

# Drug wars and coffee houses paper essay sample

[Health & Medicine](#), [Drugs](#)



David Mares gives us insight into the political economy of drug trafficking in his book *Drug Wars and Coffee Houses*. To help us understand how psychoactive substances are organized and distributed, he uses the concept of a commodity chain. A commodity chain is the system that links consumption of psychoactive substances to everything that makes it possible, and proves that if something affects one phase of the system, the other phases are affected as well. Consumers and producers in this system depend on each other, and “neither one could exist without the other” (Mares, p. 13). The whole system consists of various pieces that ultimately work towards getting the consumer what they want, and from a producer who actually has what they want. Since consumers and producers are rarely ever in the same place, consumers get their substances from a transportation network.

These traffickers get the substances from the producers, and just like any other business, producers need various inputs. This includes “labor, chemicals, and in the case of illegal products, perhaps weapons and corrupt officials, to produce and transport the substance” (Mares, p. 13). So then we have the people who provide these inputs. Playing with drug money can get messy, so then money launderers come into the picture. The commodity chain system that Mares presents helps us organize and understand how all these roles connect to get a psychoactive substance produced and distributed to consumers.

Though the commodity chain concept helps our understanding of how these phases are connected and work together to operate the drug business, Mares recognizes that some basic questions about the process go un-

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answered. With the commodity chain system, we can't really answer questions such as why people consume the drugs they do, why some people decide to get involved in the production of potentially harmful or illegal substances, or why in some countries production is not illegal.

Mares also explains strategies that countries may follow for their policies on drugs. These strategies include demand reduction, supply reduction, crime reduction, harm reduction, and civil rights protection. He states that while most countries want to pay attention to all of these, they may give priority to one in particular.

There is demand reduction, which is basically attempting to reduce the demand for psychoactive substances and therefore set a chain reaction to where producers don't make profit and so they turn to other means of making money. Mares states, " the ultimate expression of such a demand reduction strategy would be a population in which ' just say no' actually happens," and he gives the example of fundamentalist Muslim countries in which people actually choose on their own or they are socially convinced not to drink or smoke. We can compare this strategy to supply reduction, where a country focuses on reducing the supply of drugs to consumers, which Mares explains as being both economically and politically attractive to policy makers.

They assume that if the supply decreases, prices of these drugs will rise, and the demand will decrease. The focus is not so much on finding and punishing the people who use drugs but the people who produce them and " push" them on these " victim" drug-users (Mares p. 30). Supposedly this strategy

could potentially focus on all the phases of the commodity chain leading up to the consumer; this includes money laundering, producing, and distribution. In our October 5th lecture on Charting the Possibilities of Drug Restriction, we as a class discussed these two first strategies with some skepticism. The idea that trying to reduce demand or supply comes off as naïve, due to the fact that the state can only control so much (Andes, Charting the Possibilities, Oct. 5 2012).

Another strategy policy makers follow is crime reduction. The strategy focuses not on the crime of distributing or producing the drug for consumption specifically, but more so on property crimes committed by drug consumers. Whether in order to acquire money to buy the drugs or simply as a result of being under the influence of these drugs, the idea is to decrease the amount of crimes related to drugs at all. This includes crimes committed by drug pushers (Mares p. 30). The United States under the Nixon administration underwent a period following this strategy briefly before deciding that drug use was too connected to criminal activity and that it should be prohibited (Mares p. 125).

With the harm reduction strategy, drug policy makers put their focus on reducing the “ potential negative effects to users and society that result from the use of illegal substances” (Mares, p. 30). These negative effects generally refer to health-related risks, such as overdosing, consuming “ adulterated substances,” or unsanitary sharing of needles between drug users, potentially spreading HIV. The basic idea is to try making it less dangerous to consume these psychoactive substances by providing

treatment and education on psychoactive substances, therefore hopefully making it less of a societal issue. However, the author does bring up a good point in that people could argue that the consumption of these illegal drugs is “harmful in and of itself.” One would have to analyze each country on its own to determine if decriminalizing these substances would be considered harmful in its own society. Portugal is an example given by Mares.

They have decriminalized the consumption of psychoactive substances, as well as brought on the possibility of “mandatory treatment if an individual’s consumption becomes problematic” (Mares p. 31). The documentary *American Drug War* by Kevin Booth essentially argued that instead of using our time, efforts, and funds to fight drug-related crimes here in the United States, those resources would be better off being directed towards more harm-reducing programs. Imprisoning people for mere possession or distribution of these psychoactive substances is, as some of Booth’s interviewees basically stated, a waste of prison space and tax-payers’ money. Treatment and education for drugs that people are going to use regardless would be a better solution.

The last drug policy strategy that Mares mentions is civil rights protection. The idea behind this strategy is that limiting the governments control and “intrusion into the private lives of citizens” is more important than trying to stop the consumption and production of psychoactive substances (Mares p. 31). In regards to the United States, like the *Economist* article “How to Stop the War on Drugs” explains, we have tried completely restricting psychoactive substances, and scaring people into thinking that they are

much more dangerous than they actually are. Considering that nothing our policy makers have done has helped reduce drug consumption or the transport of it into our borders, so why not try something new?

#### Works Cited

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