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Historia Agraria de América Latina

Lina Britto, *Marijuana Boom: The Rise and Fall of Colombia's First Drug Paradise*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020. 352 pp. ISBN: 9780520325470.

In *Marijuana Boom. The Rise and Fall of Colombia's First Drug Paradise*, Lina Britto tells the unexplored story of the green gold rush in the Greater Magdalena, comprising the present-day departments of Guajira, Magdalena and Cesar, in the Colombian Caribbean, from the early 20th century to the mid-1980s. Britto shows how the ascent of marijuana was related to the unfulfilled promises of agrarian modernization, the socio-economic exclusion of popular sectors, old smuggling practices, the illegitimacy of state-led projects, and changes in the international market and demand for marijuana. Its fall is explained in connection to the “narcotization” of US-Colombia relations that transformed the latter into a laboratory of the “war on drugs” from the late 1970s onwards.

Oral histories plus rich archival sources –both from the U.S. and Colombia– help Britto build a readable book. She also introduces excerpts of *vallenato* songs and shares pictures that include seasonal workers, politicians, Peace Corps volunteers, *vallenato* singers, U.S pilots arrested for trafficking, and confiscated marijuana turning to ashes. The author clarifies that the word “marijuana” is used in the book as it was the one used by historical actors.

The *bonanza* is studied through what Britto labels as its three cycles: ascendance, peak and decline. Chapter One, “Wheels of Progress”, explores long-term efforts at agrarian modernization in the Greater Magdalena since the beginning of the 20th century. Britto focuses on the production and commercialization of tropical commodities: the banana; *divi-divi*, a native tree of the Wayuu territory in the Guajira; and cotton. Through them, the author studies the tensions within the regional political class, the conflicts between them and the *bogotano* elites, the marginalization of popular groups, the asymmetries of power due to racial and colonial legacies, and the effects of adopting the mandates of the Green Revolution. In exploring their interaction, Britto explains how some decisions about economic investment were made, why enduring credit-and-debt relationships were established, and in what ways the creation of new administrative units

(like the Intendencia de la Guajira, 1954-1964) served particular economic interests and limited the possibilities for social reformism.

According to Britto, the two agrarian reforms, Law 200 of 1936 during the “Revolution on the March” (1934-1938), and Law 135 of 1961, one of the cornerstones of the National Front’s (1958-1974) pacification project, generally served the concentration of land and wealth. They facilitated gains for merchants, industrialists, cattle ranchers, financial groups, and foreign investors. The book shows that the director of Incora, the organisation that led the 1960s reform, was enmeshed in a corruption scandal that involved using a private firm for illegal expropriations of peasant families from Tamalameque, Magdalena. Britto convincingly argues that this affected the social legitimacy of state-led reformism. Paradoxically, this encouraged people to consider as legitimate alternative practices that were later defined by state law as illegal, such as the marijuana business.

Chapter Two, “Coming from the Mountain”, focuses on the development of a novel business model that began during previous transformations of the regional social space. Britto explains that coffee smugglers helped to create the conditions for the rise of marijuana by connecting different parts of the region through commerce and guaranteeing integration with international markets. It was in the face of a crisis in the U.S. domestic market that Colombia emerged as a potential source of marijuana and smugglers of coffee and other commodities took advantage. Based mostly on two personal trajectories, alias Chijo and Barranquilla, Britto states that “personal autonomy, self-sufficiency, and risk-taking” (84) were crucial for the youth that participated in these businesses. The indifference, and even cooperation, from regional authorities, plus the redeployment of commercial ideas and practices, set the stage for the transformation of marijuana from a “minor domestic affair” into a burgeoning export economy at the beginning of the 1970s, which coincided with the rolling back of the 1961 agrarian reform.

In Chapter 3, “Santa Marta Gold”, Britto focuses on the technological interventions that facilitated the rise of varieties of marijuana that were cultivated especially in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta. Against a common narrative that the exportation boom was promoted mainly by U.S. buyers, Britto contends that they neither opened the business nor played a leading role in its innovation. Instead, she argues that different social sectors experimented with local crops and foreign seeds to develop “Santa Marta Gold”, today a well-known crossbreed. Moreover, Britto presents what could be labeled as a “democratizing effect”: as Estefanía Ciro has argued in relation to coca cultivators in Caquetá, Colombia, the marijuana business allowed popular sectors in particular to accumulate capital, at a time when they had few other options for doing so. Britto also clarifies that not all members of the “pyramidal structure” received the same benefits.

Among cultivators, intermediaries, exporters, smugglers, and many others, *marimberos* or those involved in the commercialization of marijuana receive special attention. In Chapter 4, “Party Animals”, Britto explores how this actor achieved social projection, established gendered values, and built solidarity through vallenato music and

vallenato *parrandas* or feasts. According to Britto, hosting a *parranda* was a symbol of success and a gendered expression of social mobility. Britto includes songs that highlight the role of *marimberos* and the social imaginaries around them, revealing a kind of popular hero. This suggests that a whole story about cultural manifestations and symbolism around this (illegal) business and the (legitimate) practice of vallenato is worth exploring more in detail. In fact, the presentation of the *parranda* experience is really insightful, although perhaps a little bit too harmonious, as Britto for example claims that “tensions dissolved amidst the music and alcohol” (138), and that the *parranda* was a “safe zone free of animosity” and a “relaxed atmosphere” (139).

The Two Peninsulas campaign—in reference to the Guajira and Florida peninsulas—launched against drug traffickers on November 1, 1978, is explored in Chapter Five. Both US and Colombian governments, according to Britto, defined a “geography of illegality” that was attuned to Cold War counterinsurgency efforts. Britto argues that Colombia became a laboratory of Nixon’s “war on drugs”, which reoriented the drug problem from a domestic to an international issue. New bureaucracies were created in Colombia (e.g., National Narcotics Council), patterns of inter-state diplomatic collaborations were established, money for the war against drugs was allocated, and a new “internal enemy” was created. Britto explains, for example, that President Alfonso López Michelsen (1974-78) assigned General José Joaquín Matallana, a Cold Warrior trained in the Inter-American Defense College and head of the Administrative Department of Security (DAS) since 1973, to coordinate action against the drug business. General Matallana later commented that a state-controlled business model was not totally absurd as the costs surrounding the war on drugs in terms of lives, legitimacy, and fauna and flora were too high. While others shared this idea, marijuana traffickers thought that legalization would probably just benefit the capitalist class, risking the “democratic” effect of this business.

In Chapter Six, “Reign of Terror”, Britto transits from the inter-state implications to the “on the ground” consequences of the anti-narcotics campaign. It is stated that militarization altered the codes and norms established by *marimberos*, which had previously kept violence in check. Moving to urban centers, they found a place for their money in the construction business. Britto argues that during the last part of the 1970s, marijuana traffickers relied on the use, and sometimes, the commercialization of cocaine, to “solve a crisis of masculinity” (190), a product of their difficulties in entering the legal labor market. In the future, studying the biographical trajectories of actors who transited from marijuana trafficking to cocaine will help to fully grasp the gendered implications of this change; an exploration that Britto planned but was unable to complete due to the paramilitary takeover of the zone during her research years, which speaks both to the difficulty and the merit of reconstructing this story.

Throughout the book, Britto convincingly argues that the causes of the boom were related to a regional transformation that resulted from a highly violent process of state intervention and capitalist integration. This argument echoes others’ critiques of the

assertion that “illegal” activities, such as marijuana or coca cultivation, are a by-product of the “absence of the state”. While Britto quotes anthropologist Margarita Serje, who elaborated this idea (Serje, 2012), more discussion of its implications might have prevented her from suggesting on a few occasions that the “state of lawlessness” in the Greater Magdalena was a consequence of modernizing reforms (70), that the Two Peninsulas campaign created “an emptiness of law” that enabled the violation of civil rights, and that violence was justified by “state-sanctioned lawlessness” (194). The evidence presented in the book, by and large, suggests that the marijuana business was not so much about a legal vacuum but rather a violent form of state-sanctioned law.

Marijuana Boom is a persuasive book that contributes to our understanding of a protracted conflict through a multidisciplinary exploration of the overlooked story of marijuana. Britto’s account enriches recent studies of drugs in the Americas that have argued, for example, that the cultivation of coca in places like the Alto Huallaga valley in Peru from 1960 to 1980 was a consequence of attempts at state developmentalism (Paredes & Manrique, 2021). It is to be hoped that the book will be promptly translated to Spanish, allowing it to reach a larger academic and non-academic audience across the Americas.

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