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Challenging conventional wisdom on illicit economies and rural development in Latin America

Laura Aileen Sauls [a,b,*], Anthony Dest [c], Kendra McSweeney [d]

[a] Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Winter Street, Sheffield S10 2TN, United Kingdom
[b] Center for the Study of Natural Resource Extraction and Society (Extractives@Clark), George Perkins Marsh Institute, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610, United States
[c] Department of Anthropology, Lehman College, Bronx, NY 10468, United States
[d] Department of Geography, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, United States

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ABSTRACT

Illicit economies have become a major driver of socio-environmental change in Latin America's rural spaces. The arrival of transnational drug trade networks in rural communities has significantly altered the economic, political, and social dynamics of entire regions. The drug trade has particularly affected the ancestral territories of Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples, which coincide with significant areas of forests and high biodiversity, increasingly making trafficking an issue of racial and environmental justice as well. Furthermore, the decades-long drug wars, sponsored in large part by the United States Government, have fundamentally altered economic, social, environmental, and political conditions in areas of production and transshipment. The convergence of competing claims on rural spaces coupled with the violence provoked by the drug trade and state reactions to it enable and constrain possibilities for transformative action on the part of rural communities, and for development and governance projects. In this introduction to the Special Issue, we provide an overview of cross-cutting insights and key conceptual and methodological themes from the nine included papers. These findings challenge normative narratives of how illicit economies negatively affect political stability and economic development, problematizing especially the role of the state and market economies in this nexus. These papers also make clear the importance of mixed methods and ethnographic research that attends to questions of power to describe, explain, and transform illicit economies' roles in this dynamic region.

1. Illicit economies in rural Latin America

What is the role of the illicit in transforming Latin America's rural spaces? At the 2019 Latin American Studies Association Congress (LASA), we participated in a two-part session that brought together anthropologists, rural sociologists, political scientists, geographers, interdisciplinary scholars, and development practitioners to address this question. Our intention was to explore what illicit economies do—how they develop and how they function—in these historically marginalized, often Indigenous or Afro-descendent, and typically economically precarious zones, and how rural communities interact with, interpret, and make claims related to the illicit. These sessions featured research from sites all along the pathway from production to consumption of illegal products. Indeed, many of our participants had become intrigued by questions of the illicit-in-development when they found that their research sites coincided with major nodes in the northward export of cocaine. Our broader 2019 conversation at LASA thus allowed us to expand the scope of inquiry and explore significant trends across the region that ultimately demanded new ways of thinking about illicit activities in rural development.

This collection—and the authors' own research—demonstrates forcefully that both the process of making certain products, people, and relations illicit, and the functioning of economies designated as such, are inextricably intertwined with state formation and the expansion of capitalist relations into rural spaces (Bebbington, Sauls, et al., 2018; Dest, 2020; McSweeney et al., 2017). With evidence from Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru, this special issue ultimately demands an uncomfortable reckoning with the ways in which both development policies and drug policies have, together, exacerbated the impoverishment of rural communities in the

* Corresponding author at: Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Winter Street, Sheffield S10 2TN, United Kingdom.
E-mail addresses: l.a.sauls@sheffield.ac.uk (L.A. Sauls), anthony.dest@lehman.cuny.edu (A. Dest), mcsweeney.14@osu.edu (K. McSweeney).

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present day. Furthermore, the research featured here draws attention to the ways in which illicit economies are foundational—not peripheral or aberrant—to processes of capitalist economic development and nation-state formation in the late 20th and early 21st century. As such, many of the processes described here will be recognizable to those working in rural settings around the world; they are hardly unique to Latin America (e.g., Baker & Milne, 2015; Mansfield, 2019; Woods, 2020). They may be particularly *legible* to researchers in Latin America, however, because some of the world's most lucrative drug supply chains begin and concentrate in sites through the region. After all, coca is grown and cocaine produced in quantity exclusively in the northern Andes, and the commodity reaches markets world-wide through multi-stage smuggling networks that span Latin America (Davila et al., 2021). This of course is not the result of any unique pathology of the region, but rather a product of long colonial and imperial histories (Paley, 2014; Tate, 2015).

In this introduction, we highlight insights that crosscut the papers, and probe the associated conceptual and methodological questions they raise. We begin by laying out what might be termed the 'conventional wisdom' on the illicit's influence on development—i.e., that it is both a cause and consequence of poverty and violence—and then point to the emerging critiques of this view in the context of rural Latin America. Ultimately, these articles suggest that researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in the nexus of economic development, security and violence re-consider key assumptions that currently—and counterproductively—animate 'supply-side' counternarcotic interventions in the rural spaces of Latin America. We note that without a significant rupture in business-as-usual, this general policy approach will continue, as it disproportionately privileges existing structures of power. However, even as new models for drug policy emerge —including legalization—that successfully mitigate the harms of production, transport, and use (Grisaffi et al., 2021; von Hoffmann, 2016; Whitelaw, 2017), we are left asking: what will it take to abandon the drug wars and embrace emancipatory, transformative, integral forms of rural development?

2. Conventional wisdom: The illicit in Latin America's rural development

In 2018, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations released a report revealing a "historic reversal:" after a decade of supposed progress on income and well-being, Latin America's rural population of 59 million faced deepening impoverishment. The report suggested that "the lack of educational and economic opportunities has simultaneously led to the explosive growth in illicit activities" (FAO, 2018, p. 17), particularly in the period since 2000, during which rising poverty rates coincided with surging violence and the growing visibility of criminal enterprises (FAO, 2018).

The underlying assumption of these claims is that 'underdevelopment' is the problem: peasants turn to criminality because they do not have access to basic resources, while their poverty means they do not have the power to resist coercion by (external) illicit actors. Throughout the region, there seems to be consensus on this point. Policymakers across the political spectrum, private sector interests, multinational corporations, and even social movements point to the absence of the state and the lack of economic development as the principal obstacles to addressing poverty and the proliferation of illicit economies in rural spaces (Buxton, 2015; Gillies et al., 2019; Gootenberg, 2020). The prescription is generally for more investment in rural spaces along with the increased presence of the state to enhance "stability" (Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission, 2020).

Recent work seeking to reconcile development and the illicit typically supports what might be described as a 'conventional' view in which illegality and associated criminality are understood to undermine economic and social 'progress' at scales large and small. Through this lens, largely informed by Washington Consensus-style neoliberalism, criminal violence and corruption (Kashwan et al., 2019), for example, are said to deter investment and drive down productivity and consumer spending while diverting social spending to security costs (Felbab-Brown, 2018; Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2015; Jaitman, 2017; UNODC, 2007, 2012). In this reading, violence and corruption deter foreign investment, which is crucial for the infrastructure, agroindustry, and extractive projects that have driven the modest rates of gross domestic product (GDP) growth that Latin American economies have posted in recent years (Ashby & Ramos, 2013; Blanco et al., 2019; World Bank, 2011).

In rural communities, this conventional view attributes 'poverty' and 'low human capital development' to the absence or weakness of the state (MacGregor-Fors & Vázquez, 2020; Yashar, 2018). Within this world view, what defines the 'underdeveloped rural' is state absence, as manifest in the undercapitalized status of relatively abundant land and resources, characterized by underproduction, thin land and labor markets, and illegible property regimes that are incompletely enforced (Kay, 2019; Muñoz-Mora et al., 2018). This perceived state absence, in turn, attracts lawbreakers whose illegal activities inspire criminality among the vulnerable poor while also distorting rural economies and depressing investments in education and health (Bunker & Sullivan, 2014; FAO, 2018; OAS, 2013). Insecurity, economic precarity, and emigration are understood to be the result. The 'obvious' solution, then—across geographic scales—is to address perceived underdevelopment and insecurity by setting the stage for 'development' through enhanced state presence, which can manifest as land regularization programs (e.g., investments in cadastral systems), privatization and investment in land and resource markets, infrastructure development, conservation set-asides, and the extension of the rule of law (Oliveira, 2013; Gillies et al., 2019; Kashwan et al., 2019).

3. Troubling the illicit in/and rural development

In contrast, we argue that the expansion of illicit economies does not derive from 'underdevelopment' or absence of the state per se. On the contrary, many supposedly isolated, marginalized, rural regions have been subject to intense economic and state interventions over the course of decades (Álvarez Rodriguez, 2020; Ballvé, 2020). Through this lens, then, the 'underdeveloped rural' is not defined by state absence, but rather by particular *modalities* of state presence. These modalities include imposing fiscal and tariff regimes that privilege particular forms of rural property and economic activity and the strategic use of state-sponsored and paramilitary violence, which legitimize certain actors over others while perpetrating racist forms of social exclusion (Aranda, 2009; Britto, 2020; Das & Poole, 2004; Serje, 2005; van Schendel, 2005). For example, Richani (2012) demonstrates how tax structures encourage drug traffickers in Colombia to launder their earnings through massive land purchases, leading to land concentration and dispossession. Regimes of criminality have been shown not to foil, but to accelerate state projects for areas classified as 'frontiers' (Ballvé, 2012, 2020), as when criminal(ized) activity facilitates elite-led land enclosures of Indigenous and peasant lands, and capitalizes natural resource extraction, export-oriented agribusiness, and infrastructure expansion (Grandia, 2013; McSweeney et al., 2017, 2018; Paley, 2014).

This work makes clear that the militarization of rural space—justified as protecting the poor from criminals—serves to advance elite interests by enforcing the dispossession, labor casualization, and low wages that attend elite usurpation of rural land (Aranda, 2013; Castellanos-Navarrete et al., 2019; Grandia, 2013). Further, state investment that might otherwise go to social spending (e.g., health or agricultural extension services) is used to institute rural militarization and land policies that privilege large-scale agroindustry, extractivism, and mega-development projects (Bebbington, Humphreys, et al., 2018; Castellanos-Navarrete et al., 2021; Kay, 2019; Roseboom et al., 2006). These processes of dispossession and precaritization also create the conditions for what Gago (2017) calls "neoliberalism from below" whereby impoverished and marginalized people – often working in the informal sector, including the illicit – practice entrepreneurship and reshape capitalist relations in potentially transgressive ways. In short, the functioning of illicit economies, and the counternarcotic response to them, work hand in glove with the long-standing neoliberalization of government structures and policies across the region, intensifying rural precarity.

State-building projects premised on anti-drug logics in Latin America also serve to undermine Black and Indigenous struggles for autonomy and self-determination (Escobar, 2008; Hale, 2011; Hooker, 2020; Mollett, 2016). Many of the rural spaces where illicit economies operate are home to Indigenous and Afro-descendent populations, and a significant literature has documented these communities' resistance to illegal activities and criminal actors (Fuentes Díaz & Fini, 2021; Mortensen & Gutierrez, 2019; Vélez & Lobo, 2019). These studies highlight the ways illicit economies are foundational to contemporary processes of state formation and capital accumulation, not only through the extension of militarized control, but also through social, economic, and bureaucratic practices that erode socio-ecological relations and community cohesion (Ballvé, 2012; Dest, 2020; Devine, 2018; McSweeney et al., 2018). At the same time, other research reveals the ways in which communities actively negotiate precarity related to the proliferation of illicit economies (Alves, 2016, 2019; Gutierrez, 2020; Heuser, 2019). This growing body of critical research makes clear that in today's political economic context, there is no simple or singular role that the illicit plays in rural development in Latin America. These insights also help make sense of the apparent paradox that rural communities – even those long brutalized by state-led violence and structural racism – may call for an enhanced state presence to protect them from 'narcos' and to foster development.

The intersection of illicitness, state formation, and neoliberalization draws attention to an obvious point often overlooked in the 'conventional wisdom' about illicit economies: that the discourse of legality/illegality is established and maintained by states. This narrative takes notions of the legal and illegal – not to mention the authority of states – as immutable facts. Critiques of the conventional approach challenge this totalizing discourse of legality/illegality: they understand law as a social construct, and, as such, it can be deconstructed or constructed otherwise (Benjamin, 2004). By taking this critical approach to illicitness, criminalization, and the state, they create space to move beyond *reforming* drug policy by questioning the very premises of the debate.

4. Key reflections from the special issue

This critical scholarship demonstrates that the relationship between illicit economies and development is mediated by state, corporate, and local elites' power in complex and non-linear ways. Violence, in its multiple expressions, is central to the establishment, maintenance, and reconfiguration of these relationships. At the same time, rural communities and social movements are capable agents—protagonists in their own right—and their negotiations with illicitness are differentiated and contingent.

These insights provide a much-needed counterpoint to conventional accounts of the crime-development nexus. At the same time, this welcome critical corpus has yet to fully engage the ways in which natural resources and the non-human are bound up in these dynamics, or the ways in which axes of race, class, and gender infuse community understandings of, and responses to, illicitness. The richly ethnographic contributions of this special issue collectively shed light on these issues through five key interventions, elaborated in this section.

4.1. The production of il/licit spaces

The work here understands illicitness not as an innate quality of certain goods, activities, or rural economies, but rather a socially constructed condition that is produced by governments. Coca, marijuana, opium poppy – the most prevalent cultivated 'illicit' substances – have been part of cultural, spiritual, and subsistence practices across the globe for centuries. It is through violent processes of colonization, imperialism, and emerging capitalism that certain states have criminalized their production, transport and use, with variation across space and time in service of different state-building projects (Burger & Kapron, 2017; Paley, 2014; Ramírez, 2018). The exclusion of these substances from the sphere of legality represents an active choice, one that in Latin America has often been influenced by the United States, which produces certain landscapes as ripe for state intervention (Britto, 2020; Reiss, 2014; Teague, 2019a, 2019b).

Contributors to this special issue describe landscapes that have been brought into contemporary illicitness primarily *because* of the drug wars. For example, Dest (2021) and Huezo and Bazán Orobio (2021) highlight how coca's movement into Afro-Colombian spaces is exacerbated by eradication programs elsewhere in the country. The attendant changes in demography, culture, and political economy challenge existing socio-political processes and transform peoples' relations to the state and capital. Grisaffi et al. (2021) similarly note how interdiction causes the displacement of drug cultivation to increasingly marginalized zones. Modifications to transit routes in response to interdiction campaigns in the Caribbean and Mexico introduced new actors and economic activities—generally illicit—into Indigenous-led forested areas of Panama and the Caribbean Coast of Central America, followed in turn by violent interdiction operations (Blume, 2021; Colectivo Darién, 2021).

At the same time, many of the spaces penetrated by illicit economies have long resisted the dominating forces of the state and capitalism (Colectivo Darién, 2021; Dest, 2021; Valdivia & Okowí, 2021). As illicit economies and the corresponding interdiction efforts enter these spaces, the articles highlight that this illicitness co-produces and subsidizes the licit. For example, narco-businesses prime rural landscapes for expropriation and enclosure, fundamentally compounding uneven rural development and growing inequality (Blume, 2021; Devine et al., 2021). Illicit economies pave the way for – and in fact often demand – licit economies in which to invest, launder, and increase reserves of drug money.

As Devine et al. (2021) highlight, drug traffickers across Central America launder profits in cattle ranching, thus capitalizing the beef sector even in zones where it is not otherwise profitable and in conservation areas where it is officially prohibited. This undermines biodiversity and forest conservation efforts, and undercuts more productive and sustainable land uses. Illegal industries subsidize other legal (if informal) industries, from mafia-managed avocado farms in Mexico to informal gold mining in Colombia (Gonzalez-Duarte, 2021; Huezo & Bazán Orobio, 2021). This intermingling of illicit and licit commodities and income streams privileges particu-

lar forms of (capital-intensive) rural economies over others, drawing labor from other sectors and activities, including food production. At the same time, the illicit capitalization of 'regular' activities can lead to a level of tolerance of the illicit among a population that is able to realize some gains from their combination (Blume, 2021). In stark contrast, Grisaffi et al. (2021) find that the managed legalization in Bolivia has in fact enhanced social and economic well-being, emphasizing again no essential relation between drug economies and violence or 'underdevelopment.'

4.2. The role of the illicit in state formation

As argued above, spaces with significant presence of illicit activities do not suffer from state absence, but rather must contend primarily with the military and policing modalities of the state (Ballvé, 2012; Blume, 2022). Authors in this special issue demonstrate how the designation of some economies as 'illicit' – along with the attendant strategies to address them – are foundational to state formation, especially in areas that have resisted full incorporation into capitalist state-making projects (Ballvé, 2012; Scott, 2014). Work featured in this special issue also nuance existing understandings of how the il/licit (following Gonzalez-Duarte, 2021) spatializes elements of the state, and vice versa. As Peñaranda Currie et al. (2021, p. 11) suggest, their examination of the material history of the state in Colombia leads them "to denaturalize the cohesive and linear notion of the state which underlies some of the present peacebuilding discourse, and reveal the non-linear, erratic and changing forms of state-formation on the frontier." Ultimately, illicit economies and state entities interact in varied ways over time, across space, and in the context of broader political economic trends, producing diverse state-citizen relations.

The authors in the Special Issue also address how illicit economies coalesce with state-making practices to forge new kinds of relationships across the state-trafficker-community nexus. One question thus is the visibility or invisibility of different modalities of the state within rural spaces, and how specific state-making practices interact to produce different forms of illicit activity. Blume's (2021) work across Central America's Caribbean coasts clearly indicates that differences in the perceived visibility of the state and its relations to marginalized communities may produce drastically different state-trafficker and trafficker-community relations, with implications for violence and economic development. In these cases, illicit economies help to produce and sustain a certain state modality that blurs the lines between licit and illicit and creates conditions that rupture community incentives to call for forms of state presence—e.g., education, healthcare—that respond to its purported constituents (Blume, 2021; Gonzalez-Duarte, 2021).

Over centuries, by ground, water, and now by air and even from space, state entities – primarily military, but not exclusively – and capital have intervened in rural regions with the goal of controlling populations, environments, and economies (Dest, 2021; Devine et al., 2021; Peñaranda Currie et al., 2021). Whether in response to activities explicitly coded as illicit or in order to control unruly subjects resistant to 'civilized' rule, these interventions have fundamentally shaped Latin America's rural spaces and are part of long histories of racist colonization (Dest, 2021; Valdivia & Okowí, 2021). Illicit activities in rural spaces provide a primary contemporary justification for further penetration into zones of resistance, not to 'protect' marginalized subjects so much as to assert control over resources and people in the service of consolidating state power – or, as the Colectivo Darién, 2021 argues here, of settler colonialism (Wolfe, 2006). Even in moving away from the drug war model, as Grisaffi et al. (2021) explore in Bolivia, suggests the importance of state interventions in encouraging community roles in licit coca markets.

4.3. Race, gender, and the Il/licit

A growing scholarship analyzes how Black and Indigenous communities and social movements confront the expansion of illicit economies in their territories (Corporación Ensayos, 2020; Gasparello, 2021; Huezo, 2019). As illicit economies open new pathways for state formation and the deepening of capitalist relations, they also tend to create new elites while disadvantaging many already oppressed groups (Bull, 2016; Grisaffi, 2018). The articles in this issue identify how illicit economies throughout rural Latin America exploit, reproduce, and reshape the structural inequalities of society at-large, particularly along axes of gender, race, and ethnic relations. They specifically examine the differential impacts of illicit economies on Black and Indigenous peoples as well as how these economies alter gender and intergenerational relations.

For example, Devine et al. (2021) identify how "narco-degradation" in protected areas of Central America differentially impacts Indigenous peoples. Maps by Huezo and Bazán Orobio (2021, pp. 10–12) reveal the connection between aerial eradication, forced manual eradication, coca cultivations, and alternative development in ethnic territories throughout Colombia. Relatedly, Dest (2021) analyzes the massive spike in coca cultivations in the predominantly Afro-descendant region of Colombia's Pacific Coast as a consequence of Plan Colombia. Taken together, these papers connect the colonial legacy of racist and patriarchal domination with contemporary forms of violence and dispossession associated with illicit economies.

Contrary to racist tropes that stigmatize and criminalize Black and Indigenous peoples as complicit perpetrators in illicit economies, the articles reveal how the expansion of illicit economies coincides with the conjoined projects of settler colonialism, mestizaje, and capitalism (Colectivo Darién, 2021; Dest, 2021; Valdivia & Okowí, 2021). This is particularly evident in the way that illicit economies reinforce racialized, gendered, and hierarchical subjectivities, for example by bolstering the status of what Valdivia and Okowí (2021, p. 10) call "criminal mestizo masculinities" in historically Black and Indigenous regions, or what Dest's (2021, p. 2) interlocutors call the "anti-culture" of coca, to name the ways that these economies rupture social relations. This shift often privileges illicit actors or even state actors, eroding Indigenous or Black identity and norms in favor of interests that may not align with the communities (Huezo & Bazán Orobio, 2021). As Blume (2021) points out, individuals and communities as a whole may feel pressured to participate in or at least tolerate illicit activities because of limited opportunities for income, threats of violence, and/or in the context of tense relations with the state. The influxes of quick cash predominantly accumulate among young men, especially, thereby undermining the position of ethnoterritorial authorities and seeding potential intergenerational conflict.

These transformations contribute to intersecting forms of racist dispossession that bridge the slash within the il/licit. For example, one Indigenous leader interviewed by Devine et al. (2021, p. 10) reflected on the challenges of confronting contemporary forms of colonialism and state formation embedded within the illegal land markets associated with il/licit economies:

> What you've mapped is not a *frontera agrícola* (agricultural frontier), this is a wave of cattle. And that is why a third of our territory has been deforested in the last decade... Land speculators start by removing valuable trees, then fifteen days later they burn the remaining forest, and then they plant grass for cattle. Then they sell the land, and repeat the process further into Indigenous territory.

The rapid commodification of land as a money laundering mechanism intensifies the longer processes of community dispossession and the conversion of territory into property long enabled by colonial state-building logics. As Valdivia and Okowí (2021, p. 1) note of the Rarámuri region of Mexico, drug trafficking exerts claims on space that limit claims to sovereignty, largely "because of the historical processes of racialization that continue to define Rarámuri space and people as colonized subjects." These processes, however, are also met with resistance, and the articles contribute to explaining how Black and Indigenous peoples reject the constraints imposed by il/licit economies.

4.4. A political ecology of 'illicit' rural development

The articles compiled here are strongly political–ecological in orientation. That is, they attend explicitly to relations of power in contexts in which illicit economies intersect with conflicts over land and resources, intensifying or ameliorating existing pressures on rural socio-ecologies (Bridge et al., 2015). By attending to the multi-sited interrelation of politics and material environmental conditions, these articles provide key insights into how land and resources are enrolled into the economies produced by illicit activities. In particular, these articles highlight how illicit economies intertwine, embed into, and exacerbate the challenges of communities living in areas prioritized for biodiversity conservation, which political ecologists have demonstrated can be central to neoliberal, state-building efforts (Brockington & Duffy, 2010; Mollett & Kepe, 2018). In this context, illicit economies can further destabilize community relations to and governance of biodiverse ecosystems, with destructive results.

Drawing on long-term political ecology research in the region, Devine et al. (2021, p. 12) employ mixed methods to explain "specific forms of environmental degradation as the drug trade emerges and takes root in protected areas," and find that these processes limit local communities' rights to, access to, and control over resources. Illicit economies' intrusion into local communities' relations to key ecosystems is reminiscent of how biodiversity conservation initiatives, and before it state colonization mandates, have undercut the long struggle for Indigenous and Afro-descendent land and cultural rights in particular. Several of the Special Issue's authors highlight how narco-trafficking destabilizes Indigenous and Afro-descendent territorial processes while also noting how the presence of protected areas has already made these socio-ecological processes precarious, where "conservation is an entry point for violently asserting state or parastatal dominion over human and nonhuman nature" (Gonzalez-Duarte, 2021, p. 4). As Gonzalez-Duarte (2021, p. 5) adds, "conservation policy itself has also fueled organized crime economies, triggering cycles of both deforestation and violence," in part by reducing the rights and capacity of Indigenous and *campesino* communities to manage their lands; in a sense, this converts these areas into frontiers prone to exploitation by elite and illicitly-enriched actors.

To date, most of the scholarly work of the socio-ecological effects of trafficking has focused on drugs, and especially cocaine. The articles in this issue point beyond that singular focus to draw attention to the ways that il/licit economies combine, with perverse effects for communities and the environment (Colectivo Darién, 2021; Gonzalez-Duarte, 2021). The emergence of avocado cartels in Mexico, the illegal land markets that undermine Indigenous collective land claims in Honduras and Panama, the trafficking of people and timber through the Colombia-Panama border, and the policy interventions and development projects that redirect funds and people, ostensibly intended to stop these activities—all provide evidence of how the illicit reshapes environments and the social relationships that co-constitute them.

4.5. Overcoming the 'impossibility' of researching the illicit

Most illicit activities are designed to be hidden, and rural residents are rightly fearful about the implications of revealing the nature and extent of their imbrication with illicit capital and powerful criminal actors. Further, given the opaque nature of illicit operations, quantitative and official data about trends and impacts may be partial, classified, or difficult to untangle (Andreas & Greenhill, 2010). The articles in this collection demonstrate how a broad range of methodological approaches in different combinations may overcome these problems and can provide nuanced and rich insights into illicit economies and their role in rural spaces. They demonstrate the merits of long-term ethnographic engagement, a commitment to the co-production of knowledge, and data and methodological creativity to overcome the many challenges of studying the illicit on-the-ground.

Given that the archives of the illicit tend towards the clandestine, authors have developed creative strategies for compiling and analyzing empirical data (Blume, 2021; Dest, 2021; Peñaranda Currie et al., 2021; Valdivia & Okowí, 2021). Complementing this rich ethnographic work in the special issue, several authors also draw on ex and in situ geospatial analysis to examine the relationships between illicit activities, environmental degradation, and community development by providing important evidence of both the connections between these phenomena and the significant role mixed methodology studies can play in bringing them to light (Darién, 2021; Devine et al., 2021; Huezo & Bazán Orobio, 2021). Authors' engagement with contemporary journalism as source material and as validation method also contribute to tracing illicit economies as well as the popular discourses around them (Blume, 2021; Colectivo Darién, 2021). Further, these authors evidence a creative mixing of methods that, across the collection, makes possible nuanced, detailed, and ultimately policy-relevant studies of the illicit across scales.

This collection also highlights the work of authors from throughout the Americas, including those based in the countries studied and in academic and non-academic roles. Contributors to this volume also include community- and social movement-based intellectuals, whose inputs speak to the significant contributions that collaborative, participatory research can make to understanding the challenges of development from the ground up (Colectivo Darién, 2021; Grisaffi et al., 2021; Huezo & Bazán Orobio, 2021; Valdivia & Okowí, 2021). Conducting and publishing this research can endanger their security, and these risks are amplified along lines of the race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality of the researcher (seeBerry et al., 2017). We acknowledge the stressors that this type of research and publishing may generate and are grateful to all the authors, particularly those based outside of academia, for sharing the fruits of their labor. The possibility of doing this embedded and co-produced research also results from the trust-building and long-term commitment on the part of all of the authors featured here.

5. Prospects for transformation

Collectively, the articles in this Special Issue call us to think about and approach the interactions of the il/licit and development in new and nuanced ways. Although all of the authors consider how illicit economies function in rural areas, they do so in a diverse range of places across the region, where different physical geographies, colonial histories, and social and racial hierarchies are at work. At the same time, these papers draw our attention to some broader forces and important, recurrent themes that are fundamental to understanding how illicit activities—and state and international involvement in and reactions to them—structure the

possibilities for well-being, community-based development, and non-Western economic, socio-ecological, and spiritual practices.

In particular, the active role of the state in shaping the where and how of illicit economies, along with the influence of 'illegal' commodities on 'legal' ones (and vice versa) emphasize just how intertwined these political and economic spheres are. Through careful attention to multi-scalar and historical processes, the articles reject the idea that the 'absence' of the state can explain the flourishing of illicit economies. Instead, they demonstrate the degree to which specific processes of state formation are fundamental to introducing illicit economies into the geographies where they flourish today and re-structuring socio-ecological and economic relations in those places. The articles here highlight how the diverse constellation of actors and interests that make up 'the state' may be implicated in illicit economies in different ways—not all state presence is equal, and increasingly rural Latin Americans' most persistent interaction with the state is militarized. The resulting focus on interdiction to stamp out illicit products, processes, and increasingly people ruptures community expectations of state accountability and responsiveness, undermining local institutions as well as buy-in to participation in broader democratic processes.

These articles further emphasize repeatedly the degree to which different iterations of the state promote neoliberal logics and push to integrate communities into global markets, which in these cases does not lead to development, but rather to dispossession and conflict. Whether it is to enact conservation in Mexico or to incentivize substitutes for coca in Colombia, national governments and development partners promote engagement in the market as a solution to the gamut of so-called sustainable development problems – at the same time as narco-economies in particular have been much more effective at enrolling individuals and places into global economic processes. The Special Issue articles clearly demonstrate that the extension of capitalism – through il/licit economies – will not solve the poverty or violence in these rural spaces. Development interventions targeting one element of the economy inevitably alter human relations to land, ecosystems, and each other. The laser-focus on drugs in much of Latin America has clouded the interconnectedness of life on-the-ground, undermining people's capacity to sustain themselves in the places they live.

Far from closing a debate, this Special Issue invites further examination of the dynamic ways that illicit economies transform socio-ecological and political economic relations throughout Latin America, and further afield. They suggest important work to come on each of the key themes discussed above, and provoke additional questions. For example, how does the il/licit produce different subjectivities and alter social relations, especially given the transient nature of illicit economies? Relatedly, given the boom-bust nature of many illicit products, what social, cultural, political, economic, and ecological legacies do they leave behind? Finally, how will these dynamics of state formation and neoliberal incorporation shift as some countries move towards decriminalization and perhaps legalization?

Ultimately, this Special Issue appeals to researchers and policy makers to not only re-think drug policy and its linkages to other illicit activities, but also, to re-think what development looks like in the places where such economies have historically operated. The efforts of the authors and their community-based colleagues illustrate the importance of studying and explaining the functioning of illicit economies in rural Latin America through nuanced, embedded, mixed methods approaches that attend to the interactions across scales. Through this work, the authors unlock an important piece of the puzzle of how development possibilities unfold these zones, in part by clearly demonstrating that those economies classed as illicit articulate with a broader drive for capitalocentric expansion, which plays a significant role in limiting the possibilities for grassroots, integral development. As such, achieving on-the-ground development that reflects the needs and experiences of rural communities will require a transformation – in policy, politics, and dominant economic narratives well beyond these sites.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Laura Aileen Sauls: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Anthony Dest:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Kendra McSweeney:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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