THE POLITICS OF DRUGS AND ILICIT TRADE IN THE AMERICAS

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Illicit trade has long been a central feature of the political economy of the Americas. Since colonial times, when smuggling flourished as a way to circumvent the regulations and restrictions on commerce derived from mercantilist imperial policies, illicit commerce has had a profound impact on public security, the configuration of state power, and cross-border relations.

Yet, partly due to a lack of adequate data as well as insufficient comparative and theoretical analysis, scholarship in this area remains uneven and limited. Some prominent illicit cross-border economic activities (most notably drug trafficking) have been subject to extensive analysis, while others (such as the illicit wildlife trade and antiquities smuggling) remain much more obscure. Much of the existing literature on illicit trade is policy driven, single-issue focused, and devoid of comparative-historical perspective. For the most part, the literature does not deeply engage the major theoretical trends and debates in political science. With some notable exceptions, political scientists have arrived late to the study of illicit trade and its political repercussions. This is unfortunate, given that some of the field's central preoccupations, ranging from democracy to development to violence, are intimately intertwined with illicit trade and the domestic and international politics of policing such trade. And nowhere is this more evident than in the Americas.

In this chapter we first briefly sketch the scope and dimensions of illicit trade in the region, and stress the importance of various types of power asymmetries. Drawing on illustrations primarily from drug trafficking (by far the most studied and documented case), we then outline in a very preliminary fashion some of the contributions to political science in general and to the study of Latin American politics in particular that may be derived from a focus on illicit trade. We concentrate on three themes: (1) the relationship between illicit trade and democratic governance; (2) the relationship between illicit trade and organized violence; and (3) the relationship between illicit trade and neoliberalism. We conclude by encouraging more political science interest and attention but also highlight the considerable obstacles and pitfalls of conducting research in this area.

Scope, Dimensions, and Power Asymmetries

The illicit side of cross-border trade in the Americas includes the smuggling of prohibited commodities (such as cocaine and heroin), the smuggling of legal commodities (such as cigarettes), the black market in stolen commodities (such as intellectual property), and the trafficking in body and body parts (miembros, sex workers, babies, endangered species, human organs, animal parts). Some of these illicit trading activities are fairly obscure and minimally policed (the smuggling of rare orchids), some are little noticed by law enforcement agencies (the cross-border trade in stolen vehicles), but others receive intense policy attention and media scrutiny (drug trafficking and migrant smuggling), and still others have clear and direct security implications (most notably arms trafficking). A number of illicit trading activities also have serious environmental consequences (the smuggling of endangered flora and fauna), the trade in toxic waste, the dumping of chemicals used to process psychoactive substances such as cocaine). Despite their enormous diversity, these illicit trades all share some basic characteristics: they are unauthorized by the sending and/or receiving jurisdictions, and they move across borders via mechanisms designed to evade detection and apprehension.

Illicit trade patterns reflect broader power asymmetries. First and most obviously, illicit trade is an increasingly prominent source of conflict and tension between relatively unequal countries—most notably, between the United States and its southern neighbors. Concerns over illicit cross-border economic activities (especially drug trafficking and migrant smuggling) dominate U.S. relations with many Latin American countries, from Mexico to Colombia to Bolivia. In an era of economic liberalization otherwise defined by deregulation and the loosening of controls over cross-border economic exchange, there is a counter move of re-regulation through intensified policing and surveillance of illicit trade. Some Latin American and Caribbean countries otherwise at the margins of the global economy have a market niche and comparative advantage in illicit trade: drug market and related trades (smuggling from Guatemala, migrant workers from Ecuador, and coca/cocaine from Bolivia). Other countries specialize in "transit trade" (Paraguay and "sex tourism" (Colombia). And still others have a role in laundering and sheltering illicit financial flows (Cayman Islands, Panama). Many countries in the region are becoming more economically integrated with wealthier countries such as the United States, but it is often the illicit side of the integration process that is most entrepreneurial and responsive to market forces (for example, drugs and migrant workers are two of Mexico's most important exports, but not formally part of NAFTA). Moreover, resentments from migrant workers (both legal and illegal) have become a leading source of revenue for countries such as the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Mexico.

Illicit trade also reflects much broader economic inequalities in the Americas, which are reinforced by borders and their enforcement. For instance, formally excluded from first world labor markets through the front door, workers from Mexico, Central America, and elsewhere attempt to gain clandestine access to the U.S. labor market through the backdoor by hiring professional smugglers. Some peasant farmers cope with growing economic inequalities by facilitating illicit trade (such as drug crop cultivation) or by actually becoming objects of the illicit trade (as smuggled migrant). Clandestine entrepreneurs produce, transport, sell, or otherwise enable illicit trade as an alternative ladder of upward socioeconomic mobility, where opportunities for advancement in the legal economy may be limited or blocked. And still others attempt to challenge power asymmetries through organized violence—poorly aided and sustained through illicit trades ranging from drugs to arms. Some of these conflicts prompt various forms of external involvement, including an influx of military aid and training. For instance, through the U.S.-sponsored international "war on drugs" and the merging of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, Colombia has become a leading recipient of military assistance.
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Power asymmetries also influence which illicit trades are at the top of the region's policing and security agendas. Thus, regulating the illicit antiques trade (which is especially a concern for source countries such as Peru and Guatemala) is relatively unimportant, with wealthy collectors in the United States and other advanced industrialized countries the primary source of black market demand. Similarly, illicit waste exports from north to south receive considerably less law enforcement scrutiny than the export of labor from south to north. The United States has successfully exported its anti-drug agenda and enforcement methods across this region and the world while at the same time obstructing and weakening international initiatives to more forcefully police the illicit trade in small arms.

Indeed, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the history of what trading activities are and are not prohibited in the first place is largely a story of the most powerful countries exporting their criminal law preferences and procedures to weaker countries. Thus, not just illicit trade, but the policing of such trade mirrors broader geopolitical power asymmetries. Importantly, there is also an enormous asymmetry between the power to legally prohibit particular trades and the power to effectively enforce such prohibitions—and at the most basic level, it is this asymmetry that creates the clandestine transnational space within which illicit drug activities flourish. For example, smuggling operations, incentives, methods, and routes are more readily shaped by asymmetries in policing with, capacities, and priorities. These asymmetries prompt both growing tension and cooperation between highly unequal countries, as evident not only in U.S.-Latin American counternarcotics cooperation but also in a range of other law enforcement issues such as efforts to combat money laundering and human trafficking.

Illicit Trade and Democratic Governance

Illicit trade, most notably drug trafficking, has direct and indirect effects on democratic governance. Corruption associated with illicit trade directly affects the quality of political institutions, drug-related violence undermines public security, and these two factors undermine citizens' trust in democracy. In some cases, the perception that democracy does not deal effectively with crime issues may foster citizens' support for ill-fitted or militarized responses to crime that further undermine civil rights and liberties. This has been prominently in the case of drug corruption. In other Central American countries, and is also illustrated by public support for militarized responses to crime in Mexico. Furthermore, in countries such as Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia, coca crop eradication has contributed to political instability and social unrest as many peasant populations depend on coca cultivation. But the relationship between democratic governance and illicit trade also works in the opposite direction, as weak democratic institutions further undermine and complicate the possibilities of effectively curbing illicit trade. Consequently, a closer analysis of illicit trade would broaden significantly our current understanding of the variation in democratic outcomes across the region.

Corruption, and its negative repercussions for accountability and transparency, has arguably constituted one of the main obstacles to the consolidation of Latin American democracies. Those engaged in illicit trade attempt to access the state or parts of it in order to secure the non-enforcement of the law. Simply put, they attempt to buy off the state because they cannot entirely bully or bypass it. Prominent cases such as the involvement of Alberto Fujimori's close advisors with drug traffickers in Peru, the connections between politicians and illicit actors in Colombia, the relations between military officers and traffickers in Guatemala, and the pervasive police corruption and protection traditionally provided by PNC officials to traffickers in Mexico, constitute only some of the most well-known illustrations. Yet, illicit trade is associated with corruption in more diverse and complex ways than it is often understood. Corruption has many different manifestations and dynamics. It does not provide the state to the same extent in all countries and it is entrenched to different degrees and in different ways in different branches of government and political institutions. Drug related corruption in Mexico, for example, has evolved in distinct phases depending on the patterns and organization of drug trafficking activities at particular times. This highlights the dynamic nature of the relation between state and illicit actors, which evolves not only depending on market conditions, but also on institutional and political contexts.

Thus, to fully understand the impact of drug related corruption on Latin American democracies it is necessary to more clearly specify different types and levels of corruption. A crucial question that needs closer scrutiny is how different configurations of state power affect the opportunities and dynamics of corruption. Scholars in Colombia and Mexico suggest that different state structures (a unitary versus a federal state) and patterns of political competition explain variation in relations between state officials and drug traffickers. In their view, political competition in Colombia reduced the capacity of the state to control its relations with drug traffickers, whereas in Mexico due to the PRI hegemony, traffickers were more dependent on politicians. Although the contrasting image of ultra powerful Colombian traffickers and ultra powerful Mexican politicians may be overstated, it highlights that the organizational structure of the state as well as the dynamics of electoral competition shape the relation between traffickers and state officials in different ways in each country and over time. In Mexico, the democratization process is intuitively associated with shifts in drug trafficking and corruption patterns. In Colombia, the institutional and social transformations that made electoral politics more competitive in the 1980s facilitated, and sometimes were even reinforced, by the emergence of a burgeoning criminal class in politics. Yet, political competition also hindered the possibilities of some prominent drug traffickers from participating in electoral politics.

These complex relations raise troubling questions that remain to be answered: Do criminal actors shape political practices or do political practices determine the incentives of illicit actor? Does democratization increase the opportunities for corruption or does it change its dynamics (rather than its scope) by making corruption less predictrable and more fragmented? How do democratic checks and balances affect criminal behavior?

Literature on the dynamics of different regime types and the institutional legacies of dictatorships and armed conflict can further illuminate the complex relation between democratic governance and illicit trade. In Guatemala, the legacies of dictatorship and counterinsurgency made the military a central actor in politics at least until the signing of peace accords in 1996. This powerful institutional legacy may explain why the military has been one of the actors more closely associated with drug-related corruption as reflected not only in the accusations against high ranking military officers but also in the alleged role that former Guatemalan military members, known as Kallistas, have played in training drug traffickers within and across the U.S.-Mexican border. By contrast, in neighboring countries such as Nicaragua, where legacies of armed conflict translated into the party system, drug corruption has been more closely related to electoral politics. Such contexts require further research.

From a more historical perspective, an interesting but understudied area that relates to the literature on state formation is how interactions with illicit trade has shaped state institutions. Regardless of their effectiveness in combating crime, state institutions have frequently changed and been redesigned in order to carry out their crime-fighting function.
For instance, constant purges and anticorruption campaigns have resulted in the creation and recreation of security and law enforcement agencies in Guatemala and Mexico and the transformation of militaries in some countries through a greater crime-fighting mission (especially militarized drug enforcement) by the increased availability of sophisticated weaponry, grenades, and bombs for trafficing organizations, underlining a link between the illicit arms trade (with much of the supply originating in the United States) and more deadly forms of violence (though it should be stressed that the availability of arms is a necessary but not sufficient condition for escalating drug violence). Yet, the disproportionate attention to the most violent aspects of the international drug trade obscures and glosses over some important and interesting variation. For example, far more attention is devoted to cocaine and heroin (relatively high violence) than cannabis and MDMA (comparatively low violence). Furthermore, even within the trade in hard drugs there is striking variation, and beyond the clear violent manifestations there is a more complex and ambiguous reality. Contrast Colombia, which has been plagued by violence since the 1960s, with Bolivia, which has been characterized by much lower violence—yet both are deeply enmeshed in the coca/cocaine trade (Bolivia arguably even more so on a per capita basis). Similarly, consider the variation of violence over time in Mexico, where modern forms of drug trafficking date back to the 1940s, yet until the mid-1990s the market was relatively more peaceful (or more precisely, violence was less visible).

Thus we need more research about the conditions under which illicit trade generates violence. It requires differentiating forms and types of violence and addressing questions such as how do prohibitions and their enforcement shape the nature and level of organized violence against illicit trafficking activities? What are the mechanisms connecting law enforcement and violence? What policing and regulatory methods and strategies are least or most likely to inhibit or exacerbate illicit trade-related violence? This question is crucial considering that high-profile police crackdowns can unintentionally fuel more trade-related violence—as some are removed, new ones emerge to fill the void and claim market share through violent competition. Considering that excessive violence can be bad for illicit business (since it is disruptive and invites unwanted police and media scrutiny), another key question that emerges is: does violence follow rational motivations? Ideas about the rationality of violence derived from the analysis of civil wars and ethnic conflicts provide a theoretical lens to advance the study of violence related to illicit trade. They show that seemingly irrational forms of violence can be instrumental to maintain influence or compliance of those under power become unstable and thus can better explain why illicit actors become more violent when they face internal disputes and external pressure. Finally, considering the wide variety of actors that engage in illicit practices, it is worth exploring how the internal structure and organization of trafficking actors affect the dynamics of violence. Descriptive evidence and insights derived from the analysis of civil wars and terrorism suggests that the size and organization of groups affects the type of violence and violence used. For example, a large centralized organization may be more capable of engaging in violence, yet at the same time may be more able to control individual violent behaviour of their members.  

A more careful consideration of the conditions under which violence emerges also requires paying more attention to less studied geographic market participants. Perhaps most strikingly, the tri-border area of Paraguay is the epicenter of a variety of flourishing illicit trade activities given its strategic location, yet it remains far less violent than, say, Colombia or Mexico. Perhaps for this reason, it has largely been overlooked as a focus of study. The relationship between insurgents and drug trafficking is a dimension of drug related violence that has been widely studied in Colombia (mainly in relation to the FARCs Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and to a lesser extent in Peru (with Sendero Luminoso).
While the most common assumption is that the proceeds from drug trafficking can strengthen armed groups by providing them with a lucrative source of funding, the story is considerably more complex and subject to heated debate. According to the "narcoterrorist" thesis (which has enjoyed considerable influence in policy circles for several decades), drugs and insurgency are inseparably intertwined and thus should be combated simultaneously and with similar methods. But critics have long questioned the underlying assumption of this argument as overly simplistic, with counterproductive policy implications. Recent studies detail the importance of political capital insurgents generate in rural areas by protecting peasant drug producers from government eradication and interdiction efforts—and thus more intensive anti-drug operations pervasively play into the hands of insurgents. The narcoterrorist thesis also ignores that in many cases armed conflict long precedes the emergence of drug trafficking, as in Colombia, and thus it would be erroneous to simply reduce an insurgency to an interest in drug profits. It also ignores that some armed groups have not become heavily involved in drug trafficking even if they have the opportunity to do so, or that some engage primarily in the cultivation stages while others engage in the whole trafficking chain in as many profitable stages. In this regard, existing knowledge on the relation between drugs and conflict would be strengthened by a deeper analysis of these groups that lack of a close connection to drug trafficking such as those in Mexico. By seeking more systematically under which conditions armed groups engage in illicit trade, we can analyze the impact that ideology, capacities, and transnational connections have in shaping relations between armed groups and illicit business.

Besides financial and social connections, armed groups and traffickers may connect in other ways. Several studies in Colombia have analyzed the historical deep connections between paramilitary groups and drug trafficking. As these studies point out, the story of paramilitary groups is complex and involves many actors and motivations, yet it is clear that drug traffickers played a key role in organizing paramilitary groups as their branch of armed protection in the 1980s. As these groups grew and advanced, they eventually became more autonomous and towards the early 2000s became a crucial player in the Colombian drug trade. This story raises two important questions. First, why traffickers decide to create armed structures that can eventually pose a threat to them by attracting excessive law enforcement and media attention, and by transferring crucial power to individuals who can potentially overpower traffickers? Second, what conditions facilitate the creation of such structures, and how do they evolve and reproduce? Third, how do changes in the security apparatus of the state relate to the creation of these armed structures? A useful comparative case in helping to answer these questions is the Zetas, the armed branch of the Gulf Drug Trafficking Organization in Mexico, formed in 1997 with deserts members of a special military and antiguerrilla force known as GAFES (Special Forces of Aerial Groups).

Finally, the connection between drug trafficking and violence can occur through the engagement of youth gangs. As in the case of armed groups, trafficking activities provide gang members financial clout while at the same time creating incentives for their proliferation. Yet, in some cases such as those of Central American countries, the connection between gangs, drug trafficking, and violence is not, despite widespread perception, as prevalent as in other countries, such as Brazil. As of 2007 the United Nations estimated that about the 10% of gang members existed in Central America alone, mostly in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Yet, as the same UN report points out, the association between youth gangs, crime, and international trafficking is based on shaky assumptions, such as that gang members are responsible for most homicides in Central America, that drug use is crucial to providing international connections for guns when in fact few individuals detained en the

**Illicit Trade and Neoliberalism**

The spread of neoliberal free market reforms—including the liberalization of trade and finance and privatization of state owned enterprises—have been the focus of considerable economic analysis, however, is how these shifts in the formal economy have interacted with the illicit export economy, particularly in the transition from state protection to smuggling legal commodities. This is quite significant, as existing tours and other restrictions on legitimate trade has historically been a major motivation to smuggling. At the same time, reducing barriers for illicit trade may also have the unintended consequence of facilitating illicit trade. Consider the case of NAFTA. Trade across the US-Mexico border has been double the growth of the mid-1990s, making it increasingly challenging for border authorities to "weed out" illicit goods such as drugs. While simultaneously facilitating legal trade and enforcing laws against illegal trade has always been a frustrating and counterproductive task, it is made all the more difficult by the rapid growth of commercial cargo through highly congested ports of entry. Further analysis is needed to evaluate both the viability and deterrent effect of border interventions in the context of deepening economic integration, and the impact of lighter border controls on the integration process.

It should be pointed out that trade agreements have also become tangled up in the politics of policing. Bilateral trade pacts are also highlighted in the campaign for NAFTA, Mexican President Carlos Salinas famously promised that the trade agreement would help Mexico "export tomatoes" instead of "marijuana pickers," while he also launched a high profile anti-drug crackdown to appease and impress Washington critics (even as drug trafficking and related corruption worsened). Likewise, for a number of Andean countries, extensions of trade agreements with the United States have been conditional on the cooperation with antidrug efforts, as in the case of the AIDT (Andean Trade Preference Act) in 1993 and the ATPDEA (Andean Trade Preference and Drug Eradication Act) in 2002. Bolivia was excluded from these preferences in 2008 as the Bush administration determined that the country did not meet antidrug cooperation agreements. This analysis of the connections between trade liberalization and the politics of policing efforts, and the evolution of these connections as trade liberalization schemes shift towards more multilateralism, constitute a promising area of research.

More research is also needed to determine the extent to which the illicit economy has provided an immediate cushion of sorts for those most negatively affected by the shocks of neoliberal market reforms. For example, in the 1990s, dislocation migration and illicit drug
crop cultivation became more attractive coping mechanisms for Mexican peasants displaced by sweeping agricultural reforms (such as the lifting of government price supports and protections for the traditional ejido system). Throughout the region, shifts in prices and dynamics of commerce derived from free trade policies may have created incentives and pressures to turn to the illicit economy. As some analysts have noted, when prices for agricultural products collapsed in the 1990s, local populations in the valleys around the Rio and Apaneca rivers that grew coca for local consumption, entered into the cocaine export economy. Similarly, in Bolivia the illicit economy may have acted as a cushion for increasing urban unemployment rates derived from economic liberalization in the mid-1990s.

Although requiring further study, there have also been some indications that privatization and financial liberalization have unintentionally facilitated investing the proceeds of illicit trade. The Mexican experience again provides a useful illustration. According to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, many of the state-owned companies privatized under the Salinas administration were bought up by drug traffickers. Financial liberalization in the 1990s also apparently enabled narcoinvestments. According to the Economic Intelligence Unit, the liberalization of finance and capital markets in Mexico has facilitated money laundering and narco-investments.

Finally, another interesting channel through which neoliberal market reforms may have influenced illicit trade is by reconfiguring relations between political and criminal actors. As mentioned above, in Colombia, proceeds from illegal activities expanded criminal influence on electoral politics, sometimes providing emerging politicians with an opportunity to compete and oust traditional politicians allowing traditional politicians to maintain their control. In Colombia and other countries like Brazil and Mexico, this process may have been exacerbated by market reforms and deregulation, as these curtailed the availability of public resources for clientelistic exchanges—this increasing the incentives for politicians to turn to other private and illicit funding sources.

Conclusions

For the study of illicit trade to gain more traction in political science, scholarship in this area will need to more explicitly and deeply engage larger debates and questions at the center of the field. In this chapter we have provided a brief sketch of just a few of the possibilities here, ranging from issues of democratic governance to organized violence to securitization. To some extent, this is simply a matter of theoretical framing and asking research questions that are most relevant to the discipline. But it also relates to research design, case selection, and methods.

As a starting point, political scientists interested in this area should become more familiar with works in other disciplines. Reading broadly beyond political science is always a good thing, of course, but is an absolute necessity in this particular research domain. This includes works by anthropologists, economists, sociologists, and historians working on topics related to illicit trade. A handful of interdisciplinary collections and collaborations also stand out. There are also a number of more policy-oriented collections that demonstrate the utility of work that not only crosses discipline but also the policy academies divide.

The field of political science has always been good at "smuggling in" insights and methods from other disciplines (with economics, it seems, particularly fashionable in recent years) and nowhere would this be more appropriate than in the study of smuggling itself.

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1 For a more general discussion of the democratic governance literature, see Part I of this handbook.
2 According to the 2009 Latinobarómetro surveys, only 25 percent of Latin American citizens surveyed consider that democracy effectively protects them from crime.
3 At the beginning of President Felipe Calderón's mandate in 2006, 94 percent of the population supported the militarization of the war against drugs. Three years later, despite opposition in some sectors, surveys show that a significant sector of the population still supports Calderón's militarized strategy. Surveys conducted by the Center for the Study of Violence in August 2009 reported 50 percent approval of the war on drug trafficking, a support rate far higher than support for economic and social policies.
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9. In Guatemala the corruption of the rampant pillars of Democracy Operations (DOAND) by the Former Secretario de Administración de las FARC (FARC) is crucial but has not been significantly analyzed. In Mexico, the creation and dismantling of the Secretaría de Defensa en México (SEDEN) is crucial. See, for example, "The War on Drugs," Foreign Policy, Issue 85 (Winter 1991).

10. For a more detailed discussion, see Colisa Younger and Eileen Rostow, ed., Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of U.S. Policy (Lynne Rienner, 2004).

11. For a broad introduction, see Peter Andreas and Elza Mellembom, Policing the Failed: Criminalization and Crime Control in International Relations (Oxford University Press, 2006).

12. Such discussions would clearly benefit from broader social movements, for example, a discussion of the uneven politicization of indigenous groups in Latin America is particularly illustrative. See Deborah Yadav, "Constraining Citizenship: Indigenous Movements and Democracy in Latin America," Comparative Politics, Vol. 31, No. 1 (October 1999): 23-42.

13. Attempts by coca growers to delay eradication campaigns have succeeded sometimes through violence and intimidation. See, especially, the groups opposed to the Peace Process in the Peruvian coca region described by Ursula Durán, "Coca o muerte: la radicalización del coca cultivo movement," MA dissertation (University of Oxford, 2005) and Luis Patricio Arana, "En el Centro del Conflito: Coca-Getan, Narcotrafico y Sindicato Los Balsas en el Alto Huallaga," MA dissertation (Universidad Nacional del Junín, Peru, 2004); on the mobilization of coca growers in Bolivia, see Benjamin Dangl, The Poisoned Peace: War and Social Movements in Bolivia (NY: OR, 2003) especially chapters 2, 5-6 and 9; on the mobilization in Colombia, see Maria Estelvia Rumi, "The Politics of Recognition and Citizenship in Penamayo and in the Big Bora of Caquetá: The Case of the 1996 Guajibo Movement," in Movimiento Social, ed., Democratización (Yaarico, 2003), 220-250.

14. For a more detailed analysis across a range of disciplines, see the special issue of Crime, Law and Social Change Vol. 52, No. 3, 2009.

15. These statistics mainly capture the so-called "suicide-executions." See Secretaría Ejecutiva del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública Básica y Datos de Fallecimientos ocurridos por presunta violencia delictiva o accidental, and also David Sale, Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and Analysis 2001-2009 (Trans-border Institute, Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, University of San Diego, 2009).
PART V
Theories/Methods