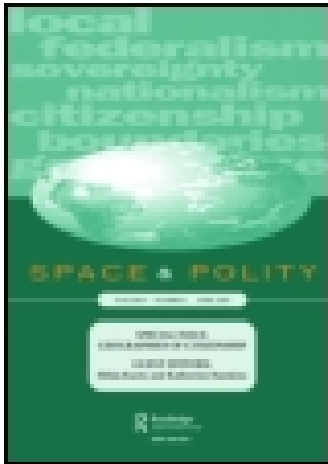


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The myth of the narco-state

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Despite being used repeatedly in different contexts, the term “narco-state” has never been satisfactorily defined or explained. In fact, the existence of the narco-state is almost always taken for granted. This article will argue, on the basis of a review of existing definitions and of selected case studies, that there is no such thing as a narco-state and that using the term tends to oversimplify if not mask the complex socio-political and economic realities of drug-producing countries. The narco-state notion will be debated and opposed in terms of politics, territory, and economics.

Keywords: narco-state; definition; rentier state; territory; politics; economics

Introduction

Virtually every single illegal drug-producing and/or drug-trafficking country in the world has one day or another been referred to as a narco-state or has been issued warnings against becoming a narco-state, whether by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), by senior counternarcotics officials, by heads of states and other politicians or, of course, by journalists and academics. The term has become extremely common despite a pervasive lack of definition. It seems that what a narco-state is, or is supposed to be, provided that it exists, is mostly assumed. As a consequence, the menace or threat that the simple reference to the narco-state implies is also assumed, maybe in part because something that is undefined is pretty much unknown and makes for the ideal menace or threat. While this is not the subject of this article, it must be stressed from the onset that the elusiveness of the term explains much of its discursive power and success as its undefined nature makes it an amorphous category that can be used to refer to very diverse states: this makes labelling a country a narco-state all the easier and can serve the interests of foreign powers by delegitimizing particular regimes or states and by calling for various forms of interventions and political interference.

In this article, we first briefly review the range of definitions that exist in the literature and address their limitations, especially how their vagueness tends to trivialize the notion of the narco-state by qualifying most countries as narco-states on the sole basis of their drug-tainted economies. We then determine what criteria we deem the most pertinent to describe so-called narco-states: the economic importance of the drug industry relative to a country's economy; the surface areas dedicated to illegal drug crops compared to the arable or cultivated land of a given country; the active involvement of the state in the illegal drug economy. It is on the basis of such criteria that we show that neither Afghanistan nor North Korea, arguably the

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world's two most drug-tainted economies, qualify as narco-states. We consequently argue that narco-states are nowhere to be found.

The ubiquitous but elusive narco-state

Guinea-Bissau's narco-state story is typical of how the news media very often refer to so-called – and alleged – narco-states: either by being content with quoting official reports or statements, sometimes inaccurately, or by sensationalizing their titles. This happened when the British newspaper *The Observer* reported in 2008 on “How a tiny West African country became the world's first narco state”, stating, without defining what a narco-state was, that the UNODC called Guinea-Bissau the continent's – not the world's – “first narco-state” (How a tiny West African country became the world's first narco state, 2008). In fact, the UNODC has repeatedly warned against Afghanistan and other countries “being on the brink of becoming narco-states”, or “moving from narcoeconomy to narco-state” (2006, p. iii), yet without defining what a narco-state is, or what a narcoeconomy is, or how it differs in degree or nature from a narco-state. Lack of definition is actually often made worse by the frequent association of highly debated and confusing notions. Such is the case of the “narcokleptocracy” first mentioned in 1989 to describe how the Panamanian government ended being funded with drug money (US Congress, 1989, p. 84). There are also mentions, without definitions of any sort, of “failed narco-states” (Marcy, 2010, p. 71) or of “narco-mafia states” (Tadjbakhsh, 2008, p. 6).

While the lack of definition can explain the prevalence of the narco-state phrase amongst politicians who want to delegitimize a given country or who wish to pressure a given government into action, the use of such an undefined notion by academics is less understandable. In fact, many if not most academics resort to the “narco-state” notion without defining it, as is the case with Jonathan Marshall who explains, in an otherwise significant book, that “Lebanon arguably declined from a narco-state to a failed state” (Marshall, 2012, p. 3): as if a narco-state was a superior state category. Still, some academics have provided various levels of definition of what a narco-state is or is supposed to be. In his 1972 seminal work *The Politics of Heroin* Alfred W. McCoy did not refer to the narco-state. Nor can any such mention be found in a 1991 revised edition. However, in a largely updated 2003 edition, McCoy referred to what had then become a widely used notion, as if it had become so pervasive that it could no longer be avoided. He explained how in Pakistan and Mexico “drugs had achieved the multifaceted mix of economic and institutional influence that defines a narco-state” (McCoy, 2003, p. 23). Yet, while such a description gives a sense of a narco-state's nature, it does not explain at which point a given state becomes a narco-state. In fact, so-called narco-states do not seem to be defined by most authors by much more than by reference to government corruption in drug-producing and/or -trafficking countries, despite the fact that corruption is usually described according to its nature, or to its scale and/or to the sector it affects, not according to the economic resource at stake. Why, then, is drug-related corruption singled out as it is when referring to a narco-state?

Most attempts at defining alleged narco-states basically describe forms and levels of drug-related corruption, not why or how a given state can legitimately be called a narco-state rather than a corrupt state. This is the case with Jordan who does not define the narco-state *per se* but rather what he calls narcostatization: “the corruption of the political regime as a result of narcotics trafficking” (1999, p. 9). He distinguishes between “narcodemocracies”, “narcoauthoritarian regimes” and “narcoanocracies”, and proposes five levels of narcostatization (from incipient to advanced) according to which a narco-state would be characterized by the “compliance of ministries, in addition to judiciary and police, with organized crime”; with “a president surrounded by compromised officials”; with a “possible complicity of the presidency itself” (Jordan, 1999, table 2). This typology – rather than a proper definition – eventually focuses more on the

corruption of the state than on any supposed “narco” nature of the state, and it also proves too vague and limited in scope to determine which countries are or are not narco-states.

In a Ph.D. thesis questioning the narco-state and failed state statuses of Guinea-Bissau, Ashley Neese Bybee stresses that “as often as the term is used, consensus on a single definition of ‘Narco-State’ has not emerged”. Despite warning against the use of the term “narco-state”, Neese Bybee eventually refrains from a critical approach and simply defines the narco-state as “a state whose political, economic, security, or social institutions have been impacted to some extent by the drug trade” (2011, p. 97), yet without usable metrics and/or thresholds. As for Julia Buxton, she explains that “the term ‘narco-state’ refers to those countries where criminal organizations connected to the drug trade acquire an institutionalized presence in the state”. Although institutionalization is obviously a very important phenomenon when the state is concerned, she does not explain what she means by an “institutionalized presence”, nor does she detail the process behind it. In fact it seems that Buxton refers to the penetration of the state’s institutions by the criminal organizations through what she calls “narco-corruption” (2006, p. 129). Here again the definition of the narco-state is rather incomplete and unconvincing for its criteria cannot be used to determine precisely which countries are narco-states or not.

Only Weiner critically addressed the issue of the narco-state’s definition, stressing how the “use of the prefix ‘narco’, mainly by politicians and journalists, has ballooned to become almost ludicrous” (2004, p. 4). Yet Weiner bases most of his efforts at definition on a short description by the International Monetary Fund that explains that a narco-state is “where all legitimate institutions become penetrated by the power and wealth of traffickers” (IMF, 2003, p. 45). Weiner, after rightly dismissing various definition efforts by other authors for being often “vague and distracted by irrelevant terms” (p. 6), eventually defines the narco-state as “a state where drug networks are able to control and regulate the coercive instruments of the state, financial apparatus and government executive and policy to facilitate narcotics production, refining and trafficking” (p. 18). The problem with his definition is that it refers to a state that became controlled by drug-trafficking organizations rather than to a state that actively controls, if not encourages, drug productions and networks. In the end, rather oddly, Weiner cannot find any state to match his definition but refrains, nevertheless, from dismissing the narco-state notion. Still, he explains that a narco-state “may exist only in a Weberian ‘ideal-type’ manifestation” (p. 11), as if a narco-state could exist only as an idea and not in reality (ideal-types are pure types of existing phenomenon, which means that, to exist, the narco-state’s ideal-type needs to be extrapolated on the basis of real-world narco-states).

It is on the basis of Weiner’s definition that Letizia Paoli, Victoria A. Greenfield and Peter Reuter have asked to what extent Afghanistan and Burma are “narco-states”. In the cases of both countries, the authors eventually dismiss the narco-state notion, mainly, and rightly in my opinion (see *infra*), because of the lack of control exerted by both the Afghan and Burmese states over their territories. In their chapter on Afghanistan and Burma the authors do not define what a narco-state is but they explain that there are two main conditions for a narco-state to exist: “a country that is economically dependent on the illicit drug economy” and “in which the government elites are complicit in the illicit drug trade” (Paoli, Greenfield, & Reuter, 2009, pp. 142–143). The authors stop short of explaining what degree and form of dependence they refer to or what they mean by complicity. However, later on, the same authors posit the rise of a narco-state in Tajikistan on the basis of different criteria, that is, where “leaders of the most powerful trafficking groups occupy high-ranking government positions and misuse state structures for their own illicit businesses” (p. 181). This is based on such an equivocal definition that the authors then declare that “Tajikistan has become, in less than 10 years, a veritable narco-state” (p. 197) (suggesting, it seems, that there are false narco-states).

The last definition to be mentioned here is that of the French Geopolitical Drug Watch that described a narco-state as “a state that, or in which state institutions, benefit directly and in a significant or even a major way, from illegal drug proceeds” (Observatoire géopolitique des drogues, 1994, pp. 12–14). Here again the definition proves too vague to be used to determine accurately which countries are narco-states. Moreover, the narco-state is oddly described as a state that benefits rather passively from – instead of actively developing – the illegal drug trade.

All the above attempts to define the narco-state are lacking in various ways. As Weiner rightfully put it, too many attempts of this sort are “vague and distracted by irrelevant terms”. Also, most of them refer to the corruption of state and/or government officials by illegal drug funds but do not explain why speaking of narco-states rather than of corrupt states is justified (as if naming a state after the resource used for corruption is only justified when illegal drug production or trafficking is the resource). In any case, the extent of the drug-related corruption, or of the economic dependence of a given state or country on an illegal drug industry, is never defined precisely enough, whether in terms of metrics or threshold. Nor is the level of penetration of state institutions. The lack of territorial control experienced by the state in many drug-producing countries and its consequence on the pertinence of calling such states narco-states are also barely addressed. Pertinent criteria are therefore needed in order to decide if narco-states exist or not and, if they do, which countries qualify as narco-states.

Is a narco-state a rentier state?

The first thing about a narco-state, obviously, is that it is a state, that is, according to Migdal, an

organization, composed of numerous agencies led and coordinated by the state’s leadership (executive authority) that has the ability or authority to make and implement the binding rules for all the people as well as the parameters of rule making for other social organizations in a given territory, using force if necessary to have its way. (Migdal, 1988, p. 19)

States that are referred to as narco-states, rightly or not, all happen to be those late and less developed states that Douglass C. North et al. call “natural states” or “limited access orders” whose patterns are characterized, notably, by “polities without generalized consent of the governed” and by a “predominance of social relationships organized along personal lines, including privileges, social hierarchies, laws that are enforced unequally, insecure property rights, and a pervasive sense that not all individuals were created or are equal” (North, Walls, & Weingats, 2009, p. 12). In such natural states, “the positions, privileges, and rents of the individual elites in the dominant coalition depend on the limited entry enforced by the continued existence of the regime” and rent-seeking can easily amount to corruption or other unequal competitive processes (North et al., 2009, p. 20). This is in part why Migdal warns that there is a danger in making the state anthropomorphic, and that “where state coherence is low, reference to the state leadership or executive authority as if it *were* the state or, worse yet, reference to *the* state without regard to differences within it could be downright misleading” (Migdal, 1988, p. 19).

This is one reason why calling Afghanistan a narco-state is somehow problematic since the country has been under no or very little state authority for years. In this case and in that of many other weak or even failed states, the state clearly lacks the “ability or authority to make and implement the binding rules for all the people as well as the parameters of rule making for other social organizations” in its territory, even by force. The same is true of Burma, where some of the world’s longest armed insurgencies persist and where the state, far from being a monolithic and homogenous organization, has never had the political and material means to enforce official anti-drug laws (whether through repression or economic incentives) over its

territory (whether or not state actors and successive governments have ever been willing to do so). Reducing or suppressing illegal drug production and/or trafficking in weak or failed states is most often beyond governmental and institutional capabilities, because of power rivalries and armed contestations, or (geo)political realism and pragmatism (such as in Morocco). Even basic economic laws and legal procedures can be difficult if not impossible to enforce, as exemplified by the fact that, very often, “natural states cannot issue something as seemingly simple as a driver’s license on impersonal basis” (North et al., 2009, p. 11).

The absolute and relative importance of illegal crop superfluities would then seem to be an important criterion to include in a definition of the narco-state, provided that the illegal crops are grown in areas under the effective control of the state. Following the same logic, the absolute and relative economic importance of an illegal drug industry in a given country can be related to the penetration of the state institutions by drug-trafficking organizations and to the corruption of the government. All things considered, it seems that a so-called narco-state must be a country in which the resort to illegal drug production and/or trafficking is part of the official state policy with the government organizing drug production and/or trafficking through the involvement of state and/or non-state actors. Without going as far as Aureano (2001, p. 3) when he writes that the narco-state “implies the existence of a state who would devote its most important resources and those of the civil society to the benefit of the drug industry”, we can say that for a narco-state to exist illegal drug production and/or trafficking must be sponsored and planned by the state, whether the state’s most important resources are devoted to drug production and/or trafficking, or not.

Obviously, no state resorts to illegal drug production or trafficking as part of an official policy as no such ideal narco-state can exist within the international system without becoming a pariah. In fact, the only country that could well be a narco-state, on the sole basis of resorting to drug production and trafficking as part of a state’s (unofficial) policy, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, can be said to be a pariah. Since defaulting on its international debt in 1975 the North Korean state allegedly resorts to illegal activities such as counterfeiting money and producing and trafficking opium, heroin and methamphetamine, in part so that its embassies can be financially autonomous (Chestnut, 2007, pp. 85, 89). Yet very little is known about illegal drug production and trafficking by the North Korean state, whether about the areas cultivated with opium poppies or the revenues obtained from heroin and methamphetamine production and trafficking. What is known is that opium production and exportation (trafficking) was reportedly developed after a countrywide public order to produce opium was issued by the Korean state in the early 1990s (until then opiates were reportedly only purchased by North Korean diplomats for resale). It is also known from defectors that “drug processing and counterfeit currency manufacturing took place at state-run factories”, and that “opiates, and later methamphetamines, were processed and plastic-wrapped at refinement plants established in consultation with Southeast Asian experts and run by state security” (Chestnut, 2007, p. 89). How much North Korea earns from illegal activities is not known in detail but US officials estimated in 2005 the country’s “total income from criminal activities at \$500 million, an amount roughly equal to income from arms sales and 35–40 percent of the income provided by legitimate exports” (p. 92).

If these figures are accurate North Korea is most likely the closest to what a narco-state (i.e. a rentier state comparable to a petro-state) would be if the economic criterion were to be considered the most pertinent. Yet for a state to be called a narco-state purely on an economic basis, the revenues procured to the state through illegal drug production and/or trafficking have to be vital to state stability: as we will see, both resource abundance and dependence are needed to qualify a state as a rentier state. While North Korea clearly relies on illegal drug revenues and other illegal activities, it is not clear to US officials and various observers if the “contribution of criminal activity to regime stability” is vital or not (Chestnut, 2007, p. 93). In any case, calling North

Korea a narco-state remains problematic since illegal drug proceeds are most likely matched, if not surpassed (according to most observers), by illegal arms sales (Hurst, 2005; Perl, 2003): North Korea would therefore qualify more as an “arm-state” than as a similarly awkwardly named “narco-state”. Interestingly, while the US Department of State mentions estimates of 4200–7000 hectares of poppy cultivation and of 30–44 metric tons of opium being produced annually (with an expected yield of 3–4.5 metric tons of heroin) in the early 2000s, it also makes clear that such “estimates have not been confirmed”, that “reports of extensive opium cultivation in North Korea are dated” and that “agricultural problems in North Korea, including flooding and shortages of fertilizer and insecticides, suggest that current opium production might well be below these estimates” (US Department of State, 2002, pp. VIII-46–47). What brings North Korea closer to an ideal narco-state is the fact that it is most probably the only country in which state-sponsored illegal drug production and trafficking takes place.

Only Afghanistan could match or rival North Korea when, in the 2000s, its drug economy was estimated to be *equivalent to* 61% of Afghanistan’s GDP, that is, when it amounted to 37% of the entire (legal and illegal) Afghan economy (UNODC, 2006, p. 9). But that was until Afghanistan’s legal economy grew enough to significantly reduce the relative importance of its drug economy (despite an increase in cultivation) with the Afghan opium industry *equivalent to* only 15% of the country’s GDP in 2013, that is, when it amounted to about 13% of the entire Afghan economy (UNODC, 2013, p. 70). In Morocco, the hashish industry was estimated by the UNODC to be *equivalent to* only 0.57% of the GDP in 2003, when production was likely to be at its highest (UNODC, 2003, p. 5). Yet, in the mid-1990s, the hashish industry was said to be the country’s main foreign exchange earner and to *be equivalent to* 55% of the country’s official export earnings (OGD, 1994, pp. 31–55). It would be difficult, in the end, to call Afghanistan and Morocco narco-states based on such “low” incomes derived from their respective drug industries; or, for that matter, as we will see later, on the basis of their surface areas cultivated with poppies and/or cannabis.

According to the above-mentioned economic data, can so-called narco-states qualify as rentier states? According to their drug production outputs and their absolute and relative economic importance, neither Afghanistan’s nor North Korea’s states are characterized by both the resource abundance and resource dependence that define rentier states (Brunnschweiler, 2008, p. 401). They clearly cannot be compared to those petro-states that Terry Lynn Karl described as the rentier states “par excellence” (Karl, 1999, p. 36) or to other “mineral economies” that Gobind Nankani qualified as “developing countries in which the share of mineral production in GDP and of mineral exports in total exports render the keystone of the economy”, with “guiding thresholds” of 10% or more of GDP and 40% of total merchandise exports (in the mid-1970s) (Nankani, 1979: p. i, note 1). While Afghanistan and North Korea may be compared to petro-states on the basis of such metrics and thresholds, they clearly do not qualify as rentier states because their drug economies do not provide them with the “substantial *external rent*” that characterizes a rentier economy according to Hazem Beblawi. Rather, their drug economies result from a “domestic productive sector”, that is, “a situation of domestic payment transfer in a productive economy” that should not be confused with a rent (Beblawi, 1990, p. 51). Also, in a rentier state, the state (or the government) must be “the principal recipient of the external rent in the economy”, a rent that is redistributed to the population and makes the rentier state, to use Giacomo Luciani’s distinction, an allocative state rather than a productive state (Beblawi, 1990, p. 53; Luciani, 1987).

North Korea is most likely the principal recipient of what is an internal rent rather than an external rent but it remains, like Afghanistan, Burma, Colombia, Morocco, etc., a production state. While states that derive a large source of revenues solely from drug trafficking (an external rent) could be considered rentier states and therefore narco-states, none of the alleged narco-states

are allocative states and therefore none of them are rentier states. Indeed, according to Luciani, a rentier state differs from a “production state” (“a state that relies on taxation of the domestic economy for its income”) in that it is an “allocation state” that “does not depend on domestic sources of revenue but rather *is* the primary source of revenue itself in the domestic economy” (Luciani, 1987, p. 63; Yates, 1996, p. 15). Luciani refers to the “allocation state” that depends on a “rentier economy” to perform its allocative function: according to him, a rentier or allocation state is a state “whose revenue derives predominantly (more than 40%) from oil or other foreign sources” and “whose expenditure is a substantial share of GDP”, so that allocation (without taxation) is “the only relationship that they need to have with their domestic economy” (Luciani, 1987, pp. 70–71). This is clearly not the case in the alleged narco-states of Afghanistan, Guinea-Bissau or North Korea. Moreover, the relative importance of their drug economies to their global economy (GDP) derives in part from the usually limited size of their economy (legal and illegal, for there are non-drug-related illegal activities in every single country). Indeed, as stressed by Gavin Wright and Jesse Czelusta in their critical review of the resource curse hypothesis and literature, “the relative size of resource exports is at best an indicator of *comparative* advantage in resource products”, which means that “comparative advantage in natural resources may simply reflect an absence of other internationally competitive sectors in the economy – in a word, underdevelopment” (Wright & Czelusta, 2004, p. 4). This is exemplified in Afghanistan where the growth of the legal economy lessened the relative importance of the country’s drug industry in a matter of a few years (Chouvy, 2009).

This is not to say, though, that when (as in Afghanistan or in Guinea-Bissau) the size of the legal economy is small, or even smaller than that of the illegal economy, the revenue generated through illegal drug production and/or trafficking is not “central to sustaining competition within the elite”, or that there are no “sufficient powerful actors [. . .] who have a vested interest in its continuation” (Transparency International, 2014, p. 27). Indeed, as “the non-drug economy provides very few rents which could sustain patronage networks, the drugs trade is of central political importance” (Transparency International, 2014, p. 27). In fact, the existence of highly valuable resources and rents is likely to increase rent-seeking and corruption, along with political bargaining between state and private actors. According to the traditional rent-seeking theory, corruption can be seen as a particular type of rent-seeking activity (as opposed to the legitimate lobbying’s open competition): “rent-seeking is called corruption when competition for preferential treatment is restricted to a few insiders and when rent-seeking expenses are valuable to the recipient” (Lambsdorff, 2002, p. 120). But, according to Lambsdorff (2002, p. 121), “corruption motivates the creation of inefficient rules that generate rents”, something that does not truly fit the idea of the narco-state where corruption does not motivate the creation of rules but merely manages to avoid or bend the rules: the illegality of drug production and trafficking is not the result of rent-seeking processes in any alleged narco-state or, for that matter, in any state at all.

The narco-state vs. the lack of political and territorial control of resources

The literature about rentier states is vastly dominated by references to extraction economies, that is, mineral economies among which so-called petro-states form a large majority. In this literature as well as in the resource curse literature, references to production economies and especially to agriculturally based resource rents are almost nonexistent. In fact, some studies stress that “oil and minerals give rise to massive rents in a way that food or agricultural resources do not” (Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2003, p. 9). Despite their relatively high value (at least compared to most other agricultural products), even agriculturally based illegal drug economies are absent from the literature on resource rents and rentier states. Conversely, and rather oddly, the literature on narco-states does not resort to the notions of rentier state or of rentier economies. While the

latter is difficult to understand, the fact that narco-states are not mentioned in the rentier state literature is more understandable since the value of illegal drugs at the farm gate compares unfavourably with the value of mineral resources such as oil, diamond, ore minerals, etc., but also because the geographical dimensions or spatial characteristics of agricultural drug production (closer to small-scale subsistence agriculture than to large-scale plantation agriculture) define the drug resource as distant (as opposed to proximate) and diffuse (as opposed to point). This is actually another reason why states faced with illegal drug production cannot qualify as rentier states, and even less as narco-states: because the resource that could provide a rent (even an internal one) is most often beyond the direct and complete reach and control of the state.

Distant resources are resources that are far from the centre of power, “whether through a physical relationship or a socially constructed one”, or both (such as poppy, coca or cannabis cultivation in Afghanistan, in Burma, in Colombia, in Morocco) (Le Billon, 2001, pp. 569–570). Diffuse resources “are spatially spread over vast areas and access to their revenue is socio-economically dispersed”, which makes them less accessible, and therefore less taxable and/or “lootable”, than extracted resources: illegal drug cultivation (often small and remote fields in poorly accessible – and often peripheral – areas) is clearly a perfect example of a diffuse resource (Auty, 2001; Le Billon, 2012, pp. 28–29). Indeed, as stressed by Goodhand and Mansfield, the “diffuse, high value (and price elasticity) and fugitive qualities of drugs makes them inherently difficult for state actors to monopolise” and, one could add, to control (2010, p. 29). Also, agricultural drug production (being a lootable resource not in the sense of extracted resource but in the sense that it can be easily produced by independent individuals outside of the government’s knowledge/taxation and/or opposition) is a diffuse and most often distant resource that is difficult for state actors to monopolize because, as explained by Snyder, “the *low economic barriers to entry* that characterize lootable resources make it hard for rulers to gain monopoly control of them” and also because “a further impediment to public extraction concerns the *illegality*” of such a lootable resource: state actors risk international sanctions and “illegality poses a barrier to entry for the public sector” (Snyder, 2006, p. 950). Joint extraction (meaning shared income generated by exploiting resources, whether through taxation or government-run protection rackets) is also often impossible because of international pressure and, most often, because of the state actors’ incapacity to “make a credible threat of enforcing no extraction if private actors refuse to share their income” (Snyder, 2006, p. 953).

The same is true of the conditionality of so-called state-sponsored protection rackets, that is, “informal institutions through which public officials refrain from enforcing the law or, alternatively, enforce it selectively against the rivals of a criminal organization, in exchange for a share of the profits generated by the organization” (Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009, p. 253). Such rackets are possible provided that the state is in a position to threaten private actors with law enforcement (so that the promise not to enforce the law can be sold to those private actors who agree to share their income with state actors), which is rarely the case in Afghanistan or in Burma for example. Whether in Afghanistan, in Burma, in Pakistan or even in Morocco, forced eradication has always been difficult (politically, strategically and even materially) to implement by the state or by foreign paramilitary outfits (such as DynCorp in Afghanistan: see Chouvy, 2009, p. 115) as violent encounters between opium or cannabis farmers (or anti-government militants such as the Taliban in southern Afghanistan) and eradication teams often prevent crop destruction from occurring (Chouvy, 2009, pp. 157–170). Also, the threat of eradication is rarely a deterrent if only because, in Afghanistan for example, “the opportunity cost of planting opium poppy and having it destroyed is equal to the wheat crop that might have been cultivated in the place of poppy” (Mansfield & Pain, 2006, p. 7).

Another key criterion of the inadequacy of the narco-state notion, at least when agricultural drug production (and not drug trafficking) is concerned, is the surface area over which cultivation

takes place, territorial control being paramount for a state. Agricultural drug production would then be one significant criterion defining a narco-state. Here absolute and relative data need to be considered carefully in order to determine if a given cultivated surface area is important enough for a state to deserve being called a narco-state. For instance, Afghanistan and Morocco could hardly qualify as narco-states when they respectively cultivated 131,000 hectares of opium poppy in 2004 and 134,000 hectares of cannabis in 2003 (UNODC, 2003, 2004). Yet what matters the most here is not absolute data, even though it points to the degree of state territorial control or toleration, the Afghan state having obviously much less control over its territory than Morocco. What matters the most are relative data, both Afghanistan and Morocco devoting very limited parts of their arable lands (respectively 1.67% and 1.57%) to illegal drug crop cultivation (UNODC, 2003, 2004). Neither Afghanistan nor Morocco, then reportedly and respectively the world's foremost opium- and hashish-producing countries, devoted enough arable land to illegal poppy and cannabis cultivation to deserve being called narco-states on this basis alone: in both countries the vast majority of the arable land was then and still is cultivated with cereals, and not poppies or cannabis.

The only real difference here is that in 2003 the Afghan state was then being (re)built and was clearly not in control of the entire country, even though the insurgency had not yet reached the levels known in the mid-2010s. In terms of absolute territorial control, the Afghan state was at the time lacking the means to enforce the monopoly of the legitimate use of force over its territory. Law enforcement was then – and still is – extremely difficult if not impossible to achieve. As Goodhand wrote in, 2008: “Large swathes of the south have now become ‘non-state spaces’ where the government has neither the capacity nor the legitimacy to mobilize capital or coercion in order to enforce institutions of joint control (or no extraction)” (2008, p. 414).

To the contrary, the Moroccan state was and still is in full control of its territory, where its writ is unchallenged by armed insurgencies. Yet the tense socio-economic situation of the impoverished Rif region, where cannabis is grown, most likely prevents the authorities from acting decisively against the hashish economy. The Moroccan state formally controls its territory but has no other choice, economically, socially and even politically, than to tacitly tolerate hashish production and trafficking in the centre of the Rif: a region where cannabis cultivation has been inherited from a long, complex and violent history of rivalries, tolerance and contestation (Chouvy, 2005, 2008). Cannabis cultivation in Morocco can be said to benefit from the socio-political and economic context of the Rif, as well as from large-scale corruption, but it clearly does not entitle Morocco to be considered a narco-state.

It is obviously difficult to label a weak state – that is, a state that lacks the means of effective territorial control (a vulnerable state) – or even worse, a failed state – that is, a state that cannot perform any of “the core state functions in the fields of security, representation and welfare” (a state in overt crisis) – as a narco-state (Boege, Brown, Clements, & Nolan, 2009, p. 3). Although this is not to say that a large-scale illegal opium economy, such as the one in Afghanistan, has not had “several direct and indirect impacts upon both the degree of the state and the kind of state”, or that the drug economy has not “become a vehicle for accumulating power” (Goodhand, 2008, pp. 411, 412). Goodhand is correct when he writes that the “drugs economy provides a mode of accumulation that enables military and political entrepreneurs to ‘capture’ parts of the state”; and also when he stresses that “although drugs are a factor in political decision-making, the “narco-state” discourse exaggerates their role by raising them to a position of primacy” (2008, pp. 412, 413).

In Afghanistan as well as in all illegal drug-producing countries, North Korea apart, the drug industry is developed through private extraction regimes or through joint extraction regimes that involve rulers and private actors (Goodhand, 2008; Snyder, 2006). Only in North Korea, where the state is the closest to what a narco-state could supposedly consist of, has the illegal drug

industry been developed through a public extraction regime, the state (and not only some state actors of government officials) reportedly coercing some farmers to produce opium rather than grain on parts of the state farms land they till. That very specific case apart, most illegal drug-producing countries are weak or failing states where non-state actors are too strong to be suppressed or ignored by the state. As Migdal explains, “there can be no understanding of state capabilities in the Third World without first comprehending the social structure of which states are only one part” (1988, p. 34). He explains how “in circumstances of fragmented social control, the state has become an arena of accommodations”, something that is echoed by the limited access order of North’s natural state (Migdal, 1988, p. 264; North et al., 2009). It therefore appears that weak, failed or natural states that cannot reign in their strongmen-turned-drug lords, and other powerful potentially anti-government non-state actors, cannot reasonably be called narco-states. Weak and failed states are characterized by a lack of state control over certain parts of a population and/or territory while the alleged existence of a narco-state necessarily implies control and governing over drug-trafficking organizations and/or drug-producing areas. In any case – and to acknowledge that no state, whether natural or modern, weak or strong, can fully control its territory to totally prevent drug cultivation (including the USA where illegal cannabis cultivation occurs on large areas in state-owned forests) – what so-called narco-state would devote less than 2% of its arable land to drug crops, mostly, at that, outside of its direct territorial control?

Conclusion

The three most pertinent criteria by which to judge whether a given country qualifies as a narco-state are: the surface area covered by illegal drug crops; the size of the illegal drug economy relative to the overall economy and, most importantly, the state-sponsorship of illegal drug production and/or trafficking.

Contrary to what most definition attempts have described, the ideal narco-state is the opposite of a state whose institutions have been penetrated by drug-trafficking organizations or of a state whose officials have been corrupted by drug money. A state cannot qualify as a narco-state unless illegal drug production and/or trafficking are/is the result of top-down economics where the state developed, if not initiated, an illegal drug industry. For a state to be rightly categorized as a narco-state, the illegal drug industry must be state sponsored and must contribute to the majority of a country’s overall economy (GDP + illegal economy or, as is now the case within the European Union, GDP that includes the illegal economy).

According to such a restrictive definition, neither North Korea nor Afghanistan, arguably the world’s two most drug-tainted economies, are narco-states. This leads to the conclusion that there is no existing narco-state, and that mentions of alleged narco-states can be explained by what Alfred North Whitehead described as the “Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness”, that is, the “error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete” (Whitehead, 1925). In fact, and as James Stuart Mill wrote:

The tendency has always been strong to believe that whatever received a name must be an entity or being, having an independent existence of its own. And if no real entity answering to the name could be found, men did not for that reason suppose that none existed, but imagined that it was something peculiarly abstruse and mysterious.¹

The future existence of narco-states remains of course a possibility. They are part of what John Leslie terms Plato’s “necessarily existing realm of possibilities” but that does not mean that any such state presently exists (Holt, 2012, p. 198). Qualifying existing states as narco-

states is only possible because of a lack of proper definitions, which makes it a perfect example of reification.

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Note

1. A note (no. 2) by John Stuart Mill in a book by Mill (1869, p. 5).

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