



Legal Coca

Colombia's Drug Policy Insurrection

David Restrepo

After suffering through decades of the Andean region's most repressive, expensive, and fruitless drug war, designed and funded by the USA, Colombia is finally revolting against its historical drug policy subservience and choosing to lead the global debate on the legal regulation of drugs. On July 20, 2022, Colombian Independence Day, members of the newly elected, progressive Congressional majority announced they will legalize not just adult-use cannabis, psilocybin mushrooms, and opium poppy, but also tackle perhaps the most important drug policy issue of our times: the legal regulation of coca and its derivatives. During his August 7 inauguration speech, Colombian President Gustavo Petro reiterated his commitment to legal regulation—the first time a sitting president has ever broken this lingering drug policy taboo.

Why Coca Matters

Despite its near absence from global drug policy reform debates focused on cannabis and psychedelics, coca is just as important an issue, if not more—and not just in Colombia. Cocaine, first isolated from coca by Europeans in the 19th century, is second only to cannabis in terms of global illicit drug revenues, and provides even more profits to organized crime. Without punitive drug policy, it would be hard to conceive the scale of cocaine-fueled violence and corruption that afflicts the entire planet but particularly victimizes Latin Americans.

And yet, the threat that coca and cocaine reform is trying to avert is more existential and global in nature than the multi-decade crime wave caused by prohibition. Preserving tropical rainforests, not least the Amazon, is key to avoiding runaway climate change—and the war on coca is one of the main obstacles impeding that goal.

Before detailing the link between coca and climate, it should be noted that, on its own, coca is a remarkable, native South American plant with an 8,000-year history that defines the identity of millions of Indigenous people. It represents bio-cultural

patrimony with enormous untapped potential in nutrition and medicine.¹ For coca cultures and those of us trying to consensually appropriate—or remember—a more comprehensive understanding of coca, this humble-seeming plant is the heart of a distinctive Indigenous worldview: one where the educated use of plants fosters a nature-centric structure to society and supports the pursuit of a balanced life.

This would seem a tall order for coca, with its almost imperceptible effects. Coca chewing is a far cry from psychedelic journeys, cannabis highs, alcohol intoxication, or the rush of isolated cocaine. And yet, despite its subtlety, coca plays a decisive role in our lives. Functionally, coca is a highly nutritious and effective stimulant whose impact is most felt when prolonged effort and concentration are required, such as in strenuous exercise or focused work. But beyond pharmacological function, coca is a powerful community-building tool. By boosting attention and stamina, coca enables *talking circles* with family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors that improve the quality of conversation, and allow us to better understand our relationships with each other and the natural world. At a time in history where social media is undermining communication, coca talking circles help us establish horizontal, empathetic dialogue that fosters a better-informed, shared vision of reality. As a result, coca provides us the energy to implement talking circle agreements in everyday life.

How the War on Coca Drives Climate Change

Unfortunately, until now, none of this perspective on coca has made it into drug policy. Instead, the U.S.-mandated focus on eradication and substitution has stigmatized coca, pushing crops ever deeper into pristine jungle. There, coca prohibition acts as a first domino in a process that is converting carbon-sinking forest into eroded pasture and ash. Glyphosate spraying and cocaine lab interdiction, hallmarks of U.S. drug policy, do little more than chase coca around in a spiral of deforestation, damaged food crops and polluted soils and water. The little illicit cocaine profit that isn't stashed away in tax havens and first-world bank accounts mostly stays in the hands of absentee landlords, their mercenaries armed with U.S. weapons and their allies in government and law enforcement. Since U.S.-concocted anti-money laundering rules hamper investment in the formal economy, drug money winds up diversifying

the portfolio of the illicit drug business via armed land grabs, merchandise contraband, human trafficking, weapons dealing, logging, cattle ranching, and mining.

Drug financing thus fuels extractive capitalism in the ever-expanding pan-Amazonian agricultural frontier. The result is a hostile environment against Indigenous communities whose livelihoods and culture historically utilized psychoactive plants—not least coca itself—to implement sustainable rainforest management. They are now contending with poisoned rivers, rising birth defects and cancer, as well as violent encroachment of their land. Behind the Amazon's thickening ring of fire is not just soy, meat, and mining. Prohibition weaponizes cocaine profits into a replenishable source of seed capital shoving the Amazon towards desertification—and the world towards uncontrolled climate change.

Colombia's Pathway of Indigenous-Led Coca Reform

Unless we radically alter the rules of the economic game at play with coca. In this sense, Colombia's developments are exciting not just because of the switch from prohibition to legal regulation, but because the new government is promising to center "peripheral" communities that have been historically absent from these debates. The new legislature has announced it will design new markets based on principles like the primacy of human rights over international drug control treaties, fully decriminalizing cultivation and drug consumption. Draft legislation shows that regulations will be shaped via the consultation and participation of communities victimized by the drug war, while recognizing that plants like coca are sacred to Indigenous people. This signals that Indigenous and local authorities will have a protagonist role in the work ahead – building on the frameworks of the pioneering 2020 coca and cocaine regulation bill archived by [the previous government](#).²

Colombia's current moment starkly contrasts the Global North's approach: a chimera of top-down over-regulation that sustains illicit economies while excluding communities most hurt by prohibition, with a sprinkling of affirmative actions that are a welcome but insufficient patch-up of systemic disadvantage.

It is no surprise that Colombian Indigenous leaders have resisted coca legalization until now. The medicalization route, used to subvert cannabis and psychedelic prohibition from within, comes at the cost of replicating the very exclusion that

¹ Restrepo, D. A., Saenz, E., & Jara-Muñoz, O. A. (2019, October 21). *Erythroxylum in Focus: An interdisciplinary review of an overlooked genus*. MDPI. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://www.mdpi.com/1420-3049/24/20/3788>

² David, D. (2022, April 25). Documento Temático: Daring to regulate coca and cocaine: Lessons from Colombia's Drug War Trenches. CESED. Retrieved August 29, 2022, from <https://cesed.uniandes.edu.co/daring-to-regulate-coca-and-cocaine-lessons-from-colombias-drug-war-trenches/>

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prohibition has buttressed. Instead of airplanes laden with glyphosate, the weapons of neocolonial drug regulation are unaffordable clinical trials, unmanageable licensing procedures, and carbon-intensive monocultures: a further imposition of “Western” ideas of medicine, economy and society that offer no relief to coca communities who are still ducking bullets.

A coca-focused approach, overlooked by the “Northern” cannabis and psychedelic movements, tells us that drug policy needs to do more than add yet another item to over-saturated consumer and pharmaceutical markets. Drug policy reform should be a step towards healing a world sickened by excess and disconnection, where a key focus is to remember—as well as innovate—the beneficial, community-building use of teacher plants and drugs.

In Colombia, we are hopefully accelerating our pace along this path – both at a macro and micro level. In my work, this has meant uniting drug war survivor communities – particularly the queer and artist groups I belong to – with academia and Indigenous leaders around coca talking circles. These have helped build research projects, social start-ups, and cultural interventions that challenge drug policy preconceptions. We are particularly excited about the intercultural research-action process we’re co-creating with Indigenous Authorities—one where Indigenous governance is respected; Indigenous elders and “western” researchers are recognized as equal contributors in building coca knowledge; and coca innovations remain collective property that strengthens Indigenous economies, fulfilling equitable, benefit-sharing agreements.

How we work together – using the ethos and practice of coca talking circles – is as important as what we do. That said, our objectives are another source of excitement. In a world where the racist 1961 UN Single Convention treats coca as a pest that should have been driven to extinction by 1986, we are conducting research to validate the plant’s safety profile and its many benefits identified in traditional knowledge. Our research will help bolster emerging product markets seeking to maximize the benefits of coca and promote the adoption of its profound values. In parallel, we are also exploring the kinds of supply systems needed to reduce the public health damage of isolated cocaine. Legal cocaine supply should avoid corporate capture and profit-based incentives while making harm reduction a design imperative.

However, the growing prevalence of substance use disorders like stimulant addiction are primarily a function of social fragmentation. This is why the ultimate aim of Colombia’s coca movement is transforming coca into a motor for regenerative economies from supply to consumption. The role of coca is to help communities organize and deliberate on how to shift food systems towards carbon-sinking approaches that stabilize the agricultural frontier while promoting equity and bio-cultural diversity.

The favorable political landscape in Colombia is making us optimistic about the future of our efforts. However, there are U.S. Senators already threatening Colombia for daring to innovate away from failed drug policy orthodoxy. We hope allies in the Global North understand the urgency of our work, and choose not to interfere but respectfully listen and contribute to this necessary resistance.

