Book review


The book is the result of the author’s doctoral thesis submitted to the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research. Based on five years of ethnographic research with Colombian cocaine dealers in the Netherlands and Colombia, the study aimed to examine the nature of the social and business relationships that Colombian drug traffickers establish amongst themselves and with other – not always criminal –, social actors. Addressed to a scholarly audience the book concentrates largely on transnational organized crime networks particularly those engaged into the international cocaine trade in the Netherlands. Zaitch’s reflection on Colombian drug networks in the Netherlands is dense and intellectually sophisticated. Chapters I–IV cover a general overview of the research methodology, the role of Colombia as the main world cocaine producer, the historical evolution of the European cocaine markets and the circumstances under which Colombian immigrants are living in the Netherlands. A more specialized audience, however, will appreciate chapters V and VI which evaluate ‘the ways in which different sorts of Colombians are involved in cocaine smuggling, import, distribution and retail selling in the Netherlands’ (p. 283), and chapter IX which provides sound explanations for the extent of violence, secrecy and trust in the cocaine business in that country. The author should be congratulated for his effort to bring clarity to the debate on international serious crime for profit. He shifts away from abstract arguments about cocaine trafficking in the Netherlands and reaches out for something deeper: the perception that Colombian nationals or expats have on the cocaine trade as it occurs in daily life. Interviews with informants are specially revealing and constructive, hence confirming a solid fieldwork. Unquestionably, the recurring theme running through the book indicates that the cocaine trade at both local and international levels is far from being homogeneous. The diversity of the people involved and the way they associate around specific ventures suggests that when one talks about the actors and activities of cocaine trafficking networks in general, or Colombian cocaine trafficking networks in particular, we are often referring to various types of phenomena at the same time. Drawing from his empirical evidence Zaitch reaches valuable conclusions, which challenge orthodox discourses around transnational organized crime – in Europe and elsewhere. First, the illegal
cocaïne trade is shaped by today’s international legitimate trade and not the other way around: ‘… cocaïne follows the lines of legal trade, so it is the legitimate business world that in fact decides, even unwillingly, the faith of cocaïne shipments’ (p. 103). That is, good trading business performance (legal or not) relies on a good communication infrastructure in terms of shipping, haulage and distribution. Moreover, distance does not seem to play an important role for cocaïne exporters ‘… for whom transportation costs are very small in comparison to the benefits’ (p. 104). Second, the author illustrates the diversity of criminal groups by putting forward a series of typologies that include (a) different types of smugglers, (b) different types of importers, (c) different types of distributors and, (d) different types of illegal immigrants involved in the cocaïne business. Third, regarding the structure of groups and individuals involved into the cocaïne trade in the Netherlands one is compelled to interpret that the organisation of organized crime groups in that country, is structured around fluid criminal networks shaped by the activities of key actors who interlock around specific (almost always) illegal ventures. It is worth mentioning that the units or networks identified are not permanent entities (e.g., constant shifting alliances amongst Colombians and other criminal groups) although, some network connections endure; probably more as the result of trust as opposed to cohesion. The author highlights that despite there appears to be an ethnic recruiting process, criminal individuals often come together on the basis of economic needs. Finally, due to the rapid evolution of alliances, violence and secrecy are not essential to the protection of illegal activities. A huge gap in the book, however, is the lack of policy evaluation and the development of policy (or even further academic) recommendations. Today, it is well known that many policymakers and law-enforcement officials focus almost exclusively on la crise du jour and that they do not spend enough time devising ways to prevent potential problems from becoming actual problems. Thereby, it is a shame that Zaitch has fallen short in generating recommendations leading to the development of practical strategies at least, let’s say, for data collection and the (huge challenge on the) monitoring of trends. As a final point, and merely as a constructive critique, to conclude that individual criminal entities or flexible and fluid criminal networks resemble more Post-Fordist legal businesses where flexibility is accentuated by illegality is likely to result in more confusion than clarity.

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