



Trying to Make it: The Enterprises, Gangs, and People of the American Drug Trade by R.V. Gundur

MARK BERRY 

REVIEW



ABSTRACT

This is a review of the 2023 IASOC Prize Winner *Trying to Make It: The Enterprises, Gangs, and People of the American Drug Trade*. By R.V. Gundur. Gundur offers a masterful account of the inner workings of the illicit drugs trade from the Mexico-US Border into the USA. His ethnography examines the lived experiences and criminal strategies of key actors in the trade, such as those involved in gangs and cartels. In doing so, Gundur provides a depth of original insight in contrast to common stereotypical tropes on the issue.

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KEYWORDS:

organised crime; drugs;
ethnography; gangs; cartels

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Berry, M. 2024. Trying to Make it: The Enterprises, Gangs, and People of the American Drug Trade by R.V. Gundur. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 6(1): pp. 60–63. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.254>

R.V. Gundur's *Trying to Make It* is an outstanding ethnographic study that explores the dynamics of illicit drug trade from the Mexico–US border into the heartland of America. It traces the criminal strategies and lived experiences of people who have significant roles in securing the procurement and delivery of drugs, whether they are gangs, cartels, or independent suppliers. The monograph depicts Gundur's journey through Ciudad Juarez and El Paso (cities that lie across from one another along the US–Mexico border) to Phoenix, and Chicago. His work is presented in contrast to common political tropes around drug cartels that control the trade from the top down and have far-reaching tentacles to American citizens at the street level and cause extreme violence to spill across the border through territorial turf wars. As he explains, these xenophobic alien conspiracy myths of foreign invasion have bolstered America's anti-immigration campaigns and justify its failed criminal justice policies resulting in the mass incarceration of ethnic minorities on an unprecedented scale.

Gundur moves beyond other works in this field by not only immersing himself with key informants such as drug dealers, gang members, and journalists but also interrogating the processes of the criminal justice system through interviews with official actors and comprehensive fieldwork within the immigration court itself. After observing hundreds of court cases to assess the prevalence of drug traffickers and organised crime groups, he rarely saw evidence of serious criminal involvement. The vast majority of cases involved ordinary immigrants with non-criminal motives for immigrating, with many respondents citing threats from cartels in their home countries. Unfortunately, their cases were too vague to meet legal standards and were rejected. Gundur explained this issue in relation to the significant language barriers and difficulty navigating the legal system that these people encountered. I did wonder if it was also because they were concerned about violent retaliation to themselves or their families. Nonetheless, Gundur provides a depth of insight into the inner workings of the immigration court, and how those processed within it differed from the common media imaginary around predatory drug traffickers. The system deals mostly with non-violent, non-criminal migrants seeking legitimate opportunities or fleeing harm.

The reality that Gundur presents is that cartels in Mexico do not dominate retail drug sales in the America, nor would they want or even need to. They instead work mainly to pass on their product to distributors who serve the US markets. The supply chain is made up of an array of different actors who know very little of each other as they manage the heightened risks of their activity. Criminal justice agencies cannot work their way up the chain to catch the 'big fish', and other criminal predators have limits on who they can target for robbery (Jacobs, 2000); the exceptional case here is the Flores Twins who had more oversight over supply and turned themselves in. As Gundur explains, the supply chain operates through a process of 'blind compartmentalisation' and 'smoke screening', so that people know very little of other actors past those they deal with or may incorrectly attribute people as being responsible for supply, which can also accord reputational benefits. Violence at the wholesale level is kept to a minimum to reduce visibility and keep a low profile. And even at the street level, violence is often bad for business. It is at the street level that gangs take up the mantle to sell drugs with prison gangs controlling the street market in certain cities through territorial dominance as their members transition between prison and their local communities.

Indeed, a significant proportion of the book is dedicated to examining gangs both within prison and out on the street, whereby Gundur deftly demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between the two. Prison is a place that gangs are born and their members are recruited as they seek refuge from the violence of other criminal groups whilst having a financial stake in the drug markets they operate; which also means engaging in violence to control them. The book explains the organic growth and adaptations of notorious prison gangs, such as Barrio Azteca, a solidarity group that went on to dominate supply at the street level in El Paso. Gundur highlights how the structure of prison gangs shifts over time due to internal and external forces. In particular, he notes changes from vertical to horizontal structures as a survival mechanism against the practices of solitary confinement being imposed on gang leaders. Indeed, the evolutionary nature of the phenomena is well documented.

The research employs an unconventional 'gonzo' methodology, which involves organic and spontaneous recruitment of informants within the natural context of the field. These are key actors that were directly embedded in the ecologies, rhythms and happenings of the illicit drug

trade. He employs this method alongside more systematic, yet unconventional recruitment through bilingual advertisements listed on Craigslist, to allow for in-depth interviews alongside the observational fieldwork. Throughout the book, he directly observes the local drug trade, from users shooting up heroin and drug-addicted sex workers in the streets or those in brothels controlled by criminal groups. Getting access to this hidden population is difficult enough aside from gaining the ethical approval to do so, due to the numerous challenges that come with researching illegal activity (Calvey, 2017). He fully embeds himself in the book, reflecting on his own experiences of the journey, as well as how his personal biography of Indian and Italian heritage allows him to integrate and blend into diverse communities, rather than standing out. What the study amounts to is a series of interconnected ethnographies that provides a broader picture of the drug trade that is attuned to the geographical, contextual, and cultural differences in each location. In doing so, Gundur's work differs from traditional ethnographies in this field that often concentrate on one geographical area (i.e., Bourgois, 2003; Venkatesh, 2008). There is always a trade-off here between depth and breadth, but Gundur manages to embed himself in each locale and firmly draw out the lived experiences of the men and women of the trade. As such he is able to attend to the micro-, meso-, and macro-dimensions of this complex phenomenon across time, which is just one of the things that sets this book apart.

The book is written in a clear, accessible, and compelling manner making it suitable for a general readership with interest in this field. The book is relatively free of jargon; there were very few occasions when I had to look up what an acronym or particular policy meant. It provides significant original insights into the phenomena making it essential reading for students, academics, and policy makers alike. I became immersed in the journey as Gundur recounted his experiences through a tapestry of rich and vivid descriptions of the places and people he had visited. The occasional photograph taken and embedded in the pages added visual context and further depth to the narrative whilst infographics helped to outline complex systems, such as immigration proceedings and supply chain mechanisms. Gundur's retelling of events included deep socio-historical descriptions of the cities that he visited as well as the cartels and gangs that make up the drug trade. In doing so he provided, contextual and cultural insights to familiarise the reader, whilst also demonstrating what events and geopolitical conditions have led to the current structure of the drugs market and the criminal groups that operate within it. The book unravels these layers of complexity in an easily digestible manner.

Perhaps the most significant omission from this book is a detailed discussion of emergent technologies in both offline and online drug markets. For example, how is the Internet of Things, cryptomarkets and social media changing how gangs operate and communicate both inside prison (via smuggled smartphones) and outside the prison on the streets? As ethnographies go, this is not all that surprising given fieldwork is typically offline, yet as his methodology of using Craigslist has shown, the internet is an effective recruitment tool for research, as it is in recruiting people into gangs (Pyrooz and Moule Jr, 2019). Moreover, mobile phones are one of the main advances that allow drug dealers to be mobile rather than dealing on a street corner and have been a key factor in reducing territorial gang violence. The street gangs transition to pagers and then mobile phones, as depicted in the famous TV show *The Wire* and outlined by scholars Edlund and Machado (2019), has reshaped the drug trade in ways that on the one hand have reduced violence but on the other made the product more available. Although these changes are discussed in the book, as is the case with the delivery-based systems noted in drug networks in Phoenix and Arizona, the role of technology could perhaps be recognised more so. As McLuhan (1964) stated in his seminal work in the field of science and technology studies: technology is both enabling and disabling. It can enhance traditional crimes or allow entirely new ones altogether (Berry, 2018). As Gundur observes, drug violence and increased visibility are bad for business and draws unwanted attention from the police, yet technology is one of the key things that allows drug dealers to become invisible. Nonetheless, the book is excellent and hard to fault. It stands out as an exceptional piece of work and makes a significant contribution to the knowledge base.

Overall, the book demonstrates that the drug trade involves ordinary people just trying to survive; not violent pushers trying to corrupt society as they peddle their wares to innocent victims through the ruthless pursuit of wealth (Coomber, 2006). Most are regular folks living banal lives, coming from the margins of society having experienced heightened poverty and socio-economic inequalities and injustices. Media depictions demonize them and overlook their

humanity and the nuances of their lives. Yet, as Gundur demonstrates, in the vein of Becker's (1967) underdogs, their perspectives matter if we are to truly understand the drug problem and create effective solutions to it.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Submitted: 04 April 2024

Accepted: 09 April 2024

Published: 01 May 2024

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