the Chapare became a dense network of roads and farms. Towns sprung up every 30 km or so along the highway. All services were needed and there was plenty of work for cooks, shopkeepers, construction workers or anyone else with skills.

For a few exciting years, coca could be traded almost openly. People brought the coca leaves back home to dry them in the sun of their Andean farms (Sanabria 1993). Other residents tell how the supplies needed to make coca paste, were sold openly in the markets of Cochabamba. Coca had replaced tin as the mainstay of the economy.

There were also tragedies. Two Amazonian ethnic groups had lost their home. The Yuqui especially have been displaced, decimated, reduced to refugee communities that may not survive much longer (see Stearman 2006). A national park was being turned into a narcotics farm, and the rainforest was being clear-cut. Colonists would stake out a claim, 20 to 50 hectares depending on the area, and cut down about a hectare to grow rice. The rice would grow well enough the first year, on the soil fertilized with the ashes of the forest. The next year more land would be cleared for rice, and the farmer could grow manioc, bananas or even a bit of maize or citrus on the old rice field. But the main goal was to have a patch or two of coca, growing in light shade of young trees. Coca was not growing on the floor of primary forest, but under saplings in clearings.



Healthy coca bush in a plot of commercial coca in the Chapare, 2009. Few if any trees are left standing from the original rain forest

Many of the colonists never really liked living in the forest, or what was left of it. For many the goal was to save enough money to buy a house and live in the sunny valley of Cochabamba, where they could have a truck or a taxi and put their kids in school in the city.

Fortunes were made and invested or spent, but there were few complaints, except from the US government, which adopted a carrot and stick policy of military repression of coca, combined with the carrot of development of alternative crops.

The stick. Repression was the responsibility of Umopar, an elite corps of narco-soldiers who were backed up by the DEA. Colonists told me how at first the soldiers naively chopped down the coca bushes, not realizing that they would soon grow back from the roots, stronger than ever. The soldiers eventually learned to uproot the plants, and to beat up the farmers as well. They would walk into communities fully armed, strolling into people's homes uninvited, punching, kicking and stealing any little item that appealed to them.

The colonists responded by forming a strong organic political structure, with hierarchical levels and elected officials. They also began fighting back, booby trapping their farms and occasionally ambushing soldiers.

In 1995 a young shopkeeper in the coca 'red zone' told me that the worst part of the repression was the Umopar roadblock in the canyon between the Chapare and

Cochabamba. All the little buses had to stop there in this natural bottleneck. Umopar would inspect every person and every vehicle. It was intimidating even for foreigners and the middle class. But for peasants it was much worse. They would be forced to wait for hours, their baggage minutely and rudely inspected.

No one was allowed to take kerosene into the Chapare, because it could be used to make paste. One time the Umopar confiscated a case of toilette paper from the shopkeeper. They didn't believe he was going to retail it. They said he was using it as a filter to make cocaine.

Evo Morales, now the president of Bolivia, was then a colonist in the Chapare and a local leader. Umopar picked him up, beat him and left him for dead in the forest. When his friends found him he couldn't walk and they had to carry him out. "I couldn't poop for three days," he told Argentine journalist Martín Sivak (2008).



Coca leaves and their derivatives are respected, even among the Bolivian middle class. Coca leaves and various semi-commercial home remedies made from coca and other herbs, on sale at a fair at the agricultural college in Cochabamba, 2009

While the army was picking on the coca growers, it was business almost as usual for the elite exporters. In 1995 the DEA intercepted a Bolivian airliner in Lima, with four tons of cocaine aboard. It was a major scandal, but no one was ever prosecuted, because everyone who was anyone in Bolivian politics was somehow involved.

There was the notorious case of Noel Kempff Mercado, a Bolivian biologist who stumbled onto a cocaine factory far out in the forest. He was murdered by Colombian hit-men while his pilot escaped, begging for help over the radio. Help arrived two days later, giving the drug manufacturers time to tidy up and leave.

I had a personal glimpse of this murky business in 1999. I was living in San Matías, a town of about 10,000 people in far eastern Bolivia, on the Brazilian border. I was travelling around the back country doing an archaeological survey for a gas pipeline. I was assigned to work with the ex-mayor of San Matías, a quiet, polite man who liked romantic music and right-wing politics.



A functioning banana packing shed, financed by USAID through Alternative Development in the Chapare, 2002. The bananas piled in the centre are the rejects, after the good fruit has been packed

Driving home one night on an unmarked track in the forest, the Umopar shined its lights in our eyes. After the ex mayor talked to them,

and they looked into our back seat, they waved us on.

In San Matías I stayed at a little hotel with four rooms. Two of them were taken up by a group of loud but aloof pot-bellied men in their 30s. They would get up at noon, spend the afternoon over a slow barbecue and then drink whisky with prostitutes well into the night.

One day I was telling the ex-mayor about these men, wondering out-loud what occupation gave them with so much money and free time. “They traffic cocaine into Brazil,” the ex-mayor said matter-of-factly. “Everybody knows that,” he added.

“Then why doesn’t Umopar arrest them instead of wasting their time stopping pickups in the woods?”

Then it was explained to me that the drug traffickers were not arrested because nobody really wanted them to be, certainly not Umopar.

A few days later a young man sat with me in his aunt’s restaurant in San Matías. Over beers he pulled out some paperwork and explained the local economy to me. “We make papers” he said. Someone brings in a kilo of cocaine, worth \$1,000. At the border he meets someone with a stolen car from Brazil. They trade them. The Brazilian can then sell the cocaine for \$6,000. The Bolivian can sell the car in Bolivia, but only if it has papers. So there was a cottage industry, forging papers.

The carrot. The US government funded Alternative Development through USAID. It succeeded technically, but lost the PR battle. Alternative Development technicians taught colonists in the Chapare to produce bananas, palm, pepper, passion fruit and pineapple, perennial or semi-perennial crops. Alternative Development organized farmers into associations and even built



Truck loaded with bananas for sale in the Chapare, 2009. Formal alternative development programs funded research and extension on this and other non-narcotic crops

headquarters for some of the associations. Alternative Development built packing sheds for the banana producers. These sheds were not a myth, as (Gill 2004) has said in an otherwise insightful book. I have been inside several of them and visited the banana farms. As one farmer said “I really like producing bananas, because now the police don’t beat me up.”

However, the associations drew their membership from the same people who already belonged to the sindicatos that supported coca-growing. The hard-core coca growers eventually attacked the extension agencies and some of the association buildings.

The tables turn. In December, 2005, the maximum leader of the coca-growers’ federation, Evo Morales, was elected president of Bolivia by an unprecedented 54% of the popular vote. There have been many changes since then, some for the good, others regrettable. The new government kicked out the DEA and asked USAID to leave the Chapare (but let them keep projects elsewhere in the country). Umopar was neutered and de-clawed. Soldiers were no longer well-provisioned, were often kept in

barracks and were ordered to concentrate on drug traffickers and to leave coca farmers alone.

To the government's credit, people continue to be arrested for possession of cocaine, even if they are (like the Terán sisters) influential members of the ruling party, MAS.

However, farmers in the Chapare are now free to grow a quarter hectare of coca. One agronomist/colonist explained to me that the farmers are responding by intensifying their quarter hectare, planting the coca bushes closer together and fertilizing them. There is now a large demand for chicken manure in the Chapare, to apply to coca.



Legal coca for sale in the market in Tiraque, in the Andes of Cochabamba. The retailer keeps a damp cloth over the top of the bag, so that the leaves will be pleasant to chew

It is still legal to sell coca leaves in Bolivia, but not to make paste or cocaine. Now Umopar stands idly by the roadside at its once frightening roadblock between the Chapare and Cochabamba. Farmers truck their coca leaves through, hidden in loads of fruit.

Colonists no longer make as much paste in the Chapare, because they can take the coca to the highlands and make paste. In the 1990s kerosene and other industrial wastes were dumped into the headwaters of the Amazon. But farmers who make paste in the Andean valleys are usually more careful not to foul streams, which would bring them into conflict with neighbouring communities of tough, organized farmers.

Formal macro-economic indicators show that Bolivia is headed for the same economic crisis as the rest of the world, but on the ground things seem a bit more solid, supported by a robust informal economy. Construction projects are common in the cities. Wages have risen for skilled construction workers, and house prices have not fallen yet.

Deforestation may also be slowing, as donor projects (e.g. European Union) successfully help manage remnant stands of trees, as the production and marketing of food improves in the Chapare (so it is not so important to grow rice) and as coca is grown on more intensive, permanent crops.

Before President Morales was elected, the political situation was untenable. Coca producers frequently blockaded the road between Cochabamba and Santa Cruz, now a busy highway, crippling the country's economy. Clashes between coca producers and the military were all too frequent. The Chapare has since become relatively peaceful, thanks to the relaxation of drug enforcement laws.

I have not discussed cocaine as a narcotic, nor its negative impact on consumer nations. Those are other stories. I have tried to show that in Bolivia the smallholders suffered through military repression, to keep them from growing coca. It was a cynical policy which left the powerful groups alone. Now there is a new Bolivian president, who started his political career as a leader of the coca growers. The president says that the coca producers' responsibility ends once they sell the crop (Sivak 2008). Production figures are



A packing shed for coca leaves, in one of the towns in the Chapare, 2008. Coca for cocaine is packed into tight bundles, like these; workers step into the bags to press the leaves in. Coca for chewing goes in larger, looser-packed bags

slippery, but the consensus in Bolivia is that much more coca is being grown than ever before, and that most of it is being used to manufacture cocaine. The repression has stopped, and for that the smallholder coca growers are grateful.

Alternative Development was more humane than military repression, and also more successful. Bananas, pineapples and other alternative crops never did replace coca, because no other crop is as profitable, but many of the alternative crops are still widely produced and sold in the Chapare.

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