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The Architecture of Drug Trafficking: Network Forms of Organisation in the Colombian Cocaine Trade

Michael Kenney

For much of the past twenty-five years, the US-led war on drugs has been premised on a fundamental misunderstanding of Colombian drug trade. Instead of being run by a handful of massive, price-fixing 'cartels', the Colombian drug trade, then and now, was characterized by a fluid social system where flexible exchange networks expanded and retracted according to market opportunities and regulatory constraints. To support this interpretation, I draw on primary and secondary source data I collected in Colombia and the US, including interviews with several dozen hard-to-reach informants. I analyze these data to analyze the organisational form and functioning of 'Colombian' trafficking networks, focusing on how these illicit enterprises communicate, coordinate their activities, and make decisions, with an eye towards deflating some of the more persistent myths that have grown up around these transnational enterprises.

Keywords drug trade; drug trafficking; organised crime; networks; Colombia; illegal drugs

For much of the past twenty-five years, the US-led war on drugs has been based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the Colombian drug trade. In the early 1980s, as numerous Colombian trafficking networks extended their reach into American drug markets, officials began to suggest that the cocaine industry was run by a handful of massive, vertically integrated 'cartels' that restricted production and

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set international prices. Much of this mythical monopoly power was attributed to smuggling groups based in the Colombian cities of Medellín and Cali, where cocaine 'kingpins' such as Pablo Escobar, Jorge Ochoa and Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela allegedly controlled the trade, dividing up lucrative American and European markets among themselves. The cartel myth achieved remarkable staying power in American popular culture, in part because the vivid imagery it conveyed was plausible—and useful—to those that helped create it: politicians pushing for tougher drug laws, police administrators clamoring for larger budgets, journalists searching for sensational news copy, and citizens fearful of the pernicious affects of drug abuse and addiction. Press releases, media reports and Hollywood films depicted the cocaine 'cartels' as super criminal associations bent on destroying American values in their single-minded pursuit of illicit income. But irrespective of its political and moral expedience, as a description of the Colombian drug trade, the cartel metaphor left much to be desired.

'The cartels never existed until they were created by the media and the US government', explains 'Néstor', an experienced marijuana and cocaine broker with ties to the so-called Medellín 'cartel'. Sitting in a medium-security federal prison in Florida, he elaborates:

Pablo Escobar was a big smuggler, the Ochoas, all these guys were independent, like everyone else. When the government of Colombia and the Americans came after them, they had to react to the action to the government. But the cartels never happened naturally where guys sat down and said 'Okay, I'm going to control this and this, and you're controlling that'. This never happened... It was simply lots of small, independent groups: Small clans, friends, relatives, family... people were trafficking through contacts. They *networked* to get the job done.¹

Néstor is not alone in his interpretation: other former traffickers I interviewed echoed his assessment, juxtaposing the social construction of Colombian 'cartels' with the drug industry's tangible lack of a cartel structure. This will come as no surprise to students of transnational organised crime. In recent years, the cartel myth has been debunked by numerous scholars who argue that the Colombian drug trade was never dominated by a single organisation or association that controlled enough cocaine to limit production and fix prices in overseas markets.² Regrettably, many researchers still use the 'cartel' nomenclature, sacrificing conceptual and empirical clarity for stylistic convention. In continuing to (mis)appropriate the term, even as they

1. Author interview with 'Néstor' [pseudonym], former drug trafficker, *Federal Correctional Complex*, Coleman, Florida, 19 September 2000. Emphasis added.

2. See, for example, Krauthausen, C. & Sarmiento, L. F. (1991) *Cocaína y Co.: Un Mercado ilegal por dentro*, Tercer Mundo Editores, Bogotá, Colombia; Lee, R. W. (1989) *The White Labyrinth: Cocaine and Political Power*, Transaction, New Brunswick, NJ; Naylor, R. T. (1997) 'Mafias, Myths, and Markets: On the Theory and Practice of Enterprise Crime', *Transnational Organized Crime*, vol. 3, no. 3, Autumn, pp. 1–45; Thoumi, F. E. (1995) *Political Economy and Illegal Drugs in Colombia*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO; and Zaitch, D. (2002) *Trafficking Cocaine: Colombian Drug Entrepreneurs in the Netherlands*, Kluwer Law International, The Hague.

acknowledge that what they call 'cartels' are no such thing (hence the quotation marks), academics reinforce the cartel mythology, begging a valid question: why (ab)use the term at all—with or without the suggestive punctuation? For those charged with extending our knowledge in what is already a politically charged, methodologically challenging area of inquiry, the discursive strategy of following convention rings hollow.

Contrary to received wisdom, Colombia's drug trade has never been dominated by a price-fixing association. Even during the respective heydays of the Medellín and Cali 'cartels', cocaine production and exportation in Colombia was highly competitive as independent trafficking groups in more than a dozen cities smuggled substantial amounts of cocaine to American and European drug markets. While some of these enterprises transacted with Pablo Escobar, the Ochoa brothers and other prominent traffickers, their business relations more closely resembled informal producer-export syndicates than public or private cartels that controlled prices and monopolised markets. Although different groups occasionally pooled their resources to complete large-scale drug shipments, while reducing their exposure to government authorities, they steadfastly maintained their own sources of supply, financing and clientele. 'Driving this resilient structure', writes Sidney Zabudoff, author of an important study on the Colombian trade, was 'an intricate network of contacts and subcontracts built upon experience and family ties and motivated by the potential for high profits'.³

Similar to other forms of organised criminality, including weapons trafficking, immigrant smuggling and prostitution, drug trafficking in Colombia occurs in fluid social systems where flexible exchange networks expand and retract according to market opportunities and regulatory constraints. This durable, elastic structure did not emerge overnight but developed over many years as entrepreneurs built their enterprises through personal contacts, repeated exchanges and resources they accumulated gradually, while drawing on social traditions, such as contraband smuggling, that extend far back to Colombia's colonial past.⁴

This interpretation, part of a larger study on transnational trafficking and terrorist networks,⁵ is based on extensive primary and secondary source data

3. Zabudoff, S. (1997) 'Colombian Narcotics Organizations as Business Enterprises,' *Transnational Organized Crime*, vol. 3, no. 2, p. 26.

4. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, smuggling was common throughout the Spanish vice royalty of Nueva Granada, the area that encompasses contemporary Colombia. To avoid government duties and satisfy consumer demand, contraband smugglers transported food, licor, cigarettes, machinery, and weapons across Riohacha, Santa Marta, and Cartagena. They also developed a number of maritime smuggling routes through Caribbean sea lanes that drug traffickers would exploit centuries later. For an illuminating account of contraband smuggling in Nueva Granada during colonialism, see Grahn, L. (1997) *The Political Economy of Smuggling: Regional Informal Economies in Early Bourbon New Granada*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO.

5. Kenney, M. (2007) *From Pablo to Osama: Trafficking and Terrorist Networks, Government Bureaucracies, and Competitive Adaptation*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park.

I collected over several years of fieldwork in the US and Colombia. Between 1997 and 2003, I interviewed dozens of law enforcement and intelligence officials in both countries, along with a small sample of former drug traffickers. All of these trafficker-informants worked for criminal enterprises that have been widely characterized by government agencies and the media as 'cartels'. Each one was convicted of drug-related offenses in the US criminal justice system, and openly admitted his involvement in illicit activity. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, I interviewed each former trafficker face-to-face for one to two hours, with no law enforcement personnel or other individuals present. With my informants' consent, I audio-taped these interviews, which were later transcribed by professional assistants, creating a documentary record of unique value. In addition to these primary data, I collected information from unclassified intelligence reports, some of which I obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests, Congressional hearings, and courtroom testimony in criminal trials involving different 'kingpins'.

Like all research on drug trafficking and criminal networks, my data should be interpreted with caution. While I have sought to minimize problems with informant deception, unintentional or otherwise, and data reliability by carefully cross-checking information from my respondents, I do not claim to have eliminated all biases from my research. My informant sample privileges criminal enterprises that, although eventually targeted by the state, were successful enough, at least initially, to receive the attention and opprobrium of government authorities. I used chain referral sampling to build a pool of expert informants that were not particularly concerned about my need for data. Such nonprobability sampling methods allowed me to interview a range of hard-to-reach informants, but this access came at the cost of limiting the generalisability of my findings.⁶

In the following pages, I make no claim to uncover universal laws of criminal behaviour applicable to all drug traffickers, or even to present a comprehensive account of Colombia's multi-faceted drug industry. Instead, I aim to understand how some criminal enterprises coordinate their activities in hostile law enforcement environments, a deceptively simple charge that is complicated by the enigmatic and fluid nature of black markets. My analysis unfolds in four sections. First, I discuss the literature on criminal networks, emphasising the distinction between social and organisational network analysis and illustrating how students of organised crime have contributed to both. Second, I describe the organisational features of Colombian trafficking enterprises, highlighting two ideal types: wheel networks and chain networks. Third, I analyze the rules of drug trafficking, showing how criminals rely on experience-laden routines to minimize their exposure to risk and uncertainty. Finally, I explore how individuals enter and exit these criminal enterprises,

6. For discussion of chain referral sampling, see Russell, H. B. (2006) *Research Methods in Anthropology: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*, 4th edn., Altamira Press, Lanham, MD.

performing the day-to-day activities that make trafficking networks run. Throughout my analysis, I seek to deflate the mythology that surrounds the Colombian trade, under the admittedly vainglorious presumption that this will help policy makers, practitioners and publics better comprehend the illicit adversary they confront, a task that remains no less pressing today, more than five years into the war on terror. While that conflict has superseded the longer-standing war on drugs in American popular iconography, the latter remains an important foreign policy priority for the US, particularly in Colombia and the larger Andean region.

Criminal Networks: Social and Organisational

Over the years, social scientists have produced numerous studies on criminal networks. As far back as 1937, Edwin Sutherland observed that the professional thief interacts regularly with other thieves through inter-personal networks grounded in shared norms and a common language and knowledge base. These networks, according to Sutherland, constitute a form of criminal association, 'not organized in the journalistic sense, for no dictator or central office directs the work of the members. . . Rather it is organized in the sense that it is a system in which informal unity and reciprocity may be found'.⁷ Professional thieves, in this view, form informal, inter-personal networks of affiliation based largely on shared customs and acquired expertise.

Sutherland's seminal analysis foreshadowed research decades later by anthropologists and historians who argued that, contrary to the conventional scholarship on organised crime, entrepreneurs coordinated their activities through associational networks, often based on family and friendship ties, rather than bureaucratic organisations with clearly defined rules and top-down decision-making hierarchies.⁸ In his ethnographic study of an isolated village in Western Sicily, Anton Blok analysed the social networks *mafiosi* formed with peasants, landlords and politicians. According to Blok, these inter-personal networks, which relied heavily on participants' social connections and economic interdependencies, were crucial to understanding how absentee landlords and the *mafiosi* who managed their estates were able to control peasants' access to land in exchange for their political support, in the process undermining the Italian state's ill-fated

7. Sutherland, E. H. (1937) *The Professional Thief by a Professional Thief*, Annotated and interpreted by Edwin H. Sutherland, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 209.

8. The bureaucratic model of organised crime is exemplified in Donald Cressey's studies of Italian-American crime families in the United States. See Cressey, D. R. (1967) 'The Functions and Structure of Criminal Syndicates', in *Task Force on Organized Crime*, US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, pp. 25–60; and Cressey, D. R. (1969) *Theft of the Nation*, Harper & Row, New York. For a similar interpretation, see Salerno, R. & Tompkins, J. S. (1969) *The Crime Confederation*, Doubleday, Garden City, NY.

attempts at land reform.⁹ Using similar methods, Ianni studied an Italian–American organised crime family in New York. Ianni argued that the ‘Lupollo’s’ criminal activities were organised around an enduring, yet evolving, kinship network, patrimonial ties among members of the network, and shared cultural values reflecting the family’s historical roots in Southern Italy.¹⁰ In his historical research of cocaine trafficking in New York City during the Progressive era, Alan Block showed how the local trade was dominated not by a single organisation but by social networks of entrepreneurs that ‘formed, re-formed, split and came together again as opportunities arose and when they were able’.¹¹ Other research on organised crime from this period emphasizes the role of patronage relations and opportunistic partnerships rather than formal organisations, including Ianni’s study of associational and entrepreneurial networks among African–American and Puerto Rican criminals in New York, Albin’s research on Italian–American organised crime in Detroit, and Chambliss’ analysis of an influential network of politicians, law enforcers, businessmen and criminals in Seattle.¹² Resilient, yet flexible social networks, not corporate hierarchies, best captured the structure and dynamics of organised crime, according to these authors.

Since the 1970s, numerous researchers have conducted additional studies on networked forms of organised crime covering a range of countries and time periods. Undermining the notion that transnational and Chinese organised crime are recent phenomena, McIlwain shows how professional Chinese American criminals ran opium smuggling, gambling and prostitution networks in New York

9. Blok, A. (1974) *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860–1960: A Study of Violent Peasant Entrepreneurs*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, UK. As Jeffrey Scott McIlwain points out, Blok was ‘one of many’ social scientists studying the influence of social networks in traditional Sicilian society. Other examples, cited by McIlwain, include Boissevain J. (1960) ‘Poverty and Politics in a Sicilian Agro-Town’, *International Archives of Ethnography*, vol. 50, pp. 198–236; Boissevain, J. (1973) *Friends of Friends: Networks, Manipulators and Coalitions*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, UK; Schneider, J. (1969) ‘Family Patrimonies and Economic Behavior in Western Sicily’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 42, pp. 109–129; and Silverman, S. F. (1965) ‘Patronage and Community-Nation Relationships in Central Italy’, *Ethnology*, vol. 4, pp. 172–189. See McIlwain, J. S. (1999) ‘Organized Crime: A Social Network Approach’, *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 308, 321n11; and McIlwain, J. S. (2004) *Organizing Crime in Chinatown: Race and Racketeering in New York City, 1890–1910*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, North Carolina, pp. 13–15, 206n14.

10. Ianni, F. A. J. & Reuss-Ianni, E. (1972) *A Family Business: Kinship and Social Control in Organized Crime*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York.

11. Block, A. A. (1979) ‘The Snowman Cometh: Coke in Progressive New York’, *Criminology*, vol. 17, no. 1, May, pp. 94.

12. See Ianni, F. A. J. (1974) *Black Mafia: Ethnic Succession in Organized Crime*, Simon and Schuster, New York; Albin, J. L. (1971) *The American Mafia: Genesis of a Legend*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York; and Chambliss, W. J. (1978) *On the Take: From Petty Crooks to Presidents*, University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, IN. For discussion of this literature, including references to other examples, see Kappeler, V. E., Blumberg, M. & Potter, G. W. (1993) *The Mythology of Crime and Criminal Justice*, Waveland Press, Prospect Heights, IL, p. 83 and Williams, P. (2001) ‘Transnational Criminal Networks’, in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, eds J. Arquilla & D. Ronfeldt, RAND, Washington, DC, pp. 62–63.

City and San Diego during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.¹³ Arlacchi demonstrates how entrepreneurial *mafiosi* exploited kinship and friendship networks in Southern Italy to perform illegal activities, including extortion, kidnapping and heroin trafficking.¹⁴ Baker and Faulkner illustrate how white collar criminals in the American electrical equipment industry relied on inter-firm networks to engage in collusive price fixing.¹⁵ And Williams has written a series of articles demonstrating how criminal organisations from different countries use organisational networks to coordinate a range of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, immigrant smuggling and money laundering.¹⁶

These examples, which are by no means comprehensive, indicate that there is an established, and eclectic, body of scholarship on criminal networks.¹⁷

13. McIlwain, J. S. (2004) *Organizing Crime in Chinatown: Race and Racketeering in New York City, 1890–1910*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, NC; McIlwain, J. S. (1998) 'An Equal Opportunity Employer: Opium Smuggling Networks in and around San Diego During the Early Twentieth Century', *Transnational Organized Crime*, vol. 2, no. 4, Summer, pp. 31–54.

14. Arlacchi, P. (1986) *Mafia Business: The Mafia Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Martin Ryle, Verso, London.

15. Baker, W. E. & Faulkner, R. R. (1993) 'The Social Organization of Conspiracy: Illegal Networks in the Heavy Electrical Equipment Industry', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 58, December, pp. 837–860.

16. Williams, P. (1995) 'Transnational Criminal Organizations: Strategic Alliances', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1, Winter, pp. 57–72; Williams, P. (1998) 'The Nature of Drug-Trafficking Networks', *Current History*, vol. 97, no. 618, April, pp. 154–159; Williams, P. (1998) 'Organizing Transnational Crime: Networks, Markets and Hierarchies', *Transnational Organized Crime*, vol. 4, nos. 3&4, Autumn/Winter, pp. 57–87; and Williams, P. (2001) 'Transnational Criminal Networks', in *Networks and Networks: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, eds J. Arquilla & D. Ronfeldt, RAND, Washington, DC, pp. 61–97.

17. Other research on criminal networks includes, but is not limited to: Adler, P. A. (1993) *Wheeling and Dealing: An Ethnography of an Upper-Level Drug Dealing and Smuggling Community*, 2nd edn, Columbia University Press, New York; Arias, E. D. (2006) *Drugs and Democracy in Rio de Janeiro: Trafficking, Social Networks, and Public Security*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill; Coles, N. (2001) 'It's Not What You Know—It's Who You Know That Counts: Analysing Serious Crime Groups as Social Networks', *British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 41, no. 4, pp. 580–593; Finckenaue, J. O. & Waring, E. (1998) *Russian Mafia in America*, Northeastern University Press, Boston; Heckmann, F. (2004) 'Illegal Migration: What Can We Know and What Can We Explain? The Case of Germany', *International Migration Review*, vol. 38, no. 3, Fall, pp. 1103–1125; Klerks, P. (2001) 'The Network Paradigm Applied to Criminal Organizations: Theoretical Nitpicking or a Relevant Doctrine for Investigators? Recent Developments in the Netherlands', *Connections*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 53–65; Jackson, J. L., Herbrink, J. C. M. & Jansen, R. W. J. (1996) 'Examining Criminal Organizations: Possible Methodologies', *Transnational Organized Crime*, vol. 2, no. 4, Winter, pp. 83–105; McAndrew, D. (1999) 'The Structural Analysis of Criminal Networks', in *The Social Psychology of Crime: Groups, Teams and Networks*, eds D. Canter & L. Alison, Ashgate, Aldershot, England, pp. 53–94; McGloin, J. M. (2005) 'Policy and Intervention Considerations of a Network Analysis of Street Gangs', *Criminology & Public Policy*, vol. 4, no. 3, August, pp. 607–636; Meyer, K. & Parssinen, T. (1998) *Webs of Smoke: Smugglers, Warlords, Spies, and the History of the International Drug Trade*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD; Morselli, C. (2005) *Contacts, Opportunities, and Criminal Enterprises*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto; Morselli, C. & Giguere, C. (2006) 'Legitimate Strengths in Criminal Networks', *Crime, Law & Social Change*, vol. 45, no. 3, April, pp. 185–200; Natarajan, M. (2000) 'Understanding the Structure of a Drug Trafficking Organization: A Conversational Analysis', in *Illegal Drug Markets: From Research to Prevention Policy*, eds M. Natarajan & M. Hough, Criminal Justice Press, Monsey, NJ, pp. 273–298; Potter, G. & Gaines, L. (1995) 'Organizing Crime in "Copperhead County": An Ethnographic Look at Rural Crime Networks', in *Contemporary Issues in Organized Crime*, ed. J. S. Albanese, Criminal Justice Press, Monsey, NY, pp. 61–85; and Zhang, S. & Chin, K.-L. (2002) 'Enter the Dragon: Inside Chinese Human Smuggling Organizations', *Criminology*, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 737–767.

Reflecting divisions in the broader social science literature, scholars of illicit networks employ different approaches and levels of analysis in their research. Many scholars, influenced by anthropological and historical methods, examine organised criminality from the perspective of social network analysis, where the theoretical and empirical focus is on individuals and their relational ties to other criminals. Through social connections based on family, friendship or geographic ties, criminals communicate, transfer resources and build trust.¹⁸ Other scholars, influenced by organisational sociology, focus on the organisational level of analysis, examining how different groups and organisations within and across organisational networks make decisions, pool resources and engage in collective action within competitive environments.

In the following discussion I move back and forth across the individual and organisational levels of analysis. I do so because nodes in Colombian trafficking networks are populated by individuals *and* groups. Some nodes, such as brokers that facilitate transactions between different parties, are individuals; others, including smuggling rings and distribution cells that transport and sell drugs, contain several individuals, each with their own social networks, that function as a collective unit. In this dual structure social networks are embedded within and across larger organisational networks. Therefore, both social and organisational network analysis can help us better understand how these clandestine enterprises operate.¹⁹

18. See McIlwain, J. S. (1998) 'An Equal Opportunity Employer: Opium Smuggling Networks in and around San Diego During the Early Twentieth Century', *Transnational Organized Crime*, vol. 2, no. 4, Summer, p. 33; McIlwain, J. S. (2004) *Organizing Crime in Chinatown: Race and Racketeering in New York City, 1890–1910*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, NC; and Wasserman, S. & Faust, K. (1994) *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*, Cambridge University Press, New York. Law enforcers and intelligence analysts also use social network analysis, if for different reasons: to identify links between individual perpetrators involved in criminal conspiracies. For an interesting application of social network analysis to counter-drug intelligence, see Drug Enforcement Administration (1987) *Intelligence Collection and Analytical Methods*, US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, Chapter 4.

19. My argument runs counter to some social network scholars who suggest that organisations cannot be thought of as network nodes because they are composed of many discrete nodes (i.e. individuals) that act and form social ties. In this view, it is a reification to speak of 'organisational' networks because 'organisations' do not act; individuals act within organisations. While this is certainly true, it is still meaningful to speak of 'organisational' action when individuals act on behalf of organisations that contain common objectives, agreed upon practices for making decisions within the collective, and formal or informal coordination mechanisms that give individuals the authority to carry out tasks for the 'organisation'. This standard view of organisation is consistent with several decades of research on organisational behavior and social network analysis, where network 'actors' are defined as individuals, groups, organisations, even computers that have regular interactions (i.e. ties) with other nodes. For discussion of what it means that an organisation may act, see Argyris, C. & Schön, D. A. (1996) *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method, and Practice*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, pp. 8–9; and Ménard, C. (1997) *Economía de las organizaciones*, Grupo Editorial Norma, Barcelona, p. 20. For discussion of social network analysis, see Wasserman, S. & Faust, K. (1994) *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 17; McIlwain, J. S. (2004) *Organizing Crime in Chinatown: Race and Racketeering in New York City, 1890–1910*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, NC, pp. 11–13; and Williams, P. (2001) 'Transnational Criminal Networks', in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, eds J. Arquilla & D. Ronfeldt, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, pp. 66–67.

Colombian Trafficking Networks

Whether they transact in illegal drugs, antiquities, human beings, weapons or any number of commodities that command robust demand in black markets, organised criminals confront a fundamental dilemma based on their competing needs for concealment and coordination.²⁰ To protect their operations from unwanted depredations by law enforcers and their illicit competitors, criminals must conduct their activities in secret. The need for concealment encourages criminals to minimise personal contact between conspirators and limit information sharing on a need-to-know basis. Yet, to make decisions, perform tasks, distribute resources and resolve disputes, criminals must communicate with each other and coordinate their activities. The need for coordination encourages participants to communicate regularly and share sensitive information that exposes the enterprise to risk and uncertainty.

Network forms of organisation, when effectively exploited by criminal entrepreneurs, provide a number of advantages over markets and hierarchies in managing this dilemma. In contrast to centralised hierarchies that feature tight coupling between units and formal decision-making hierarchies, such as would be found in fabled drug 'cartels' if they existed, criminal entrepreneurs use networks to segment workers into loosely organised, functionally-specific compartments, minimising potentially destabilising contact between participants. Entrepreneurs also exploit network forms of organisation to decentralise their decision-making authority and rely on brokers and intermediaries to buffer themselves from direct complicity in criminal activity. Yet, in contrast to atomistic markets, entrepreneurs exploit embedded social ties and inter-personal networks, often based on participants' family and friendship connections, to recruit conspirators, generate trust and discourage malfeasance among participants.²¹

Colombian traffickers have found network forms of organisation to be useful in coordinating clandestine activities in hostile law enforcement environments. Traffickers coordinate commercial transactions through transnational commodity networks that produce, transport and distribute cocaine, heroin and other illegal drugs. Functionally-specific groups represent separate nodes within

20. Wayne Baker and Robert Faulkner identify this dilemma for price fixing conspiracies, but it is applicable to a wide range of criminal activities. See Baker, W. E. & Faulkner, R. R. (1993) 'The Social Organization of Conspiracy: Illegal Networks in the Heavy Electrical Equipment Industry', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 58, December, pp. 837–860.

21. For discussion of the advantages of legally sanctioned networks, see Powell, W. W. (1990) 'Neither Market nor Hierarchy: Network Forms of Organization', in *Research in Organizational Behavior*, vol. 12, eds B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings, JAI Press, Greenwich, CT, pp. 295–336; and Granovetter, M. (1985) 'Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 91, no. 3, November, p. 490. On the advantages of illicit networks, see Arquilla, J. & Ronfeldt, D. (2001) 'The Advent of Netwar (Revisited)', in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, eds J. Arquilla and D. Ronfeldt, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, pp. 1–25; Lupsha, P. A. (1983) 'Networks versus Networking', in *Career Criminals*, ed. G. P. Waldo, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, CA, pp. 59–87; and Williams, P. (1998) 'Organizing Transnational Crime: Networks, Markets and Hierarchies', *Transnational Organized Crime*, vol. 4, nos. 3–4, pp. 57–87.

a larger inter-group network that connects with other nodes through common objectives, shared experiences and communication. Tasks among different groups vary, according to their function in the larger network, which often extends across numerous countries. Purchasing groups buy cocaine base or opium gum from farmers or intermediaries in Colombia, Bolivia or Peru and transport these substances to processing laboratories, often located in Colombia, where they are further refined into cocaine hydrochloride and heroin by specialised processing labs. Exportation specialists then send these finished products to international transshipment points in Mexico, Central America or the Caribbean, where transportation rings often change the shipping method before moving the product on to consumer markets in the US and Europe. Distribution groups or cells in overseas markets receive shipments of cocaine and heroin and distribute them to wholesalers that, in turn, distribute them to retailers. Brokers provide critical linkages between these nodes by making introductions between participants from different groups, such as exporters and transportation rings or distributors and wholesalers and arranging transactions between them. Money launderers receive illicit proceeds from wholesale or retail transactions and 'clean' them through the international banking system. Within each node of this transnational commodity network, participants perform specific tasks in support of group objectives, which include attaining satisfactory profits and minimising unnecessary risks.

Embedded within these inter-group networks are inter-personal networks, based on participants' family, friendship, geographic and professional ties. Social networks play important roles in Colombian trafficking enterprises. They generate trust and reciprocity among wary criminals that are often reluctant to transact with people they haven't known for extended periods. They help entrepreneurs recruit new workers based on the personal recommendations of trusted participants. They increase the costs of deviant behaviour by allowing entrepreneurs and their enforcers to hold family members and friends accountable for the actions of errant employees. And they facilitate knowledge sharing and learning by communicating information within and between compartmented inter-group networks.²²

Wheel and Chain Networks

From an organisational level of analysis, the Colombian trafficking system contains two basic types of networks, although in practice a variety of hybrids obscure crisp distinctions. Wheel networks, also called hub or star networks, contain a core group that manages the overall enterprise and peripheral nodes that perform specific tasks, sometimes for different core groups. In wheel networks, capabilities are not evenly distributed: core groups, as Williams points

22. See Kenney, M. *Ibid.* 5 for more on how drug trafficking and terrorist networks learn.

out, enjoy a preponderance of 'power, influence and status within the network'.²³ Core groups exploit their resources to contract the services of different peripheral nodes that perform the same task, including multiple transportation rings, distribution groups and money launderers. Core groups are led by veteran traffickers that have the contacts, capital and knowledge to coordinate large-scale drug shipments. Leaders direct their networks through fear, charisma, managerial acumen or some combination of such attributes.

Core nodes, as befitting their central location in wheel networks, are multi-task enterprises. They organise transactions among different nodes; they supply money, equipment and other resources to complete transactions; they provide security and resolve disputes among participants; they arrange financing for multi-ton cocaine shipments from private investors; they suborn police, prosecutors, politicians and military personnel; and they gather intelligence about law enforcement activities and their illicit competitors. In short, core nodes serve as the steering mechanism for wheel networks, facilitating communication and coordinating relations among peripheral groups. If something goes wrong with a transaction, relations of informal accountability ensure that participating nodes will answer to the core, protecting leaders and investors from theft and other uncertainties (Figure 1).²⁴

The ability to safely conduct sensitive transactions is essential for illegal enterprises, and Colombian trafficking networks place great importance on risk management, even at the expense of reducing the profitability and efficiency of their enterprises. Core groups rely on a variety of practices and institutional arrangements to shield themselves from the vagaries and vicissitudes of counter-drug law enforcement. They coordinate potentially incriminating transactions through brokers in order to buffer leaders from direct complicity in narcotics violations. They use intimidation and violence to remind participants of the dangers they face should they decide to betray the enterprise and cooperate with law enforcers. They segment their operations into separate groups that are largely, but not entirely, isolated from other network nodes. They use multiple suppliers for international transportation, wholesale distribution and money laundering, building redundancy into their networks, and preventing law enforcers from immobilising the entire operation by dismantling a single node.²⁵ And they corrupt government officials, paying them to disregard smuggling activities in their jurisdiction, provide information about law enforcement efforts, become directly involved in trafficking or money laundering themselves, or influence public policy on issues of great importance to network leaders, such as the extradition of Colombian nationals to the US.

In spite of these precautions, wheel networks remain vulnerable to head hunting approaches to drug control, particularly when core group leaders

23. Williams, P. (2001) 'Transnational Criminal Networks', in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, eds J. Arquilla & D. Ronfeldt, RAND, Santa Monica, CA, p. 72.

24. Ibid.

25. Williams, P. (2001) Ibid., p. 81.

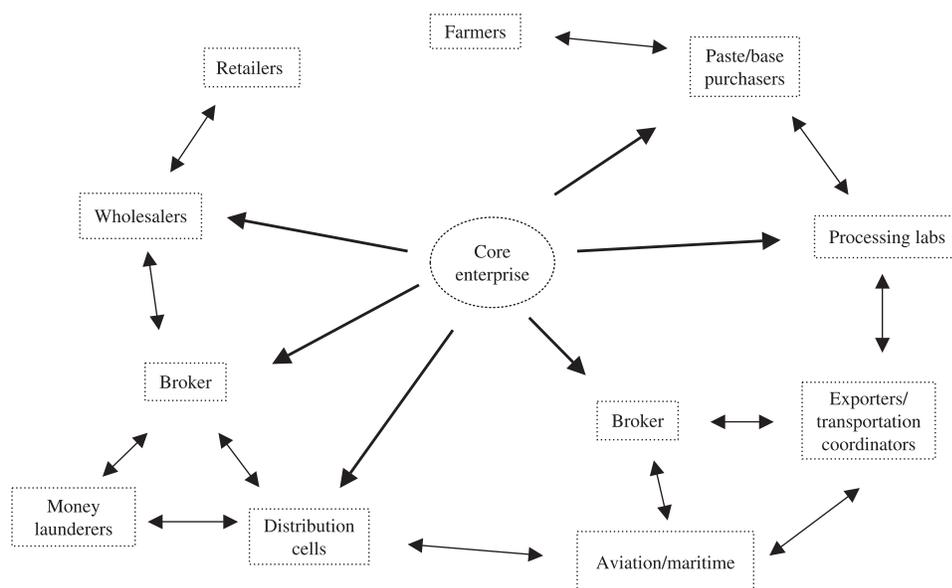


Figure 1 Drug trafficking wheel network. Single-headed arrows suggest relations based on vertical accountability; double-headed arrows indicate horizontal accountability. For each task, core groups often rely on multiple peripheral nodes simultaneously. *Source: Kenney, From Pablo to Osama.*

concentrate decision-making authority in their hands and organisational knowledge in their heads, making themselves virtually irreplaceable. A related vulnerability develops when networks rely on a single node to supply a critical service, such as international transportation or wholesale distribution. The existence of non-redundant nodes creates 'structural holes' in the network that are not easily bridged or replaced.²⁶ Law enforcers can severely disrupt networks that contain structural holes and excessive centralisation by dismantling non-redundant nodes and capturing core group leaders.

Chain networks coordinate transnational drug flows sans the synchronisation provided by core groups. Chain networks are decentralised and 'self organising': they contain independent nodes that perform specific tasks and transact directly with other nodes without mediation and oversight by core groups. While some nodes may contain influential leaders, relations among different groups are characterised by horizontal rather than vertical accountability. Drug shipments proceed through a series of arms-length transactions among independent nodes that often coordinate their activities on an *ad hoc* basis. Over time and repeat exchange, reciprocity and trust develops between interacting groups, distinguishing social relations in chain networks from pure markets. Similar to wheel networks, inter-personal relations are often based on underlying kinship

26. Burt, R. S. (1992) *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

and friendship networks that crisscross nodes and networks, facilitating trust and exchange among cagey participants. Like wheels, chains rely on government corruption to assist drug shipments, but they direct the bulk of their bribes towards local officials that have jurisdiction in their area of operations, rather than national-level politicians and administrators.²⁷ Unlike wheels, chains often lack mechanisms for sharing risks and resolving disputes among different nodes, increasing their vulnerability to government interdiction and theft. The lack of a central coordinating body also means that chain networks may require more time to recover from law enforcement disruptions to individual nodes. Yet, chain networks are more resistant to head hunting approaches to drug control: there are no 'high value' core group leaders for law enforcers to capture, and participants that are detained by authorities can be easily replaced (Figure 2).

Loosely-Coupled Networks

The need to conceal their enterprises from law enforcers and illicit competitors, while coordinating their activities among numerous inter-locked participants has led many *narcos* to segment their operations into separate working groups, sometimes called cells. Working groups are frequently small in size, with less than a dozen members that carry out much of the day-to-day work of the enterprise. Cell managers match participants to roles, often multiple ones, that informally define the division of labour within the group. Typical distribution cells contain numerous roles, including a manager that coordinates the group's activities, logistics people that purchase motor vehicles and other equipment, deliver money and punish errant employees and lower-level workers that transport drugs, manage stash houses and run errands for their supervisors. 'Arturo', the head of a US distribution cell for a Colombian wheel network, identified five distinct roles in his operation, apart from his own managerial position: transportation, storage, distribution, pick up and delivery and money laundering.²⁸ Another trafficking enterprise based in Colombia relied on a network of human couriers to smuggle multi-kilogram quantities of cocaine and heroin to the US and Spain. This enterprise contained approximately twenty members that performed a variety of roles, as detailed in Table 1.

To protect the enterprise from penetration by law enforcers and other adversaries, and to limit the damage of infiltration when it does occur, trafficking cells may be compartmented from other nodes in the network. Within wheel networks, cell managers maintain regular communication with core leaders or their intermediaries based in Colombia, but limit their interaction with other peripheral nodes. Cells managers often separate workers that perform different functions and give them the minimal information they need to perform their tasks.

27. Bagley, B. M. (2004) 'Globalisation and Latin American and Caribbean Organised Crime', *Global Crime*, vol. 6, no. 1, February, pp. 32–53.

28. Author interview with 'Arturo' [pseudonym], former drug trafficker, Atlanta, Georgia, 29 August 2000.

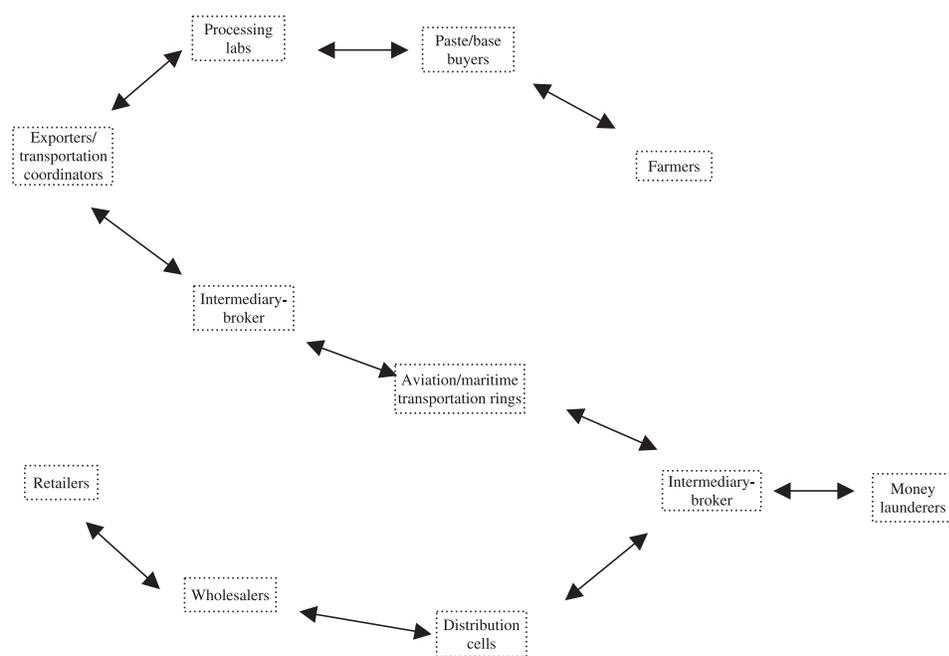


Figure 2 Drug trafficking chain network. Double-headed arrows suggest horizontal accountability between nodes. *Source: From Pablo to Osama.*

'Freddy', a former maritime smuggler in a transportation cell for a large Cali wheel network, observes: 'they don't need to know nothing about nothing, just what they need to produce'.²⁹ The reason, explains Arturo in a separate interview, is that 'if you cross over the jobs, then people will know each other'.³⁰ By compartmenting workers into separate cells, network managers hope to reduce the potential damage to their operation caused by the betrayal of a delinquent employee.

The degree of compartmentation varies among trafficking networks, with some enterprises permitting workers from different cells to share experiences, and others segmenting their participants into fairly isolated groups. Pre-existing social networks that cross cell boundaries tend to offset compartmentation as workers from different cells communicate with each other when they share overlapping family or friendship ties. However, it is not uncommon for low-level workers to be unfamiliar with participants in other peripheral nodes and core group leaders. Freddy insists that he never met the core group bosses in his transnational wheel network, and that he only knew two people in his transportation cell: the person who coordinated the activities of the group and the colleague who recruited him to join his '*oficinita*' (little office).³¹

29. Author interview with 'Freddy' [pseudonym], former drug trafficker, Federal Correctional Complex, Coleman, Florida, 19 September 2000 (my translation).

30. Ibid. 28.

31. Ibid. 29.

Table 1 Role specialisation in small trafficking network

Role	Task(s)
Leader	Oversaw entire operation, providing managerial assistance as needed (based in Colombia, but previous trafficking experience in US). Contrary to gender stereotypes about the drug trade, the leader in this enterprise was a woman
Investors	Invested money in the enterprise's drug shipments (at least two individuals filled this role)
Buyer	Purchased cocaine and heroin from processing labs (this enterprise did not process illicit drugs, preferring to buy them fully refined)
Recruiter	Enlisted human couriers and provided them with the obligatory travel documentation, including passports and visas
Packer	Compressed cocaine and heroin into digestible capsules using a hydraulic packing press
Enforcer	Used intimidation and violence to enforce transactions and resolve disputes, including coercing people that owed money for drugs to pay their debts to the enterprise
Trainer	Prepared human drug couriers in swallowing capsules, dealing with law enforcement, and avoiding problems in airport security
Couriers	Transported small amounts of drugs from Colombia to the US or Spain, sometimes by way of Aruba or Venezuela, most couriers ingested drug-filled capsules and hid narcotics in their personal luggage
Receiver/Wholesale distributor	Received couriers in the US or Spain, transported them to stash houses where they could 'expel' their cargo. Receiver was also responsible for selling drugs to independent wholesalers

Flat Networks

Smuggling enterprises are organisationally 'flat': relatively few management layers separate network leaders from cell workers. In chain networks, individual nodes often contain only a single level of management: the manager or boss who gives orders—and the workers that carry them out. Some chain networks rely on intermediaries that buffer leaders from workers. When these go-betweens possess discretionary authority to make decisions or manage workers' activities, they effectively add a second management layer to the group.

Even large cocaine 'cartels', the stuff of journalistic lore, typically contain no more than three or four management levels. From top to bottom, the typical wheel network includes core group leaders, cell managers, assistant managers and cell workers. Some wheel networks lack assistant managers, reducing the number of administrative layers to two: network leaders and cell managers. In these operations, cell workers report directly to the cell manager, who, in turn,

reports to core group leaders, often through a trusted intermediary acting as a buffer for the kingpins. Some networks contain an 'exportation manager' that supervises different cells, adding a third management layer to the enterprise. Core group leaders occasionally surround themselves with trusted advisors or investors with considerable smuggling experience, including former traffickers that have officially 'retired' from the trade. These figures generally serve in an advisory capacity, sharing their extensive knowledge and contacts on request, usually in exchange for a cut of the profits or the opportunity to invest in shipments (Figure 3).

In many wheel networks, core group leaders exercises ultimate decision-making authority, but management styles among different leaders vary. Some leaders not only make long-term strategic decisions regarding product development, market diversification and group security, they involve themselves in the most mundane matters of everyday operations. Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela, leader of one of the largest Cali wheel networks, reportedly managed every aspect of his vast smuggling operations, including selecting the best hiding spot for cocaine inside boxes of frozen vegetables. Rodríguez Orejuela also had a habit of sending supervisors to the US to conduct 'integrity checks' of his cell managers and monitor their performance. While micro-management may guard against sloppy execution and inferior performance, it requires constant communication between the leader and his charges, reducing one vulnerability by creating another. Although Rodríguez Orejuela achieved tremendous success as an illicit entrepreneur over the years, his administrative style came back to haunt him when US law enforcers recorded incriminating telephone conversations he had with different subordinates and used transcripts of these phone calls as material evidence in several successful prosecutions.

To protect themselves against such depredations, traffickers often delegate much of their day-to-day authority to trusted confidants and senior-level supervisors, such as an exportation manager. In these networks, the leader may keep abreast of major developments but step in only when problems develop. 'I made all the decisions in the US', recalls Arturo, 'from whom to sell to, to how to get to that person, to what house to be rented as a stash house, to how the money was to be brought back to Colombia... to what price I agreed to on the receiving end'. According to Arturo, every week or ten days he would travel to Colombia, where he would meet with his mentor, one of four leaders in the network, to discuss problems and set policy for the enterprise.³² While Arturo was evidently proud of his decision-making authority within the network, the structure of the operation was assuredly designed to protect his mentor and other network leaders back in Colombia. In the interest of operational security, many trafficking networks contain informal rules and routines that regulate their participants' behavior.

32. Ibid. 28.

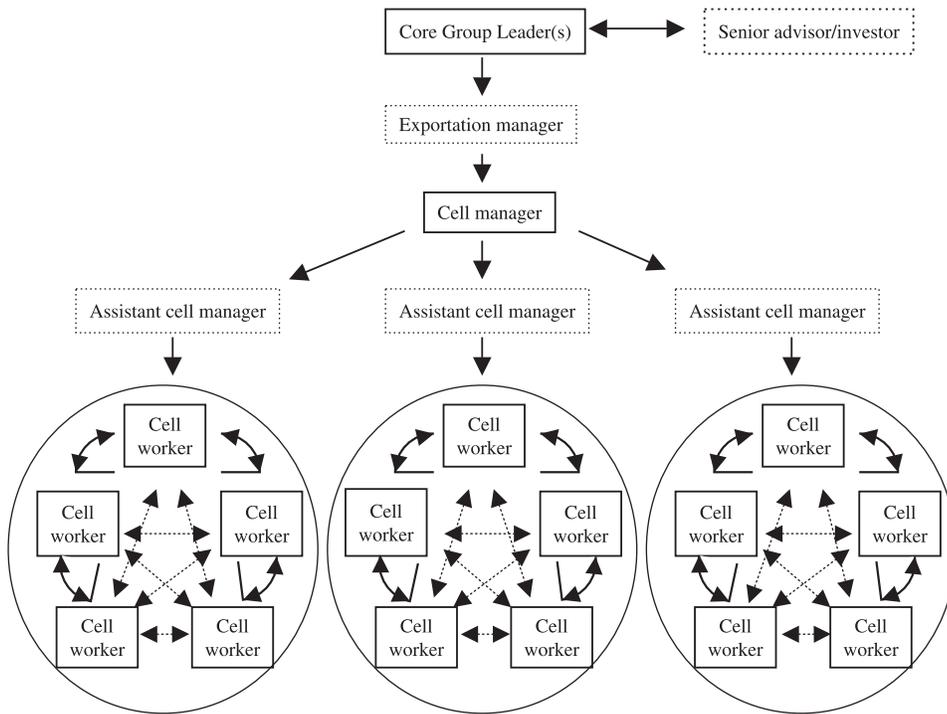


Figure 3 Management levels within Colombian wheel network. Single-headed arrows denote vertical social relations: decisions flow downward, accountability flows upward. Double-headed arrows indicate horizontal accountability and lateral information flows. However, dotted arrows suggest that cell workers may or not communicate with all their working group colleagues, depending on their coordination needs. Roles in dotted boxes do not exist in all trafficking networks. *Source: From Pablo to Osama.*

The Rules of Drug Trafficking

Rules permeate Colombian trafficking enterprises. ‘Oh yeah, we had a lot of rules’, observes Arturo, providing an obvious example: ‘We would never say anything on the phone’.³³ ‘When you go to work for an organisation’, explains Freddy, ‘there are a series of rules. You have to know the rules and apply them. These rules are simple... do your work and don’t leave traces... the most important rule is to avoid exposing your network of contacts, so that if someone falls [to law enforcement], it doesn’t compromise everyone’.³⁴

In addition to maintaining operational security, trafficking groups use rules to distribute resources, perform tasks, communicate information and make decisions. These rules and procedures structure relations among participants and reflect network leaders’ values and beliefs about how their operations should be organised. Traffickers employ rules when processing, transporting and

33. Ibid. 28.

34. Ibid. 29.

distributing drugs; collecting, laundering and repatriating drug proceeds; assigning responsibility for failed transactions; recruiting new members; and performing a host of related activities. The rules of drug trafficking emerge over time and through experience. Trafficking enterprises incorporate 'lessons' from experience into practices and procedures that guide subsequent behaviour, in the process developing larger, more diverse repertoires of action.³⁵

Because they operate in hostile environments, trafficking enterprises often refrain from codifying their rules in written documents. Instead, rules are embodied in informal, inter-subjective understandings among participants about the 'way things are done around here'. 'We never said, "Be careful," or, "If you go this far, you going to be dead," or something like that', explains a former drug pilot for Carlos Lehder, a prominent Colombian smuggler during the 1980s with links to the Medellín 'cartel'. 'You don't have to say it. It was implicit. We knew that because of who the people were that we were working with, we had to keep a low profile'.³⁶ These implicit understandings are communicated through conversations, stories, body language and social gatherings that allow veterans to share norms and experience with less knowledgeable colleagues.

Some trafficking enterprises convene meetings in which network leaders, or their associates, interview prospective employees and lay out the rules of behavior. Recruits may be asked to provide contact information for their immediate family members as a hedge against cooperating with the police. For similar reasons, some enterprises require potential employees to fill out an application that details previous work experience and supplies personal information to their employer. During a criminal trial of several alleged members of the Cali 'cartel' in the Southern District of Florida, Guillermo Pallomari, a former accountant for the Rodríguez-Orejuela network, and the US government's star witness in the case, explained that his former boss regularly held meetings with incoming employees to clarify the conditions of their employment. After establishing that Pallomari was privy to conversations that Miguel Rodríguez-Orejuela had with traffickers entering the organisation, the prosecuting attorney asked, 'What rules did Miguel Rodríguez establish for each of these people who were joining the Cali Cartel?'

35. For discussion of rules and routines in legally sanctioned organisations, see Cohen, M. D. & Bacdayan, P. (1996) 'Organizational Routines are Stored as Procedural Memory', in *Cognition Within and Between Organizations*, eds J. R. Meindl, C. Stubbart & J. F. Porac, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 348; Feldman, M. S. (2000) 'Organizational Routines as a Source of Continuous Change', *Organization Science*, vol. 11, no. 6, November–December, p. 611; Levitt, B. & March, J. G. (1988) 'Organizational Learning', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 14, p. 320; March, J. G. & Simon, H. A. (1958) *Organizations*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, p. 145; Posen, B. (1984) *Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, p. 44; and Weick, K. E. (1979) *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, 2nd edn, Random House, New York, pp. 112–115.

36. Arenas, F. former drug trafficker, *Frontline: Drug Wars*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/interviews/arenas.html> [Accessed 22 May 2007].

'That they should be people who were trustworthy, who would keep loyal to the Cali Cartel structure and that should they ever be arrested, they should never cooperate with the authorities', Pallomari replied.

'If in fact they were ever arrested', the prosecutor continued, 'what rules are you aware of Miguel Rodríguez-Orejuela stating to each of these members who were joining the Cali Cartel?'

'To keep silent'.³⁷

Pallomari went on to explain that during these meetings participants were warned that providing information to the police would not be tolerated, and that those who did so should expect violent reprisals, not only against themselves but against their family members as well. In fact, Pallomari himself apparently suffered the consequences of cooperating with the authorities. After he provided incriminating information to Colombian prosecutors about his former boss, enforcers working for Rodríguez Orejuela allegedly kidnapped his wife to pressure him to return to the enterprise. Pallomari refused, turning himself in to US Drug Enforcement Administration agents stationed in Bogotá instead. By his own account, he never saw or heard from his wife again.³⁸

Trafficking Routines

Colombian trafficking networks develop numerous practices and procedures to achieve their objectives, many of which are designed to minimise their exposure to law enforcement officials and other adversaries. They recruit family members and childhood friends as co-conspirators. They pool resources from different groups and offer informal insurance to drug shipment investors. They use multiple smuggling routes and shipping methods simultaneously. They design transportation and delivery routines that limit contact between participants. They withhold sensitive information from low-level workers until the last moment, to reduce the risk of robbery and police penetration. They communicate through pay phones, beepers, cell phones, cloned cell phones, phone cards and email to evade electronic surveillance. And they coerce, intimidate, and, when necessary, harm those that jeopardise enterprise security.

Many trafficking routines are reasonably simple, such as recruiting family members and life-long friends to join a trafficking group. These practices can be executed without much coordination or planning among participants. Other routines are more complicated, involving a series of actions among numerous participants from different groups. In general, the greater the risks of a particular transaction, the more intricate the procedures for carrying it out.

37. Pallomari, G. (1997) 'Direct Testimony', *Trial Transcript in the United States of America vs. Michael Abbell, et al. Defendants*, United States District Court, Southern District of Florida, Miami Division, Case No. 93 470-CR-WMH, vol. 36, 17 July, p. 5938.

38. Pallomari, G. (1997) *Ibid.*, pp. 6481–6493; Reyes, G. (1999) *Made in Miami: Vidas de narcos, santos, seductores, caudillos y soplones*, Planeta Colombiana Editorial, Bogotá, pp. 145–149.

Distribution cells have developed elaborate practices for delivering large amounts of drugs to independent wholesalers. Allowing for local variation, one popular delivery routine during the 1980s included the following steps. Once a large load of cocaine was received, counted, and stored within a stash house run by a distribution ring (a complicated routine in itself), the distribution manager would telephone core group leaders or their intermediaries in Colombia to confirm receipt of the cocaine and receive a delivery list for the shipment. Delivery lists contained beeper numbers for different wholesalers, the amount of cocaine to be delivered to each, and specific code words and aliases to be used when arranging transfers. The distribution manager would then call each beeper number on the list and punch in the number of a payphone where he would wait for wholesalers' return calls. When a wholesaler or his contact called the distributor, they would discuss the details of the exchange using the coded terminology and arrange to meet in a public setting, such as a popular restaurant. If possible, the distribution cell would conduct reconnaissance on this location beforehand to make sure that it contained easy motor vehicle access and ample pedestrian traffic. After meeting face-to-face in the parking lot, the distribution manager and the wholesaler would quickly confirm the arrangements of the transaction and retire together to the restaurant. Here the two managers would pass the time while their respective subordinates carried out the transaction. Workers from both groups would exchange motor vehicles—one containing drugs, the other money—drive to separate stash houses, and unload, inspect and count the contents of the vehicle. Once they confirmed that everything was in order, the subordinates would return to the restaurant and signal their supervisors that the transfer was complete, whereupon the distributor and wholesaler would depart the restaurant and go their separate ways.

This anti-septic delivery routine was designed to reduce the risks that independent distributors and wholesalers faced from law enforcers—and each other. By avoiding any direct handling of the money or merchandise, the routine made it more difficult, but not impossible, for police and prosecutors to demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt that the two men talking over a cup of coffee in the local diner were in fact completing an illegal transaction. By meeting in public, surrounded by potential eyewitnesses, the routine also made it more difficult—but again, not impossible—for the distribution manager and wholesaler to steal from each other. Of course, if the wholesalers and distribution manager belonged to the same organisation, as 'cartelised' depictions of the drug trade suggested, these precautions would have been unnecessary. But in fact distributors and wholesalers, and for that matter exporters, transportation rings and money launderers, often belonged to different groups, each with their own authority structures, associates and vulnerabilities. The delivery routine was effective because it allowed independent groups to conduct arms-length transactions at minimal risk to both. In addition, the routine was relatively easy to execute and flexible in the details. When planning their delivery, participants could choose from a wide variety of meeting places, code words, and transportation methods. In this manner, the routine adapted to fit the

circumstances of the moment and the preferences of collaborators. Still, even the best routines cannot perform tasks without the individuals that willingly perform them.

Joining the Crew: Participation in Trafficking Networks

Whether they operate in processing labs, distribution cells or as independent brokers, participants in trafficking networks make decisions, plan strategy, devise tactics, and communicate with co-conspirators. Due to the illegal nature of their occupation, traffickers do not enter into formal contractual relations with their employers that spell out their rights and responsibilities as professional drug smugglers. Instead, membership claims are informal—yet inter-subjective. Traffickers identify themselves as participants in a specific group, claims that other participants validate by recognising the legitimacy of their roles. Membership claims may be supported by kinship, friendship or geographic ties, or the specialised knowledge and skills a person brings to the operation. Whatever the justification, the member generally identifies him or herself as part of a larger collective, an entity that exists beyond themselves. 'I work for a *mafioso* as a cooker [cocaine processor]', explains 'Freckles', an informant interviewed by a Colombian sociologist that conducted extensive research on the Colombian drug trade, 'we are a group of four people, all strong acquaintances, generally family members or old friends'.³⁹ 'We had like 35–40 members', recalls 'Homero', a former drug distributor I interviewed who worked in a small transportation and distribution network. 'Of course, we all identified ourselves as members. We all had our part, some supervised the merchandise, others the distribution, others the money'.⁴⁰ What Homero recognises, Freckles clearly implies: individuals identify themselves as belonging to a specific group by virtue of the roles they perform on behalf of the enterprise.

Getting Started

In what might be called the gateway theory of drug trafficking—not to be confused with the gateway theory of drug *consumption* popular among prohibitionists—many career criminals become involved in the narcotics trade gradually, through participation in parallel pursuits, such as contraband smuggling and money laundering. These activities provide the skills, experience, and connections aspiring traffickers need to expand into the more lucrative drug

39. Echeverry, D. B. (1998) *Mediadores, rebuscadores, traquetos y narcos: Valle del Cauca 1890–1997*, Ediciones Antropos, Bogotá, Colombia, p. 159 (my translation). Tragically, Dario Betancourt was later murdered by unknown assailants.

40. Author interview with 'Homero' [pseudonym], former drug trafficker, Federal Correctional Complex, Coleman, Florida, 19 September 2000 (my translation).

business. Freddy recalls that he smuggled black market sugar and cloth for over a decade before joining a large trafficking network. His descent (or ascent—depending on one’s point of view) into the cocaine trade occurred through contacts he developed while smuggling contraband and purchasing dollars from established traffickers. ‘I began to buy dollars’, he explains, ‘and this was one of the things that most connected me to a series of people involved in the drug business. I bought dollars and they, the traffickers, developed a certain confidence in me’.⁴¹

Homero’s involvement in drug trafficking also came gradually. In the mid-1980s, drug dealers he knew in Bogotá gave him the opportunity to make money by brokering cocaine deals. After arranging several transactions, Homero became a dealer in his own right, putting him in contact with international traffickers that traveled to Colombia to buy drugs and transport them back to the US ‘I began to meet these people’, he recalls, ‘and they interested me in the business when I realised how much money there was to be made’. He soon connected with a Colombian-based network that sent cocaine and heroin to the US through human couriers. After completing a couple of carries himself, he remained in the US to receive ‘mules’ and provide them with lodging and other support during their stay.⁴² Over time and repeated transactions, Homero proved himself a reliable and trustworthy associate, and his superiors increased his responsibilities to include delivering drugs to independent wholesalers. Working as a distributor allowed Homero to expand his contacts, which he used to develop his own clientele, cementing his involvement in distribution.

As these examples suggest, social networks are critical to the Colombian drug trade. Freddy, Homero, and other former participants I interviewed were recruited into smuggling enterprises through personal connections based on family and friendship ties or professional relationships. Freddy’s connection to the Cali wheel network came through a friend of the family, someone who knew of his involvement in contraband smuggling and vouched for his reliability to network leaders. Homero exploited friendship ties among several drug dealers to become a cocaine broker, initiating his long-term participation in the trade. Néstor and Arturo drew on professional contacts in otherwise legitimate export-import businesses to gradually become involved in drug smuggling. In each case, social relationships steeped in criminal activity developed over time, as established and prospective traffickers developed mutual trust through multiple interactions and transactions. Such social networks are the bedrock of inter-group trafficking networks. They bring new people into the trade, allowing groups to replace captured participants; they create social identities based on trust and accommodation among established participants; and they facilitate the exchange not just of drugs and money, but the knowledge required to trade these commodities.

41. *Ibid.* 29.

42. *Ibid.* 40.

Turnover and Promotion

Popular mythology suggests that the only way out of the drug trade is through imprisonment or death. While lots of traffickers are eventually apprehended and incarcerated by American and Colombian authorities, and others are violently eliminated by their competitors, many smugglers exercise more mundane exit options. Some traffickers simply retire from the trade following a period of criminal activity. The reasons for retirement are numerous and vary with the personalities and motivations of the individuals involved. Some traffickers 'burn out' from the high-levels of stress that accompany this hazardous occupation, where individuals live under constant threat of exposure to the police and illegal competitors. Others recoil at the steady progression in deviant behavior that sustained participation in the trade often brings. Some participants have no qualms about guarding a stash house or collecting and laundering drug proceeds, but balk at the prospect of engaging in physical intimidation or violence. Others eventually tire of the hedonistic lifestyle that inspired their entry into the trade. Drug addiction, family problems, depression, and a heavy conscience influence some to voluntarily cease their criminal activities. Other traffickers may retire because they have reached their financial goals, or found employment in a more appealing, legally sanctioned line of work. Retirement may be driven by a combination of factors. An unwelcome brush with the law, for example, may compel a participant to reconsider his priorities, making him less tolerant of work-related stresses and more open to gainful employment in 'dull' but less troublesome occupations.

The causes of involuntary expulsion from the drug trade are also numerous. Participants may be laid off from trafficking enterprises during difficult times, as when law enforcement crackdowns force some networks to cancel smuggling ventures or downsize their operations. Participants may be fired for engaging in irresponsible behaviour that puts the network at risk, such as abusing alcohol or consuming cocaine while working, showing up late for meetings, and repeatedly getting into trouble with friends and family.⁴³ In some cases, errant workers may be subject to more drastic sanctions. If someone is believed to have knowingly cooperated with police officials, stolen product or proceeds from the enterprise, or deliberately engaged in reckless behaviour that threatens the existence of the network, he may be subject to intimidation, violence, and, in extreme cases, murder.

Finally, every year law enforcers in Colombia and the US remove thousands of participants through apprehension and arrest. Unfortunately, the impact of these apprehensions on the drug trade is muted by law enforcer's tendency to arrest low-level violators, such as drug couriers and street dealers, and Colombia's relatively ineffective criminal justice system, as manifested in case overloads,

43. Ibid. 29. Fuentes, J. R. (1998) *The Life of a Cell*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, pp. 164–166.

low conviction rates, and porous prisons.⁴⁴ Moreover, a number of traffickers incarcerated in Colombia have continued their criminal activities from behind bars. After surrendering to Colombian officials in 1990, Pablo Escobar, the notorious 'kingpin' of the Medellín 'cartel', ran his criminal operations largely unimpeded during a year of incarceration at the Cathedral, a luxurious correctional facility of his own design. While unable to build their own penitentiaries, other Colombian traffickers, including Miguel and Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, Jorge Luís and Fabio Ochoa, and Ivan Urdinola Grajales, were also accused by government officials of continuing their trafficking activities from behind bars. 'They clearly feel they are safer and can operate more comfortably from a prison they control than they could as fugitives', one Colombian police intelligence claimed. 'They have a sophisticated communications network they run through a pay phone at the prison and carry on business without interference'.⁴⁵

Traffickers that avoid apprehension readily migrate to other nodes or networks when their former colleagues are jailed. 'This happens a lot, depending on your role', explains Néstor. 'Say one guy gets popped—you go work for another group or another guy'.⁴⁶ Traffickers that maintain robust social networks connecting them to other inter-group networks are well positioned to continue their involvement in the trade. In some cases, they will even join groups that competed directly against their original employer.

Whatever the cause of turnover, participants must be replaced if the enterprise is to continue. Due to the immense profitability of the illegal drug trade, network leaders enjoy access to an abundant pool of labor, even for the low-level jobs that face the greatest exposure to law enforcers, such as drug couriers. 'The mules beg these organisations to keep them in mind', explains the head of a counter-drug enforcement unit in the detectives' branch of the Colombian National Police. 'We have intercepted many phone lines and you always hear the mules asking, "Please, keep me in mind for a trip". And the *capo* or the owner of the route says, "No, because you just traveled a month ago and they are going to see a lot of entrances in your passport". So the mule says, "The thing is I have problems". They beg them. For just one trip there are five or six mules that want to travel'.⁴⁷

To reduce their exposure to law enforcers, network leaders may recruit people 'of confidence', drawing on their own and their participants' family and friendship networks. Other recruits may be sought for the particular skills they bring to the enterprise, such as bilingual fluency, or expertise in information

44. Garzón Saboyá, E. A. (1997) 'Aspectos legales y praxis del narcotráfico y lavado de dinero', in *Drogas ilícitas en Colombia: Su impacto económico, político y social*, Planeta Colombiana Editorial, Bogotá, Colombia, pp. 347–408.

45. Farah, D. (1996) 'Colombian Drug Lords Ran Empire Behind Bars', *Washington Post*, 26 December, p. A37.

46. *Ibid.* 1.

47. Author interview with head of counter-narcotics unit, Judicial Police Directorate, Colombian National Police, Bogotá, Colombia, 21 July 2000 (my translation).

systems, international finance, criminal law, and undercover surveillance. Colombian trafficking enterprises also replace participants by promoting from within. Ironically, the stimulus for promotion often comes from successful law enforcement operations. As police and prosecutors remove traffickers from a particular network through indictment, arrest or incarceration, they provide opportunities for remaining participants to rise. Workers that have caught their manager's eye through proficiency and diligence may benefit from these incidents.

'Initially, I was a mule', explained Homero, 'but after I traveled to the US they needed someone they could trust to stay here to deliver mules to others, and that was how I became involved in that aspect of the business'.

'So it functioned as a form of promotion?' I asked.

'Yes, of course', he replied.

Because what happens is that you go and return a couple of times, and you are a competent person, so possibly in the US or whatever country, they lose someone. For whatever reason, he goes to prison, or he doesn't want to work anymore, so they need someone of confidence to ensure that the drug distribution gets to the consumers. So I began to receive mules that arrived first in Miami, then I went to New York, to obtain mules. Then I was contracting cars, etc.⁴⁸

Promotion is more complicated when enterprise leaders are the ones to be replaced. Who succeeds the 'kingpin?' In small, clan-based groups, where decision-making authority is concentrated in a single figure, the leader may be irreplaceable. In these enterprises, removal of the boss may signal the end of the enterprise itself. Yet, given that they transact in negligible quantities of drugs and represent redundant nodes in smuggling networks, the termination of small groups does not exert a significant impact on larger trafficking systems. Bigger, compartmented groups, such as core nodes and distribution cells in wheel networks, may survive a limited degree of executive turnover. In these groups, incarcerated leaders often turn over the day-to-day management of their operations to trusted subordinates, such as family members or long-time confidants. In some groups, the act of turning over operations may be as simple as supplying the new leader with the necessary contacts, and vouching for his credibility with suppliers and customers. 'Every time they capture a group of narcotics traffickers', explains a Colombian prosecutor, 'naturally, they never catch all of them. There are people that sell the information, people that know the contacts outside the country and here inside'.⁴⁹

The leader himself may sell this knowledge in exchange for a fee or a cut of the profits, or he may rent his route to trusted associates. 'The kingpins cede their routes to their men of confidence', notes another Colombian official. 'They tell

48. Ibid. 40.

49. Author interview with Colombian government prosecutor, National Prosecutor's Office, Bogotá, Colombia, 11 July 2000 (my translation).

them, "Take the route, I rent it to you, I have nothing to do with this." So they over the routes and just receive some dividends for renting them. The ones that become stronger are from the lower levels. Now they are the owners of these routes'.⁵⁰

In this manner, some trafficking enterprises continue their operations following the removal of their original leaders, demonstrating substantial flexibility, and underscoring the challenges facing head-hunting approaches to drug control. Law enforcers may sever 'kingpins' from their wheel networks, as they did in disrupting the Medellín and Cali 'cartels' during the 1990s, but other leaders appear in their place, eager to draw on surviving nodes to continue their profitable activities.

Conclusions

Understanding the architecture of the Colombian drug trade requires exposing a powerful myth that remains prevalent in the US. Contrary to what some politicians, law enforcers, journalists, and filmmakers suggest, Colombia's illicit commerce has never been dominated by one or more criminal organisations exerting monopoly control over what, in practice, has always been a fluid and diffuse industry. Even as the Drug Enforcement Administration pursued its 'kingpin strategy' in the 1990s, and Hollywood created sensationalistic portrayals of the 'drug lord' lifestyle, hundreds of criminal enterprises flourished in Colombia, producing, processing, brokering, transporting, and distributing cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and other psychoactive substances. While independent groups pooled their resources to coordinate drug shipments and suborn public officials, they did not form monolithic associations that set international drug prices. Instead, many of these groups formed flat, loosely coupled inter-organisational networks that coordinated their activities when opportunities arose. Embedded within these inter-group networks were social or inter-personal networks among participants that facilitated commerce by creating social relations based on shared identities, trust, and accommodation. To help manage the dilemma between concealment and coordination, traffickers developed flexible operating procedures to conduct sensitive transactions and reduce their exposure to law enforcers and other adversaries. These routines doubled as repositories of organisational experience, allowing traffickers to build and refine their criminal expertise over time, often in ways that made it more difficult for law enforcers to apprehend them. While personnel turnover was common in many enterprises, its disruptive impact was ameliorated by internal promotion procedures, contact sharing among established traffickers, and an abundant supply of labor.

50. Author interview with head of narcotics unit, Colombian National Police, Bogotá, Colombia, 21 July 2000 (my translation).

Today, according to figures released by the United Nations, the government of Colombia seizes more cocaine than any other country in the world, including the US.⁵¹ This is a remarkable accomplishment for relatively small, 'underdeveloped' country that is all-too-often labeled a 'narco-state'. But for all its successes, the Colombian government continues to confront hundreds of enterprises—nobody knows how many—that specialize in some facet of drug production and transportation. Following the DEA's kingpin strategy in the 1990s, during which US and Colombian law enforcers effectively decapitated the most notorious 'cartels', numerous so-called 'micro-cartels' emerged in their place. These post-cartel operations, including transnational networks based in the North Cauca Valley and Atlantic coast regions of Colombia, picked up where their predecessors left off, in some cases forming cooperative arrangements with guerrilla fronts and paramilitary groups in Colombia and trafficking enterprises in Mexico and numerous Caribbean countries.

Had Colombia's drug trade been cartelised, as government officials maintained, the kingpin strategy and other head-hunting programs would have exerted a more profound effect on the industry. Instead, counter-drug law enforcement produced a more complex trafficking system in Colombia as hundreds of small-scale enterprises quickly replaced a handful of large wheel networks. Complementary effects included the resurgence of the Colombian cocaine trade, the growth of a nascent heroin industry, the strengthening of armed insurgents and paramilitaries that maintain links to the drug trade, and the corresponding intensification of Colombia's longstanding civil conflict. An elite counter-drug task force within the Colombian National Police currently identifies more than 300 'kingpins' for capture, more than enough to keep law enforcers in both countries busy in the years ahead.⁵² In effect, Colombia's Sisyphean war on drugs, while trumped by other threats to American national security, never really ends, as one generation of 'kingpins' is replaced by an indefinite procession of others.

51. Office of Drugs and Crime, United Nations, *World Drug Report 2006, Volume 1: Analysis*, [Online] Available at: http://www.unodc.org/pdf/WDR_2006/wdr2006_volume1.pdf [Accessed 11 July 2006], p. 17.

52. Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, US Department of State. (2006) *Drug and Chemical Control*, vol. 1, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2006, March, [Online] Available at: <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2006/vol1/> [Accessed 10 July 2006].