Introduction

Eduardo Paes-Machado[a] and Christopher Birkbeck[b]

[a]Department of Sociology, Federal University of Bahia, Salvador, Brazil; [b]School of Nursing, Midwifery, Social Work, University of Salford, Salford, UK

"Land ahoy!" As vegetation floated by and birds flew overhead, sailors in the olden days sensed that a new destination was in the offing. Like sailors in search of uncharted lands, critical commentators and practitioners on current anti-drug policies can now shout "Land ahoy!" with a certain degree of hope, given the increasingly evident exhaustion of outdated mindsets and systems of control. The auguries of change are many: wasted resources, ineffective policies, high murder rates in some drug markets, mass incarceration, frustration among criminal justice personnel, insistent recommendations from social welfare and public health service providers and performative speeches from political leaders on the need to change direction. The signs also come from innovative proposals in various parts of the world: governance models founded on the principle of harm reduction, depenalization of drug use and possession, heroin-treatment and provision by health providers, creation of consumption rooms protected by police, implementation of community oriented, developmental and rehabilitative approaches, and recent legalizations in the American and Uruguayan cannabis markets.

The same signs of openness and hope that have inspired some have fed the fears of others, who insist on prohibitionist discourses and practices. To them, "Land ahoy!" is merely an illusion. Indeed, after more than a hundred years of prohibitionist policies, the punitive rhetoric continues to challenge the pioneers of the new. Despite Karl Marx's claim that humanity only recognizes

problems that it is able to solve (Marx, 1977: pp. 24-25) the prohibitionist paradigm has proved to be a hollow solution, bolstered by sociocultural, political-institutional, and practical challenges to its dismantlement.

How do we redirect the work style — encouraged by the discourse of the "war on drugs"— of criminal justice systems and police forces of many countries with an established democratic tradition? How do we guide them to embrace harm reduction? How do we deactivate the stratospheric and interconnected spirals of corruption and violence, generated both by anti-drug policy and criminal groups and cartels, in countries with a less consistent democratic tradition in Latin America and Africa?

However difficult all this might be, it is essential to be ready and willing to manage the transition, taking each step up the ladder of resistance, which begins with the denial of the wave of regulatory reforms and continues as frustration with the loss of long-standing prestige, anxiety, and skepticism regarding the reorganization of drug policies. Currently, we are going through a phase of continued change, an intense search for feasible political alternatives, and the increasing adoption of pragmatic responses (Wodak, 2014) that point to the acceptance of what had formerly been unthinkable: the conception, implementation and assessment of regulatory and rehabilitative drug strategies that go beyond the criminal justice system.

This special issue offers seven articles that examine the tensions, conflicts and prospects for change in contrasting countries or regions of the world, some of them examining consolidated democracies (United Kingdom, Denmark), some of them newly emerging economies (Brazil, South Africa) and one of them straddling the Americas (from Jamaica to Canada). The first four articles look at the policing of drug markets from the perspective of the officers themselves.

Bacon reports on an observational study of specialist drug detectives in two English police services, and Bear presents a similar study in London. Houborg, Kammersgaard and Pedersen undertook interviews and focus groups with police officers, and content analysis of criminal records from four police Danish districts. Marks and Howell spent time with drugs officers (and their superiors) in the South African city of Durban. Each of the studies uncovered some common elements: a feeling among officers that drug use and trafficking are serious problems; a discourse that linked drug work with the traditional crime-fighting role of the police; a managerial environment that set key targets for officers and encouraged drug arrests as a relatively easy way to reach them; and a recognition that a punitive, arrest-and-convict, approach to drugs will not alter the contours of trafficking or use in any significant or lasting way. Bacon found that some officers were open to alternative strategies for defining and addressing the drug problem, even as they continued to operate within the prohibitionist framework. Marks and Howell found that officers were unaware of alternative approaches but identified the tension between agency objectives and ineffectual results as a creative opportunity for moving towards harm reduction strategies. Bear, however, found that a traditional policing discourse not only remained in place but was also used to frame, and justify, anti-drug work. Houborg and colleagues discuss policing practices following the introduction, in Denmark in 2004, of a zero-tolerance approach to the possession of illicit drugs after more than three decades where this kind of possession had been decriminalized. Their main focus is on suspicion formation and its systematic use for order maintenance and the criminalization of a marginalized segment of the Danish population. As in other contexts (Auerhahn, 1999), drugs offer police an “easy” form of evidence, providing the perfect legal pretext for controlling an otherwise ill-defined group of suspicious, possibly threatening, possibly disorderly individuals and certainly a nuisance

population. Cumulatively, these studies suggest that police officers are often aware of the limitations to the enforcement approach but are impeded from exploring alternatives by their organizational environment and occupational ethos.

The final three papers deal, in one way or another, with the shifting contours of control in contemporary drug markets. In South Africa, Shaw compares the development of organized crime groups in Cape Town and Johannesburg, showing how they flourished in the aftermath to apartheid when state forces were preoccupied with political matters. As in many places in the world, the ineffectiveness of the state regulatory authority (Roitman, 2004) opened the door for the escalation of the private use of violence and armed disputes between these groups. On the one hand, illegal drug markets absorb and intensify non-lethal and lethal violence in the social environments in which they operate (Ruggiero, 2000), a point not acknowledged by prohibition supporters (Weatherburn, 2014). On the other hand, the different trajectories of control of the drug market and any associated violence in both South African cities reflect a complex interaction between local and foreign entrepreneurs of violence and the police themselves, who intervened when that violence became too egregious or inconvenient.

Looking at the policing of drug trafficking groups in Brazil, Cano and Ribeiro describe the advances and contradictions of the Police Pacification Units (UPPs) created in Rio de Janeiro in 2008. This new model, based on the community policing of almost 40 *favelas*, drastically reduced the lethal violence associated with previous police interventions and drug trafficker disputes. Despite its limitations, the programme shows that there is a practical alternative to the "war on drugs" in dealing with violence and insecurity. Indeed, in its acceptance of drug trafficking as an unavoidable reality, the UPP model has been fighting violence and intimidation

rather than drugs. In this sense, it could be conceived almost as a harm-reduction initiative related to drug trafficking, which might encourage similar initiatives in other Brazilian, Latin American, and African cities engulfed by violent drug markets and militarized police tactics.

Finally, Leuprecht, Aulthouse and Walther apply a network perspective to the operations of the international drug cartel known as the Shower Posse, based in Jamaica and with distribution in Canada and the United States. They demonstrate how the same lack of state regulatory authority, coupled with spreading corruption, contributed to the consolidation of the cartel's organization. Looking at the key nodes in the movement of information and resources, they argue that understanding the network's structure is fundamental for detecting, dissuading, and interrupting this kind of international drug trade.

Overall, these articles visit selected ports-of-call in the uneven and contrasting landscape in policing drug markets. Additional topics, such as the new advances in regulatory and rehabilitative strategies in the Americas or New Zealand, will help to complete our perspective on a matter that will probably evoke in the future the same feelings we share today concerning other sizable, foolish, and sad mistakes committed by past generations.

References

Auerhahn, K. (1999). The split labor market and the origins of the antidrug legislation in the United States. *Law and Social Inquiry,* 24, 411-440.

Marx, K. (1977). *A contribution to the critique of political economy*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Roitman, J. (2004). Productivity in the margins: The reconstitution of state power in the Chad Basin. In V. Das & D. Poole (Eds.), *Anthropology in the margins of the State* (pp. 191–224). Santa Fé, NM:

School of American Research Press.

Ruggiero, V. (2000). *Crime and markets: Essays in anti-criminology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weatherburn, D. (2014). The pros and cons of prohibition drugs. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 47, 176–189.

Wodak, A. (2014). The abject failure of drug prohibition. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 47, 190–201.