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COLONIALITY, DRUG TRAFFICKING, AND DRUG CONTROL IN HONDURAS: INDIGENOUS LANDS DISPOSSESSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIGENOUS IDENTITIES

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INDEX

Introduction

Over the past decades, the rate of drug consumption of the global population has increased, alongside the expansion of the drug trafficking network. The cultivation and distribution of cocaine, for example, have significantly increased, reaching an estimated peak in 2023 with 3,708 tons of cocaine produced globally[1]. North and South America, and Central and Western Europe, are the largest designated markets, regardless of the efforts fostered by the War on Drugs. The narco economy has, therefore, shown resilience and perseverance in the expansion of its market, affecting regions and countries that were previously not pivotal for drug trafficking. Central America has been, since the 1970s, one of them, increasing its role as a strategic transit corridor for cocaine shipments destined for North American and European markets. Among these countries, Honduras has emerged as a particularly important hub within transnational trafficking networks due to its geographical position, weak institutional control, and vast rural territories. Beyond its criminal dimension, however, the expansion of narco activity in Honduras has had profound consequences for land governance, political power, and local and indigenous communities. The UN reports that, between 2019 and 2024, the internally displaced people in Honduras were 247,000 on grounds of gang violence, climate change, and other factors[2]. The data for public security is also concerning, being one of the most violent countries in the world, with a homicide rate of 31 per 100,000 people[3]. In 2023, 64% of the population lived under the poverty line, and 41.5% in extreme

[1] UNODC, *World Drug Report 2025*, Vienna, 2025.

[2] Human Rights Watch, *Honduras Events of 2024*, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/honduras#:~:text=Honduras%20has%20been%20for%20years,of%2031%20per%20100%2C000%20people.

[3] Ibidem

poverty[4]. Most importantly, these issues disproportionately affect the ethnic and racial groups in the population. In particular, indigenous territories in Honduras have increasingly become spaces where the dynamics of drug trafficking, land dispossession, State interventionism, and systemic violence intersect.

While existing research has extensively examined drug trafficking as a security issue or a problem of organized crime, fewer studies have explored its connections with historical processes of colonialism and indigenous identity. In Honduras, the expansion of cocaine trafficking has interacted with longstanding inequalities in land tenure, neoliberal reforms, and the political marginalization of indigenous communities. These dynamics suggest that drug trafficking should also be analyzed as part of broader political and historical contexts, stemming from colonial and racialized structures. This thesis, therefore, seeks to explore the relationship between drug trafficking and coloniality, following the evidence from indigenous dispossession and its consequences on indigeneity in Honduras. In addition, the thesis examines the role of international counternarcotics policies, particularly those promoted by the War on Drugs, in shaping these dynamics. The research question of the thesis is: How do drug trafficking and drug control in Honduras reproduce colonial and racialized structures of land control and affect indigenous communities?

To address these issues, the thesis draws on insights from postcolonial theory, Critical Indigenous Studies, and political economy. Specifically, the concept of settler colonialism developed by Patrick Wolfe provides an analytical framework to understand colonialism as an ongoing structure rather than a historical event. This is a relevant notion that allows the identification of the aspects of coloniality in neoliberalism, drug trafficking, and drug control in Honduras. Narco- and neoliberal land-grabbing, drug trafficking, and the militarization of indigenous lands are, under this perspective, seen as processes embedded in longer histories

[4] Ibidem

of colonial and racialized domination. Regarding anthropological issues on indigeneity and indigenous self-determination in contexts of drug trafficking, Michael Taussig has often been a fundamental reference in this thesis. His work "My Cocaine Museum" indeed offers a theoretical bridge for the analysis of illicit economies, State authority, and indigenous communities. Other authors, such as Rony Leonidas Castillo Guity, Kendra McSweeney, Sharlene Mollett, Tim MacNeill, and James Phillips, constitute a substantial foundation of this thesis, as they provide evidence of the implications of coloniality for Honduran politics, society, and indigenous populations. At the same time, the thesis identifies alternative approaches to drug control, drawing on decolonizing and feminist theories, emphasizing the role of international cooperation and social policies, and fostering the empowerment and autonomy of marginalized groups.

Moreover, being myself a white European cis-woman, I have often questioned my rightfulness in writing about these topics and the extent to which I could do it ethically. Apart from my interest in matters of drug trafficking and Central American politics and society, a thought shared by Watego inspired me in the writing process for this thesis: "In telling my stor[y]… I am not claiming the position of 'knower', but rather showing how I came to know"[5]. As a privileged University student, my thesis aims to collect what 'I came to know' through my interdisciplinary studies and identify the issues from a theoretical perspective. Therefore, while I recognize that navigating these issues from my privileged perspective could be controversial, I also believe that addressing them could increase the visibility of marginalized groups and their political struggle.

Since the thesis focuses on indigenous communities in Honduras, the term 'indigenous', according to the Central American debate on identity, is used to identify ethnic groups with aboriginal ancestry, who organize in several indigenous communities. Overall, the generic definition of an ethnic group is: "a

[5] Watego C., *Another day in the colony*, University Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Queensland, 2021.

group of people that identify themselves as individuals sharing cultural, linguistic, religious, behavioral, and biological roots"[6]. This does not mean that all indigenous peoples in Honduras or globally share the same identity and claims. On the contrary, indigenous identities and communities vary within and among countries, as well as their definitions and terminology. This is the reason why contextualization is crucial for this thesis and why the bibliography largely focuses on the Miskitos and Garífuna peoples in Honduras. The similarities and differences of these two indigenous communities allow an interesting understanding of ethnicity as a social construct and ethnic and racial identity as an individual and collective process.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 provides the historical and theoretical background, examining colonial legacies and the formation of indigenous identities and national identity in Honduras. This chapter presents the premises of the colonial and racialized social structure of contemporary Honduran society, where indigenous identities have been marginalized by virtue of the *mestizaje*, creating a relationship of Self-Other between the *mestizo* and the indigenous, as well as the 'white' and the 'black' individuals. Moreover, the Chapter addresses the phenomenon of delegitimization of the Honduran State, widening the topic of coloniality to matters of International Relations, which suggests a relationship of dependence between the US and Honduras. Chapter 2 analyzes the contemporary socio-political framework of indigenous peoples, including the interaction with drug trafficking. Following a review of the demographic and ethnographic aspects of indigenous peoples in Honduras, the Chapter illustrates insights into the racial and ethnic identity of the Garífuna, but also offers the points of contact and contrast with others, like the Miskitos. The reasons why this Chapter focuses on these people are two: firstly, the fact that a

[6] Sandoval J. E. L., *Definiendo al indígena salvadoreño*, in "Identità delle Comunità Indigene del Centro America, Messico e Caraibi: aspetti culturali e antropologici", Third phase of the seminar on the linguistic identity of indigenous peoples of Latin America as an integration and development factor, Istituto Italo-Latino Americano, 25th November 2008, p. 48.

lot of drug trafficking consequences on indigenous peoples have been reported in their lands, along the Atlantic coast where the Moskitia lies (home for Garífunas, Miskitos, Pech, and Tawahkas); secondly, the ethnic and racial discourses around their identity processes and their political activism, have brought relevant evidence of settler colonialism and coloniality in Honduras. Chapter 2 also addresses political issues regarding displacement, migration, and the *golpe* of 2009, as well as a historical and contemporary framework of cocaine trafficking. Chapter 3 explores the relationship between neoliberal policies and land grabbing, with particular attention to indigenous territories. Here, the land tenure system in Honduras is examined, in its controversies and historical bounds. Moreover, narco-land grabbing is analyzed as a result of money laundering, increasing militarization, and affecting the stability and organization of indigenous peoples. Chapter 4 examines the expansion of drug trafficking and its implications for indigenous communities and identity processes, focusing on territorial control and social transformations. Finally, Chapter 5 analyzes the War on Drugs and the role of U.S. counternarcotics policies, discussing their geopolitical implications and possible decolonizing alternatives, drawing on decolonizing and feminist research.

1. Historical Contextualization of Honduras and Indigenous Peoples in Honduras

1. 1. Native populations in the pre-colonial time: Mayan civilization and other aboriginal groups

Before discussing the core topics of my thesis regarding indigeneity and its relationship to narcobusiness in Honduras, I would like to provide a historical contextualization of the country. With this, my goal is to provide a deeper understanding of the social reproduction and national identity processes that characterize Honduran society and affect the indigenous communities. Moreover, by revisiting the country's main historical developments, we can identify the roots of contemporary issues, such as Honduras's dependence on the USA, populist and nationalist uprisings, and the consolidation of neoliberalism as a model of economic growth. For this reason, in the present Chapter, I will identify the most influential events in Central American and Honduran history that relate to and have affected indigenous populations and their identities. Starting from the Mayan civilization and reaching to post-colonialism, I will highlight the presence and development of indigenous communities and groups, as well as of narcobusiness, in Honduras. Finally, I will examine national identity and its relationship to indigeneity and race, drawing on relevant anthropological literature.

To begin with this historical contextualization, Honduras lies within the Mesoamerican region, which comprises Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and El Salvador, and is the land where the Maya extended during the classical period (300-900 CE), as well as the civilizations of the Olmecas, Teotihuacanos, and Aztecs[7]. In Honduras, these civilizations settled in the Western part of the country, whereas the Eastern side was inhabited by Tolupanes, Pech, Tawahkas,

[7] Amaya J. A., *Historia de Honduras*, Tegucigalpa, 2021, pp. 37-40.

Ramas, Caribes, and Yanomami groups. Among the last groups mentioned, we can identify some indigenous peoples still present in eastern Honduras, namely the Tolupanes, Pech, Tawahkas, and Caribes. The main difference between these groups and the Mayan civilization in pre-colonial and colonial times in Honduras was that the former were considered 'less advanced' in institutional and political organization, technology, and economic power. The Mayans, indeed, were organized hierarchically across Central America, with independent groups that were interrelated for social, political, and economic reasons[8]. These preconceptions, reinforced by colonial and racist drifts, will be significant in the perception of indigenous peoples in Honduran society and politics, as I will argue across my thesis.

1. 2. The conquest of the Spanish monarchy (1500-1700)

At the beginning of the 16th century, during the second stage of the Spanish invasion and settlement in the Americas, two simultaneous expeditions brought Spanish troops to the territory of Honduras. In 1523, from Panama and led by Gil Gonzáles Dávila, the Spanish arrived on the Pacific coast of Honduras. In the same year, Hernán Cortés, who had previously conquered the Aztecs in Mexico from 1519 to 1521, sent two additional expeditions to Central America, aiming to reach Guatemala over land and Honduras by sea. The latter, led by Cristóbal de Olid, marked the start of the Spanish conquest of Honduran lands. At this point, as Amaya notes, the colonist territorial lineage was somewhat irregular, and the conquest focused on the Pacific littoral and the Atlantic coasts[9].

The second stage of the Spanish conquest in Honduras involved the occupation of the country's internal lands. This mission was particularly complex, given the formation of mountains and the resistance of native groups and cities. Despite

[8] Amaya J. A., op. cit., pp. 37-40

[9] Ibidem, p. 94.

their resistance, native populations experienced a substantial demographic decline. According to Newson, the native population in 1524 numbered around 800,000, whereas after the Spanish settlement in 1550, it shrank to 132,000[10]. Moreover, many indigenous groups fleeing Spanish troops sought shelter and eventually established themselves in the most mountainous areas, which the Spanish were less inclined to occupy. Remarkably, in 1537, Spanish troops led by Francisco de Montejo started conquering the Lenca population in Western Honduras. During these battles, the native Lenca fought back with considerable endurance and strength. Many legends from this period depicted the Lenca *cacique* Lempira as a hero who fiercely resisted the Spanish, alongside 30,000 Lenca soldiers. However, in 1558, Lempira and his army were defeated, and the Western territories were ceded to the Spanish monarchy. At the same time, Valle de Comayagua, in the center of the country, was also occupied[11].

In the East, Spanish troops reached only the region of Olancho and some areas close to Trujillo, whilst areas like La Moskitia (also known at the time as Taguzgalpa) were never conquered despite several attempts during the colonial period. This was due to the Spanish monarchy's interest in the regions of the *cacicazgos* (a term that was used for the native peoples considered more "civilized", like Lencas, Maya Chorti', Pipis, and Nahua), where societies were more prosperous. On the other hand, groups like Tolupanes, Pech, Tawhakas, and, in the post-conquest period, Miskitios, were less attractive because they were considered "savage" and poor[12]. This division between the 'good and bad' indigenous marked a colonial rhetoric that sought to homogenize the natives in one group of "*indio[s] permitido[s]*" and ultimately eliminate the native

[10] Amaya J. A., op. cit., p. 103.

[11] Ibidem, pp. 98-129.

[12] Ibidem

cultures[13]. The same rhetoric, reinvigorated with racial constructs, has had a strong impact on the current criminalization of indigenous and black peoples in Honduras. With the growth of new industries from the 1800s, those areas that were once considered less attractive have indeed become thriving for mining, energy, tourism, and other business purposes. Indeed, any international and domestic agencies, as well as unlawful businesses, trying to access the ancestral territories are legitimized by these colonial presumptions. Whilst the resisting indigenous groups are often criminalized and accused of raising political violence.

Overall, the conquest, aligned with the "doctrine of discovery", introduced settler colonialism in Central America and structurally threatened the native cultures. The concept of settler colonialism by Patrick Wolfe represents a relevant notion to unravel issues from land-grabbing to ethnocide and genocide, which characterize modernity[14]. As we read in his work, it can be defined as an "inclusive, land-centered project" that comprehensively involves a variety of agencies (not only institutions but also individuals and functionaries), with the aim of "eliminating indigenous societies"[15]. This means that settler colonialism sets its roots with the act of conquering, but perpetuates as a comprehensive project, leading towards the elimination of the native, the homogenization of ethnicities and races, and the prioritization of colonial social and political structures. In my understanding, it represents the foundation of colonial constructs (or "creations", as Wolfe refers to) that persist nowadays in Honduran formal and soft laws, as well as societal structures[16].

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[13] Bessire L., *The Rise of Indigenous Hypermarginality: Native Culture as a Neoliberal Politics of Life*, in "Current Anthropology", 55(3), 2014.

[14] Wolke P., *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native*, in "Journal of Genocide Research", 8(4), 2006.

[15] Ibidem, p. 393.

[16] Ibidem

1. 3. The African Diaspora in Honduras: the Garífuna and the Miskito people

The African diaspora in Central America is a complex matter, as it spread over different centuries, as well as slavery and migration processes. In Honduras, throughout these processes, the Miskitu, the Garifuna, and the Negros de Habla Inglesa communities emerged due to the mixture of different races and ethnicities. The first arrival of black slaves in Central America is registered in the first decades of the 16th century[17]. In the "Profile of the Garífuna people" by the OFRANEH (*Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña*), as Anderson mentions, the Organization explains that Garífunas are descendants of native people and African slaves who escaped to the island of St. Vincent - both groups were then deported from the island to the Honduran, Nicaraguan, and Belizean coasts in 1797[18]. Agudelo states that these native people were named by the Spanish *"kalinago",* a term used for the groups that resided in the Lesser Antilles since the conquest. The name was derived from the native name "*calliponan, calinago* [or] *carinaco*", which eventually became "*Garifuna"* or "*Garinago*" in the 1960s and 1970s[19]. It was eventually used as a synonym for "*caribe"* and "*caníbal"*, both terms deliberately used with the degrading and colonial meaning of "*indio salvaje*". Throughout the 19th century, the term *caribe* (as well as *negros, caribes negros,* or *morenos* in the last decades of the 20th century) became important for the Garífuna to define themselves when speaking to the *mestizo* or foreign populations in Spanish or English[20].

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[17] Euraque D. A., Martínez García Y., *África y la diáspora africana en los programas curriculares en Centroamérica*, in "Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos", 13, 2013.

[18] Anderson M., *When Afro Becomes (like) Indigenous: Garifuna and Afro-INdigenous Politics in Honduras*, in "Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology, 12(2) (2007), p. 388.

[19] Agudelo C., *Los Garifuna, las múltiples identidades de un pueblo afrodescendiente de América Central*, in "Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales", 27(1), 2011, p. 3.

[20] Ibidem, p. 7.

Similarly, the Miskitu people originated from a mix of enslaved people deported by the Portuguese in 1641 and indigenous Sumus. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the British took over the region in order to extend their settlements in the Caribbean, resulting in enslavement, dislocation, and assimilation of the local indigenous people[21]. In 1859, this area was ceded to Honduras under the Wyke-Cruz Treaty between the United Kingdom and Honduras[22]. In contrast to the Garífuna and other indigenous populations, the Miskitu people undertook alliances with the British, granting the community a monopoly on the natural resources in the area[23]. As explained by Mollett, through the region of Moskitia, arguments of white supremacy "both in phenotype and intelligence shaped regional racial hierarchies and became embedded in Mosquitia conventional wisdom"[24]. In the late 18th century, indeed, colonialists would label Miskitos differently depending on the presence of African (Sambo-Miskito) or Amerindian (Tawira) ancestry and relying on their physical appearance[25]. This would also determine the "purity" of the population. Colonial institutions and *mestizo* society described the Sambo-Miskito as having "visible" African phenotypic features, whereas the Tawira, who lacked these characteristics, were classified as "pure Indians". This division contributed to an overall devaluation of the Sambo-Miskito, who were labeled as lazy and retrograde people and were named "*indios selváticos*". This rhetoric rises in contemporary times, not only in a systematic degradation of indigeneity, but also in ethnic and political conflicts between the Miskitos and Garífunas, which question the legacy and the legitimacy of the indigenous claims.

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[21] Herlihy P. H., Tappan T. A., *Recognizing Indigenous Miskitu Territory in Honduras*, in "Geographical Review", 109(1) (2019), p. 70.

[22] MASTA Muskitia Asla Takanka, Equator Initiative Case Studies, UNDP, 2018.

[23] Mollett S., *Race and Natural Resource Conflicts in Honduras: The Miskito and Garifuna Struggle for Lasa Pulan*, in "Latin American Research Review, 41(1), 2006, p. 80

[24] Ibidem, p. 88.

[25] Ibidem, p. 87.

Therefore, despite sharing similar historical and ethnographic characteristics, these two populations have shown some differences in their political involvement in claiming their rights and identities. The research by Mollett illustrates some of these controversies with regard to the territoriality of Lasa Pulan, in the Northern Coast of Honduras[26]. In the dispute over ancestry and access to land, the two communities have quite opposite perspectives on their ethnic and racial identity. On one hand, the Garífuna have focused on the relevance of their self-determination as indigenous and black people, and refused the categories of Afro-descendants, Afro-indigenous, or Afro-honduran. These terms, therefore, highlighted only the African ancestry of the community without recognizing the dual nature of their ethnic and racial identity as indigenous and Afro-descendants. On the other hand, the Miskitos have shown denial of their African ancestry, widely influenced by the embedded "cultural meaning and socio-historical context that today inform subaltern subjectivity", a form of superiority of white and *mestizo* identity over the indigenous and black identities[27]. These episodes show, indeed, how rooted settler colonial structures are and how the process of *mestizaje* - that I will discuss in the next section - proposed a parameter of purity in the Honduran society and among the indigenous communities.

1. 4. The heterogeneity of *mestizo* and indigenous identity during colonization and the invisibility of black indigenous and slavery

When discussing settler colonialism, I already had the chance to anticipate some aspects that I will further analyze in the present subchapter. For instance, I mentioned the colonial connotation of the "*indio permitido*" that initiated the process of elimination of the indigenous culture in Honduras, justified by the

[26] Mollett S., *Race and Natural Resource Conflicts in Honduras: The Miskito and Garifuna Struggle for Lasa Pulan*, op. cit.

[27] Ibidem, p. 96.

doctrine of discovery. While establishing in Honduras, the Spanish settlers intended to homogenize the native peoples according to the colonial standards. This occurred through *mestizaje* (also known as *ladinización* or *desindianización*), a process of integration and assimilation that replaced local beliefs and cultures with a univocal identity brought by the Spanish, rooted in white supremacy and Catholic values[28]. In more extreme cases, this process carried on a genealogical repression of non-white ethnicities, aimed at eliminating the native and "purifying" the population. This process contributed to the flattening of ethnic diversity in Honduras and to the reinforcement of nationalist ideals and identity throughout the 19th century, leading to the invisibility of some historical and anthropological aspects of different ethnic groups, as I will soon argue.

During the colonial time, the population's ethnic and racial identity had three categories: *mestiza* (white-indigenous), *mulata* (white-black), and *zamba* or *parda* (indigenous-black). They were known as "*las tres razas*" and belonged to the more widespread '*ladino'* classification, according to censuses dated in the colonial times. Many times, these categories are described simplistically and by convenience as follows. The *mestizo* represents the mixture of the white people and the native indigenous; the *mulata* is the mixture between white and black people; finally, the *zamba* (or *parda*) is the mixture of native indigenous and black people. However, as Euraque highlights, these categories have not been homogeneous, and they were imprecisely registered in censuses from the 19th and 20th centuries under the same name of '*ladino'*[29]. This produced inaccuracy in the historiography of ethnic and racial groups in Honduras, since the term '*ladino'* encompassed multiple combinations of races and ethnicities. By

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[28] Castillo Guity, R. L., *Iseri lidáwsmsri: autonomía territorial y educativa en la comunidad garifuna de Vallecito en Honduras*, University of Texas at Austin, 2021.

[29] Euraque D. A., *Apuntes para una historiografía del mestizaje*, in "Iberoamericana (2001-)", 5(19), p. 108.

comparing data from different studies (e.g., Barahona and Newson), Euraque notices some incoherence and claims that the inclusion of all racial heterogeneity in the category '*ladino*' compromised the historical racial classification[30].

Previously, I mentioned the concept of "*indio permitido*" as a heritage of settler colonialism that allowed the settlers to homogenize and eliminate the native. Here, I would like to discuss the specific case of Honduras more thoroughly and identify in the *mestizaje* the reason for this generalization. The '*ladino'* generic yet heterogeneous ethnic and racial identity served to distinguish the population from the '*indios'*[31]. This latter class consisted of indigenous peoples who were considered 'less civilized' and did not adhere to Spanish values and principles. In fewer words, *ladino* was the righteous *mestizo* Honduran individual or "*indio permitido*", as opposite of what the '*indio selvaje*' defined. This distinction is still applicable to the contemporary social structure of Honduras, where '*indios*' is a socially constructed term to indicate the 'bad and savage' indigenous peoples. The latter are pictured as the poor people living in the rural areas of the country, and those who violently and unrighteously resist and fight the establishment. Drawing on postcolonial theory, this reflects the colonial and racist logic of the Self and the Other: the archetype of the Honduran *mestizo* citizen, as opposed to that of the criminalized '*indio'*. This is what Castillo Guity refers to as the logic of construction of the colonial States, which focused on slavery and "the production of '*negro*' and '*indio*' categorized as 'others' in relation to white supremacy"[32]. The myth of *mestizaje* creates attempts of homogeneity, providing indigenous peoples with "constructed images of mobility and fluidity of identity that require the adoption of dominant cultural traits"[33]. These dominant traits are

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[30] Euraque D. A., *Apuntes para una historiografía del mestizaje*, op. cit., p. 108.

[31] Ibidem

[32] Castillo Guity R. L., op. cit.

[33] Mollett S., op. cit., p. 86

framed in a social-racial hierarchy that makes the indigenous claims of identity and rights "constructed as false", eventually neglected because held to be inferior[34].

Moreover, according to Euraque, the heterogeneity of this classification contributed to a distortion of blackness in Honduran historiography[35]. Indigenous Afro-descendants and *mestizo* indigenous, specifically, have often been invisible and homogenized in the category of '*ladinos'*. As a consequence, the specificities and historical issues of these communities, especially of black communities, have been dismissed since colonial times. Euraque shows, for example, that words like 'slavery' and '*negro/a'* do not appear in the Honduran national basic curriculum (CNB) in the colonial period, erasing the Afro-descendent trace and merging the ethnicities into the *mestizo* dominant ethnic group *a priori*[36]. In the parallelism of gold mining and cocaine cultivation, Taussig collects these paradigms and wonders why there is no place, no museum, to assemble the history of the African slaves who served the colonists and today's drug-traffickers. In his book, he describes the industry of gold and cocaine as very similar phenomena, which are close to the concept of transgression and survival. We could paraphrase his thought by saying that these are white industries that push people to the limits of the law, and that by doing so, they highlight the existing social rules and hierarchies - including the invisibility of black and indigenous communities[37].

This invisibility causes indigenous peoples to be traditionally addressed in studies as "instruments" rather than subjects of history, omitting substantial information about their identity and their culture and replacing it with the

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[34] Mollett S., op. cit.

[35] Ibidem

[36] Euraque D. A., Martínez García Y., *África y la diáspora africana en los programas curriculares en Centroamérica*, op. cit., p. 39

[37] Taussig M., *My Cocaine Museum,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2004.

dominant *mestizo* one[38]. For instance, Castillo Guity's concept of the colonial logics for the construction of the '*negro'* and '*indio'* as 'others' confirms the settler-colonial aim of eliminating indigeneity and blackness[39]. Embracing European traditional and religious values and ideas of modernization, the *mestizo* identity was built in Honduras upon ethnic and racial superiority, counterposing the identity of the '*indio'*, classified as retrograde and savage. For this reason, indigenous peoples have been considered as the social groups that live outside the boundaries of citizenship, righteousness, and lawfulness.

1. 5. National identity in the context of independence and reconstruction in the 19th century

The Honduran national identity consolidated during the independence period in the 19th century. Because of the war between Spain and the United Kingdom in 1795, followed by Napoleon's invasion of Spain between 1808 and 1814, the Spanish monarchy lost much colonial and geopolitical power. In Central America, this resulted in independence movements. The dominant classes - *criollos* and *peninsulares*[40] - started showing disagreements regarding the future of the colonies. Between 1811 and 1814, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras experienced the first riots for independence from the Spanish monarchy[41]. On September 15, 1821, the civil, church, and military authorities of Guatemala (and some of the other Central American provinces) signed the Act of Independence. Along with declaring Guatemala independent from Spain and México, the Act convened a Congress of the Provinces, marking the independence of Central America (Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua).

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[38] Ibidem, p. 110

[39] Castillo Guity, R. L., op. cit.

[40] *Criollos* were mestizos born to high-ranking people. *Peninsulares* were Spanish colonists.

[41] Amaya J. A., op. cit., pp. 167-170.

Subsequently, after a year of annexation by the Mexican empire, the Congress of the United Provinces claimed absolute independence and declared a Constituent Assembly, which originated on November 22, 1824, and established the *República Federal de Centroamérica*[42].

As we read in Hernández Gamero, Sierra Fonseca, inspired by Leopoldo Sea and José del Valle, pointed out that the independence period was pivotal in Honduras for opening possibilities for the construction of its national identity. The new national identity was ideally meant to overcome the Spanish monarchy, marking its institutional and territorial independence[43]. Inspired by the Constitution of Cádiz, the new Constitution of Central America promoted the concept of '*patria'*, which was, on the one hand, sustained by liberal and democratic principles. On the other hand, Central American identity was reconstructed during independence through notions that involved society at different levels. Gamero mentions, for example, Miguel Lardizábal, the political governor of Tegucigalpa, who, in 1867, claims that "the independence is bound to the '*patria*', the '*patria*' to the home, the family and all the dearest things that link people to their land"[44]. This concept of national identity, which embodies independence, home, family, and land, and is blended through *mestizaje*, is the result of the re-conceptualization of Honduran identity after 1824.

In this period, we could place the establishment of the political elite as the dominant class in Honduras throughout its contemporary history. This class emerged when the political competition involved only two political parties (the Conservatives and the Liberals), mirroring the US two-party system. From 1870, with the ideology of modernization, economic liberalism, and the rejection of Spanish and Church institutions, the Liberals perpetuated *mestizaje* and laid the

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[42] Amaya J. A., op. cit., pp. 184-190.

[43] Hernández Gamero E. O., *El concepto "patria": de la Constitución de Cádiz a la independencia de Honduras y Guatemala*, in "Bicentenario de Centroamérica" by Juliana Gil Ortiz, 2021, pp. 493-94.

[44] Ibidem, p. 495.

foundation for capitalist and oligarchic elites. As observed by Lee Woodward, in Honduras, these elites "continued to live off the labor of an oppressed rural population that shared little if any of the benefits of the expanded export production"[45]. Arguably, within this societal frame, we shall identify the consideration of indigenous peoples as the latter oppressed population. Indeed, Liberals, inspired by positivist materialism, strengthened the idea of the '*indios'* as an anti-progress and retrograde population, and spread a sentiment of embarrassment about the Indian heritage of the country[46]. In 1930, the Honduran official population was classified as *mestiza*, formalizing the ethnic and racial superiority in the national census[47]. Another example of this is that in 1929, a law prohibited black people from entering Honduras without paying a deposit and imposed unaffordable entrance taxes[48].

Remarkably, regardless of the discrimination, repression, and violence that indigenous peoples experienced, some of them developed a strong sense of citizenship, conserved in the ethnic collective memory of some oral traditions. For instance, as we read in Craft, in the play *Loubavagu*, the Garífuna people call for a place in the Honduran national identity: "*Déjame entrar, déjame entrar connacional […] Soy hondureño / de nacimiento / déjame pasar*"[49] [50]. This example demonstrates the 'otherness' that characterized the Garífuna and other indigenous peoples in Honduras, as people who lie outside the boundary of patriotism and citizenship. Nevertheless, it is countered by the peaceful activism

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[45] Woodward R. L., *The Rise and Decline of Liberalism in Central America: Historical Perspectives on the Contemporary Crisis*, in "Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs", 26(3), 1984, p. 294.

[46] Ibidem, p. 293.

[47] Euraque D. A., *Apuntes para una historiografía del mestizaje*, op. cit., p. 113.

[48] Mollett S., op. cit. p. 91

[49] translation: "Let me through, compatriot, let me through […] I am Honduran / by birth / let me through".

[50] Craft L., *Ethnicity, Oral Tradition, and the Processed Word: Construction of a National Identity in Honduras,* in "Revista Hispánica Moderna", 51(1), 1998, p. 41.

of the Garífuna people, an attempt to enter the sphere of citizenship. In this oral evidence, the Garífuna people share a comprehensive idea of ethnic heterogeneity and national identity that resembles the double consciousness of DuBois[51]. The fact that indigenous and black subjectivities are systemically marginalized and racialized gives them a double perception of their identity. On one hand, there is the individual and collective self-identification. On the other hand, they embody the 'otherness' and are aware of the racist and colonial logics that depict them as 'other' compared to the *mestizo*. This makes the Garífuna community, like many other indigenous communities in Honduras, a strongly politicized group, which relies on its political activities and awareness.

1. 6. Liberal dominance in the political sphere and its implications

At the end of the 19th century, as previously mentioned, liberal governance led Honduras to economic growth and modernization. This is the time of the industrial revolution and social and economic transformation, processes that, in Honduras, were more closely associated with the Liberal Party rather than the Conservative Party. The Liberals envisioned an emulation of the US economic liberalism, encouraging privatization, foreign trade, immigration, and investment[52]. Overall, this resulted in large investments in foreign trade, the mining sector, mahogany and other woods, and plantation agriculture[53]. Central American countries witnessed a time of economic growth and prosperity. In some of them, these processes generated changes in the social structure, leading to the emergence of new middle classes and elites in the coffee industry[54]. Along with

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[51] Castillo Guity R. L., op. cit.

[52] Woodward R. L., *The Rise and Decline of Liberalism in Central America: Historical Perspectives on the Contemporary Crisis*, op. cit.

[53] Phillips J., *Misery Financing Development: Subsidized Neoliberalism and Privatized Dependency in Honduras*, in "Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development", 46(1/2), 2017.

[54] Woodward R. L., ibidem.

this, however, the presence and influence of the US on these States became more impactful, and social implications on the lower classes and indigenous communities increased. In the case of Honduras, unlike the West and other Central American countries, the social structure did not witness the development of a strong middle class as a result of liberal economic transformations. This failure marked high levels of poverty and economic dependence on the North Atlantic countries, especially the US.

As pointed out by Lee Woodward, the most thriving sector in Honduras by the end of the 19th century was the mining sector[55]. Similar to the coffee industry in other Central American countries, the mining sector contributed to the Honduran economic development during the last decades of the 20th century. Despite this, the industry failed at creating the conditions for building a strong and influential middle class. The middle and working classes suffered from inadequate wages and welfare and were gradually silenced and dismissed by political programs. According to many scholars, this was the reason economic growth concentrated in the elite class, affirming its dominance over the rest of the population[56]. As a consequence, the Liberals became the dominant political and elite class, defending their own interests at the expense of other classes and groups. To say it with Woodward, they "became the conservatives of the twentieth century", reinforcing a *mestizo* and racist establishment[57]. The liberal elite formed a liberal oligarchic State that had an "almost exclusive right" to "use and dispose […] natural and human resources of the country" for the sake of economic, social, and political development, as Phillips argues[58]. This might explain the large labour exploitation that suppressed the lower class and the indigenous peoples,

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[55] Woodward R. L., ibidem.

[56] Woodward R. L., op. cit.

[57] Ibidem, p. 295.

[58] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Honduras*, 2019.

facilitated by the racist and colonial premises of the Honduran society. Among the cases of injustice towards indigenous peoples, we could mention the Tolupanes communities. As Phillips analyzes, their people have been the object of forced labor in the coffee and *sarsaparilla* (*Smillax officinalis*) cultivation and forced evictions in lands where they had legal recognition of their ancestral claims[59].

Liberal domination in the political sphere in Honduras slowed down during the rise of fascist regimes and the difficulties brought by the Great Depression during the 1920s. Central America experienced the awakening of dictatorships to counter and contain the discontent of the middle and working classes and the spread of communist ideology[60]. Most importantly, however, at the beginning of the 20th century, Honduras was already fully absorbed in the economic dominion of the US.

1. 7. The imperialist chain of dependence between the US and Honduras

The legacy of the liberal transformation that characterized the 20th century included the relationship with the USA, which gradually imposed a neocolonial imperialist US dominion in Honduras. This bond was forged with the investments in foreign trade, which, by the end of 1800, as previously mentioned, allowed US extractivist and agricultural businesses to dominate Central American economies. In the 20th century, the relationship between the US and Honduras turned into a military and economic alliance. The US has been involved in trade, military training, transnational issues, environmental protection, and counternarcotics measures. This cooperation ultimately developed into a proper dependence that is still affecting the civil and indigenous society. The consequences have been enormous and involve the functioning of

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[59] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Honduras*, op. cit., p. 348.

[60] Woodward R. L., op. cit., p. 297.

the political and economic spheres in Honduran contemporary history. Not only did the closeness to the US have repercussions on the political ideology, introducing concepts like neoliberalism and extractivism in Honduras, but it also compromised the overall efficiency and accountability of the Honduran State.

As seen before, the US influence in Honduras was already established in the 19th century, with the liberal-democratic ideology, leading to an oligarchic State that dismissed the needs of the middle class. However, it was in the 20th century that this relationship skyrocketed and had severe consequences on the functioning of the Honduran State and its society. Specifically, in 1954, the two countries signed a bilateral treaty for military assistance, which guaranteed Honduras military aid and provisions from the US. Meanwhile, their economic cooperation was also giving signs of reinforcement. The 1950s also marked a peak in banana production and export. Notably, this fruit industry was internationally, mostly by the US, fostered and became an emblem of the US-driven economic imperialism in Central and South America[61]. As a result, Honduran immigration to the US and internal migration became phenomena with increasing social and political implications, especially among the Garífuna people who were hired or whose fields were used by the agricultural companies[62]. Moreover, the global situation of the Cold War, as well as natural catastrophes and other domestic instabilities, strengthened the relationship between the US and Honduras.

The Cold War significantly impacted the US dominance over Honduran developments in the military and agro-economic fields. Indeed, between 1950 and 1969, the US expenditure on military aid reached $8 billion, and members of the Honduran armed forces were training in the US or in the Panama Canal

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[61] Reichman D. R., *The Broken Village: Coffee, Migration, and Globalization in Honduras*, IRL Press, 2011.

[62] Ibidem

Zone[63]. By 1980, Honduras was the main US ally against the Sandinista revolutionary government in Nicaragua[64]. The military and economic aid at that time reached $1.6 billion, and in 1983, the Joint Task Force was funded as a troop presence with US military personnel, still active today[65]. As a consequence of the Cold War on civil society, during the 1980s and 1990s, anti-communist rhetoric spread in Honduras under the auspices of the US. This encouraged the elimination of community-based land tenures, affecting the communal lands of indigenous peoples[66]. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the military and economic aid seemed to decelerate. Nevertheless, in 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated the country, which received additional assistance from the US. Along with economic aid, the US provided the neoliberal model to reinvigorate the Honduran extractivism, eco-tourism, and agro-business. According to Moyo, economic subsidies - namely, aid - raise issues regarding the institutional independence of a State and the sustainable and efficient economic development of the economy[67]. Recipient countries are, therefore, "inhibited" in their growth and respond with accountability only to their donor[68]. This entangles a chain of dependency between the two countries, where the recipient country neglects the interests of its classes in order to continuously benefit from the external subsidies. This criticism is important when addressing the intrinsic issues of the US military and economic presence in Honduras.

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[63] Sieder R., *Honduras: The Politics of Exception and Military Reformism (1972-1978)*, in "Journal of Latin American Studies", 27(1), 1995.

[64] Bowman K., *The Public Battles over Militarisation and Democracy in Honduras*, 1954–1963, in "Journal of Latin American Studies", 33(3), 2001.

[65] Sullivan M. P., *Honduras: Political and Economic Situation and U.S. Relations*, in "CRS Report for Congress", Congressional Research Service, 2005.

[66] Phillips J., *Misery Financing Development: Subsidized Neoliberalism and Privatized Dependency in Honduras*, op. cit.

[67] Moyo D., *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2009.

[68] Ibidem, p. 57.

Authors like Phillips introduced the argument of the chain of dependence between the US and Honduras using a structural approach. Therefore, while the market-based approach advanced by Moyo offers a relevant critique of the role of subsidies in international cooperation, it falls short in accounting for their broader social and political implications. For this reason, the dependency and postcolonial theory carried on by Phillips could be more useful when addressing this issue in Honduras. As Phillips argues, the development model based on privatization, inspired by the US, has led the Honduran government to gradually transfer responsibilities for its functions to individuals or the US[69]. These mechanisms activated a hierarchical chain, where lower classes and indigenous peoples can survive but have no political resonance. To mention Phillips:

> "[M]echanisms of dependency provide tenuous lifelines to the poor and desperate, lifelines controlled by powerful private interests. […] [I]t creates for individuals, neighborhoods, and communities a condition that enables them to survive but always fear that the tenuous lifeline could be broken if at any time people do not do what is demanded of them, or if they show signs of resistance.[70]"

Phillips further argues that military and economic aid have caused a chain of dependence built upon different institutional and social levels. The first layer of this chain represents the dependence of Honduras on US military and economic aid. Since security is ensured through this cooperation, the government elite is bound to neoliberal development, represented by another layer of dependence. Finally, the general population and indigenous peoples depend on forms of private property in order to see their lands recognized and have the right to usufruct[71].

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[69] Phillips J., *Misery Financing Development: Subsidized Neoliberalism and Privatized Dependency in Honduras*, op. cit.

[70] Ibidem, p. 6

[71] Ibidem

This chain is particularly problematic when it comes to indigenous rights and land-grabbing due to narcotics trafficking. According to the author, indeed, a consequence of this dependence is that, on the one hand, the government relies almost entirely on foreign aid for security assistance; on the other hand, it needs internal sources of violence to ensure local governance[72]. Apart from the police and the Honduran military, these internal sources are often effectively constituted by gangs and drug traffickers, who ultimately bring violence and threats to indigenous lands. As I will discuss in the next Chapter, this is proved by the overlapping of the military and actors who control drug trafficking in Central America since the 2010s.

1. 8. Neoliberalism and the structural implications in the delegitimization of the State

The 1990s began with chronic debt in the Honduran economy and deep social and economic iniquities[73]. Neoliberalism became the promise for economic growth. But once again, the promise was made under the auspices of the US. Since its introduction in the 1980s with an agrarian land-titling project (see the *Proyecto de Titulación de Tierras* in Chapter 3), neoliberalism has aimed to revitalize economic development through extractivist and tourist projects at the expense of indigenous peoples and lower social classes. As Goodale and Postero defined it, neoliberalism is the theory of political economic practices that promote "individual entrepreneurial freedoms" and skills throughout the privatization of "property rights, free markets, and free trade"[74]. In Honduras, its implementation was considered a necessary step towards economic development

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[72] Phillips J., *Misery Financing Development: Subsidized Neoliberalism and Privatized Dependency in Honduras*, op. cit.

[73] Ibidem

[74] Goodale M., Postero N., *Revolution and Retrenchment: Illuminating the Present in Latin America*, in "Neoliberalism Interrupted: Social Change and Contested Governance in Contemporary Latin America", 2013.

and economic growth. In reality, however, neoliberalism has weakened the Honduran government's accountability and has been the expression of US imperialism and ideology in Honduras. Based on this model, communal and cooperative land arrangements were condemned because of their supposed inefficiency in the economy.

A relevant consequence of neoliberalism in Honduras is related to the role of the State and its legitimation. Taussig sees a similarity between neoliberalism and the Death Ship, not only because of the limitation or absence of state regulations, but especially because of a side effect of that limitation. Due to the absence of regulations and the transfer of freedoms to the private sector, individuals are more vulnerable to the existing rules: "[…] at sea there is no state, yet the reason the sailors work the Death Ship is because they have no passport and hence no national or legal identity"[75]. The absence of laws and legal identities is the exact reason why the ship can sail, implicitly relying on the rules once settled by society. This essentially leads to two consequences: the delegitimization of the State, and the perpetuation of colonized and racialized hierarchies and rules in the private agencies (like gold mining, cocaine cultivation and trafficking, as we read in Taussig's work). Under neoliberal practices, such as private land ownership and development projects, the State transfers to individuals and foreign actors the responsibility for functions and matters that should involve the State. In the long run, this practice transfers the accountability and authority of the Honduran State, leading towards a proper "delegitimization of the State as the propeller of development and the builder of society"[76]. This represents the "dispersed energies" mentioned by Reichman, following Hopenhayn's literature on postmodernity in Latin American countries[77]. Within a neoliberal framework,

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[75] Taussig M., op. cit. p. 64

[76] Reichman D. R, op. cit.

[77] Ibidem

practices that were meant for the "socialist or capitalist modernization, are now channeled toward more narrowly focused projects for the betterment of individuals or relatively small social groups" like foreign companies or the Honduran elite.

These focused projects, which serve as new channels for the political energies, have three directions. The first one is market-driven and is represented by foreign companies or local businesses. The second one involves the third sector and civil society, such as activists, churches, and NGOs, which often substitute the State in Honduras. And finally, the third one is organized criminality and gangs, which often incorporate the role of State alternatives and territory-bound groups. Within the first category, we may find development projects advocated by international actors that nourish the social hierarchy and accommodate foreign and neocolonial interests. Phillips gives the example of the environmental and ecological protection projects on the northern coast of Honduras, where some protected areas (PAs) have been established. Facts were somewhat controversial. Whereas Garífuna communities were obliged to formally request and obtain permissions and licenses to get access and use certain areas for traditional activities, other touristic and economic activities were not at all limited[78]. These examples are evidence of how neoliberalism contributes to the social inequalities and hierarchies in Honduras. The other two directions target the lower classes and the indigenous peoples. As argued by Reichman, the consequence of the delegitimization of a State is that people turn to other agencies to address their concerns[79]. Another way to describe this is that intensive privatization and dependency on economic and military aid, like those experienced in Honduras, may open the way to State-alternatives.

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[78] Phillips J., *Misery Financing Development: Subsidized Neoliberalism and Privatized Dependency in Honduras*, op. cit., p. 27.

[79] Reichman D. R, op. cit.

2. Political and social framework of the current situation of indigenous peoples and drug trafficking in Honduras

2. 1. Demographic and ethnographic overview of the indigenous peoples in Honduras

Based on the last national census (2013), 9% of the Honduran population is indigenous[80]. Compared to other countries in Central and South America, such as Guatemala and Bolivia, where indigenous peoples represent almost half of the general population, the indigenous population of Honduras is relatively small. However, these numbers should not suggest that indigenous communities in Honduras are less affected by issues like displacement, violence, and other human rights infractions. On the contrary, criminality and injustice towards indigenous peoples in Honduras have an equal or even more severe impact on their identity, their land, and their rights as humans and as communities. In this chapter, I will address the matter of indigeneity in Honduras, providing answers to questions such as: What indigenous communities are there in Honduras? What is indigeneity according to these communities and in academic literature? Eventually, I will also introduce and analyze the socioeconomic issues caused by neoliberalism and drug trafficking, as well as the history of narcobusiness in Honduras.

According to the census aforementioned, Honduras is home to the following eight indigenous communities (number of members in brackets)[81]:

- Lenca (453.672), who live mainly in the Intibucá, La Paz, Lempira, and Santa Bárbara Departments in the West of the country.
- Maya Chortí (33.256), in the western Copán and Ocotepeque Departments.
- Tolupán (19.033) in the central Yoro and Francisco Morazán Departments.

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[80] Censo de Población y Vivienda 2013, INE, available at https://ine.gob.hn/censo-de-poblacion-y-vivienda-2013/.

[81] Ibidem

Figure 1. Source: Freguin-Gresh and Huybrechs 2014, p. 23.

- Garífuna (43.111), on the Atlantic seaboard stretching from the Cortés Department to the Gracias a Dios Department.
- Nahua (6.339) in the eastern Olancho Department
- Pech (6.024), in the Colón, Olancho, and Gracias A Dios Departments.
- Tawahka (2.690), in the eastern Olancho, Colón, and Gracias a Dios Departments.
- Miskito (80.007) in the Gracias a Dios Department.

The map above is from a study by Freguin-Gresh and Huybrechts, representing the geographical distribution of indigenous communities in Honduran territory. As already discussed in the historical Chapter, Central America is the nest of a diversity of ethnic groups, stemming from the pre-Columbian and the Spanish colonization times. This variety was also determined by the migration of slaves and native peoples from Africa and South America during the 16th and 17th centuries, resulting in a mixture of ethnicities and races. Within this frame,

Honduras is influenced by two cultural regions, the Mesoamerican and the Isthmo-Colombian. The first one comprises the western and southwestern communities, such as Maya Chortí and Lenca. Whilst the second one includes populations in the east, such as the Pech, Tawahka, and Miskitos, which share Chibcha and Misumalpan origins[82]. The map also shows the community of *Negros Creoles* (or *Negros de Habla Inglesa*), an Afro-descendant community with around 12,337 people settled in the Caribbean islands, according to estimations from the Minority Rights Group[83]. Several of these territories are officially recognized as ancestral lands, and some are protected areas aiming at conserving their biodiversity. Nonetheless, as previously discussed, neoliberalism targeted these territories for development projects and drug trafficking activities, as they are profitable lands, rich in labor and natural resources. This leads to dreadful consequences for the protection of natural resources and the safety of indigenous peoples living in those territories. In Chapters 4 and 5, I will further expose the reasons for the exploitation of these lands and resources by the actors of neoliberalism and narcobusiness. In doing so, I will particularly focus on the areas along the Northern coast, home to Garífunas and Miskitos, since they are some of the most affected lands by narcotic trafficking.

Mollett claims that the State is accountable for struggles over natural resources. State practices and land claims, like the protected areas (PAs) aimed at environmental sustainability, reproduce "colonial racial representations of local people"[84]. In many cases, the State decides who can access and what activities can be carried out in the area. Often, these decisions are made within racialized boundaries and establish a territorialization process that puts indigenous and black people at stake. Territorialization is meant to be, in this way, a legitimate

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[82] Baldi N. F. Herrera-Paz E. F., *Importance of anthropological genetics research in Honduras, Central America*, in "Revisit Argentina de Antropología Biológica", 26(2) (2024), p. 5

[83] Censo de Población y Vivienda, op. cit.

[84] Mollett S., op. cit., p. 79

practice of the State authority, which unravels racialized boundaries that continue to "echo colonial classifications"[85]. In this regard, Phillips condemns the environmental protection promoted by green neoliberalism in Honduras. Under this development model, some traditional activities of indigenous peoples have been limited and taxed. For example, the Garífuna's activity of fishing and shell fishing has been reduced, and a tax has been imposed on them to access and use the areas. Interestingly, Phillips points out that in some areas, the very same activity, when aimed at tourism, was allowed. This endures a systematic and racialized "otherism" that, as Phillips says, re-defines the Garífuna:

> "[N]ot as people who have collectively and sustainably used and nurtured their environment for generations, but rather as potential threats […] whose subsistence activities and cultural practices must be delimited by a state […] with the stroke of the policy pen"[86].

These political stands constitute the core element of the hyper-marginilization of the indigenous and black people, picturing them as "selfish and unpatriotic"[87]. Arguably, marginalization in Honduras, as well as other countries in Central and South America, is a phenomenon that takes place also in those contexts where the State is delegitimized and where different non-State or alternative State actors, private or clandestine activities dominate. As Wolfe claims, these situations are encouraged by the settler-colonial dynamic where "the American right to buy always superseded the Indian right not to sell"[88]. Similarly, the individual foreign or Honduran right to own lands outweighs the right to indigenous ancestral lands, even when running illegal business like drug trafficking.

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[85] Mollett S., op. cit., p. 79

[86] Phillips J., *Misery Financing Development: Subsidized Neoliberalism and Privatized Dependency in Honduras*, op. cit., p. 26.

[87] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Honduras*, p. 365

[88] Wolfe P., op. cit.

2. 2. Ethnic and racial identity in Honduras: a focus on the Garífuna people

2. 2. 1. A contemporary political, juridical, and historical frame

The concept of indigeneity in Honduras takes a variety of connotations, depending on the history of the communities and their recent development with or against the government. The Garífuna scholar Castillo Guity describes race and ethnicity as socially constructed identities. Indigeneity, under this perspective, is an ethnicity related to the cultural difference in a given geographical space, and it is a form of reclaiming ancestral lands[89]. Overall, indigenous peoples in Honduras share some aspects of their ethnic identity, such as communal and collective management of land and resources, often menaced by neoliberal tendencies. From an economic perspective, their economies are sustained by self-sufficient agriculture of corn, beans, yuca, and plantains, by fisheries, and artisanal manufacture[90]. Moreover, indigeneity in Honduras is an ethnic identity that relies on several spiritual and political aspects, among which we find strong and peaceful political participation through resistance and activism, particularly developed over the last few decades. Indeed, as indigenous communities learnt how to survive in a colonial, imperialist, and capitalist country, they shaped political values to claim their ethnic identity and ancestry. Castillo Guity quotes Ruth Trinidad Galvan's work on transmigrant women in Mexico to find new perspectives on the analysis of the population of Garífuna in Honduras[91]. Specifically, the author sees a similarity between the Garífuna women in Honduras and the transmigrant women in Mexico, since they "creatively inspire one another throughout the community, the spirituality, the activism, and the support of cross-border collective groups and communities to

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[89] Castillo Guity, R. L., *Iseri lidáwsmsri: autonomía territorial y educativa en la comunidad garifuna de Vallecito en Honduras*, op. cit.

[90] De Ochoa O. Torres de Midence M. C., *2001 Biodiversidad y Comunidades Indígenas Lencas en Honduras,* Tegucigalpa 2001.

[91] Castillo Guity, R. L., ibidem.

survive"[92]. These political aspects are often shared by several indigenous peoples in Honduras, who have at times overcome their differences and have come together in their activism. The ethnic communities and groups in Honduras have had their disputes throughout history regarding the definition of the borders of indigeneity. As mentioned before, the Miskito and Garífuna people, regardless of their similarities, have confronted each other with racialized arguments and discourses of exclusivity. Nonetheless, their political stands against the foreignization and privatization of the land market and the injustices they both endure have constituted a core element of solidarity and reciprocal support. For example, Castillo Guity reports the alliance between the two communities on the occasion of a women's national meeting led by the OFRANEH. The event was attended by 1300 women, 50 of whom were Miskitas. One of them claimed:

> "*Quisimos venir a acompañar la lucha del hermano pueblo garífuna. Nosotros también hemos sido un pueblo sufrido y abandonado. Pero entre mujeres podemos ayudarnos y exigir a este país que nos respete nuestros derechos y nuestras tierras.*[93]"[94]

In the previous Chapter, I analyzed that during colonial and post-colonial times, the indigenous peoples were classified as '*indios'* or '*ladinos'* depending on their integration with Spanish and colonial values. By the end of the 20th century, during the 80s-90s, the indigenous movement in Honduras started strengthening, and political awareness among its members rose. In 1982, the term '*indígena'* appeared in the new Constitution of the Republic of Honduras after a decade of dictatorship. In Article 346, we read that "[I]t is the duty of the State to adopt measures to protect the rights and interests of the indigenous communities in the

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[92] Galvan R. T., *Women Who Stay Behind: Pedagogies of Survival in Rural Transmigrant Mexico, 1sr edition*, University of Ariona Press, Tucson, 2015.

[93] Translated: "We wanted to come to support the fight of the Garífuna brother-group. We have also been an enduring and abandoned group. However, within us women, we can help each other to demand that the country respects our rights and lands".

[94] Castillo Guity R. L., op. cit.

country, especially of the lands and forests in which they are settled"[95]. In 1995, Honduras became a signatory to the ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (No. 169). The Convention has drawn a multifaceted definition of indigeneity and was the first international attempt to protect indigenous rights worldwide. Accordingly, indigenous and tribal peoples differ from the national community in terms of social, cultural, and economic conditions; their status is regulated either by special laws or by their own customs. Finally, they share cultural and geographical aspects with the populations that inhabited the region at the time of the colonization or conquest by the settlers. Remarkably, the Convention also highlights the relevance of self-determination, a principle ultimately determining indigeneity (particularly important element in the case of the indigenous peoples in the Honduran region)[96]. These are the relevant steps that Honduras took to open the debate regarding the "*problema indígena de Honduras*" or "*indigenismo*", which institutionalized the political issues of indigeneity and simultaneously brought some new concerns[97].

Therefore, the institutional integration and recognition of indigenous peoples was driven by multicultural neoliberalism, which inherently reproduced racist and colonialist standards. Castillo Guity explains that multicultural policies of racial and ethnic recognition might promote colorblindness[98] and racial democracy. This adheres to the criticism of Omi and Winant, which claims that every form of racial classification is inherently racist[99]. Together with Mollett's literature, which claims that the State often "reinforce[s] racialized binaries" through

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[95] Constitution of the Republic of Honduras, 1982 (rev. 2013).

[96] C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), available at: https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169.

[97] Euraque D. A., *El golpe de Estado del 28 de Junio de 2009, el Patrimonio Cultural y la Identidad Nacional de Honduras,* 2010.

[98] Colorblindness is the idea that by overlooking or ignoring the race or ethnicity of an individual or a collective, the institution can provide racial and ethnic harmony.

[99] Castillo Guity R. L., op. cit.

territorialization, we might see these policies for institutional integration as controlling means or unsuccessful attempts[100].

2. 2. 2. Racial and ethnic identity of the Garífuna people

Around the same time when 'indigenous' became a common term to refer to native communities, in the 1990s and 2000s, multicultural reforms proposed replacing the word '*negro'* with 'Afro-descendant' among Latin and Central American countries. This term, along with the term 'Afro-Honduran', aimed at recognizing the African diaspora in the ethnic and racial identity of some communities in Honduras, such as the Miskito, the Garífuna, and the Negros de Habla Inglesa. As other evidence from South America testimony, this term became a progressive trap, where black people - often indigenous - were classified as the 'other', abased and differentiated from the *mestizo* and the indigenous. The author Boni, referring to the Afro-indigenous in Venezuela, explains how the Afro-denomination of the black indigenous activism delays its ability to influence the government[101]. Similarly, the Garífuna scholar Castillo finds that the switch in terminology perpetuated structural racism in Honduras, where legislators would start reasoning as follows: "*[D]esde ahora ya no le llamaremos negros sino afrodescendientes, pero los seguiremos tratando como negros*[102]"[103]. These are some of the reasons why Garífuna members have refused the term 'Afro-descendant' and emphasized, instead, both their ethnic and racial identity as '*indígenas y negros/negras*' (indigenous and black).

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[100] Mollett S., *Race and Natural Resource Conflicts in Honduras: The Miskito and Garifuna Struggle for Lasa Pulan*, op. cit.

[101] Boni S., *Identificare e contare gli afrodiscendenti in Venezuela: la ragione etnologica socialista e il censimento del 2011*, in "Antropologia", 3(2), 2016, p. 130.

[102] Translated "From now on, we will not call them *negros* but Afro-descendant, but we will go on treating them like *negros*."

[103] Castillo Guity, R. L., *Iseri lidáwsmsri: autonomía territorial y educativa en la comunidad garifuna de Vallecito en Honduras*, op. cit., p. 217.

Furthermore, as the name of the organization (OFRANEH) suggests, blackness constitutes a relevant aspect of their racial identity. Since the 1980s, this aspect has increasingly become a stronger element not only of their racial identity, but also of their self-determination as an indigenous ethnic group. The mixture between their blackness and their indigenous cultural practices intertwines racial and ethnic struggles, resonating in an intersectional paradigm of indigeneity. Garífuna people recognize themselves in a community- and women-centered structure that incorporates blackness as a racial identity, with Afro-descendant cultural features; as well as indigeneity as an ethnic identity, involving indigenous culture, "fishing, cultivation of *yuca*, shamanism, and ancestor veneration, and a cosmovision involving respect for biodiversity"[104]. Moreover, as also discussed above, Castillo Guity emphasizes the role of politics and activism in the *construcción émica* of an identity, based on self-determination as a tool to explore identity from an internal perspective. Garífuna (and indigenous) people's self-determination is, therefore, pivotal not only for a recognition of the indigenous community on a societal level, but also as a form of alternative to neoextractivism and colonialism[105]. Remarkably, it is an ethnic and racial identification that comes from within a community, not one that is imposed with the top-down approach of neoliberal multiculturalism.

2. 3. Socioeconomic and political issues of indigenous peoples in Honduras

2. 3. 1. Infringements on human and indigenous rights: *folklorización*, internal displacement, and migration

Poverty, displacement, violence, and racism: these are the socioeconomic threats that indigenous peoples in Honduras need to overcome every day. More than half

[104] Castillo Guity, R. L., *Iseri lidáwsmsri: autonomía territorial y educativa en la comunidad garifuna de Vallecito en Honduras*, op. cit.

[105] Ibidem

of their population (71% in 2011) lives below the poverty line[106]. Moreover, numerous studies indicate that the Honduran healthcare and education systems are not accessible to the majority of communities, leading to significant demographic declines. In the 20th century, the Tawahka population was devastated because of untreated infectious diseases[107]. This puts at stake many aspects of indigenous communities, from their living conditions to their cultural identity. When these services are accessible to indigenous peoples, they often fail to consider the cultural and linguistic relevance of the communities. Schools, media, and churches, for instance, have welcomed and perpetuated processes of *mestizaje*, which have replaced the indigenous knowledge, their languages, and history.

In many cases, through the multicultural institutional recognition of indigeneity in Honduras, indigenous knowledge and culture have been encapsulated in the realm of *folklore*, which can either fetishize or diminish their actual cultural and spiritual value. As Castillo Guity argues, this is a racial process aimed at "civilizing" the Honduran citizens, which is strictly linked to colonialism and racial superiority[108]. The ultimate goal would, therefore, be to reshape and "correct" indigeneity to integrate it into a 'homogenous' *mestiza* identity (even though, as seen above, *mestizaje* is not homogenous at all). Multiculturalism, after all, reflected among the indigenous identities in Honduras as an attempt to polish the marginalities of its society, rather than a cultural and ethnic integration. According to Phillips, this happens through a debasement of the image of indigenous peoples, which ultimately undermines their political power of resistance[109]. Within this frame, the *folklorización* can be understood as a plan of

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[106] IFAD, 2011, *Enabling poor rural people to overcome poverty in Honduras*, Rome, Italy.

[107] Baldi N. F. Herrera-Paz E. F., 2024, *Importance of anthropological genetics research in Honduras, Central America*, p. 9.

[108] Castillo Guity, R. L., 2021, *Iseri lidáwsmsri: autonomía territorial y educativa en la comunidad garifuna de Vallecito en Honduras*, op. cit.

[109] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Honduras*, p. 365.

trivialization, a plan to reduce “Indigenous life and history to a few symbols that become ordinary that they lose their deeper historical and cultural richness”[110]. Spiritual, political, and historical events and people among the indigenous heritage become images. By decontextualizing them, they are associated with the nation's history, rather than elements of indigeneity.

Additionally, something that is threatening the indigenous and rural communities in Honduras is the migration issue and internal displacement. Honduran emigration to the US began in the 1950s, when the banana economy was thriving, primarily motivated by economic reasons, and the Garífuna community has ever since been affected[111]. In the 1960s and 1970s, coffee production slowly replaced the declining banana economy and accounted for an increasing emigration process, creating the conditions of an “unsustainable economic base that breaks social groups apart, threatens lives, and allows organized crime to thrive”[112]. At the same time, much of the Honduran migration has been domestic, since large-scale capitalist agriculture has led peasants to occupy the less-populated areas, as documented by Reichman[113]. With time, migrant remittances have become fundamental to the Honduran economy, comprising 26% of the GDP in 2023[114]. This is sustained by a view of “migration as development”, where the goal is wealth itself, regardless of whether this ignores the systematic inequalities[115].

Internally displaced people are defined by the UNHCR as people who have been forced to flee their homes because of conflicts, violence, persecution, or

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[110] Ibidem

[111] Reichman D. R., op. cit.

[112] Ibidem

[113] Ibidem

[114] Cruceta I. et at., *Remittances Offer Hope for Struggling Hondurans*, IOM, UN migration, 2024, https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/remittances-offer-hope-struggling-hondurans

[115] Reichman D. R., op. cit.

disasters. Unlike refugees, they flee within their countries' frontiers. This issue in Honduras affects approximately 41,000 people a year, representing indigenous and LGBTQIA+ communities, women, children, and defenders of human rights[116]. Indigenous peoples, specifically, are evicted from their ancestral lands through physical, economic, and psychological violence. First of all, neoliberalism has since the 1990s accommodated extractivist and tourist projects through foreign investments. Among them are: mineral and hydrocarbon mining, energy and transportation infrastructure construction, timber extraction, and tourist projects along the coasts. Since these projects are using ancestral lands without the previous consultation of the indigenous peoples affected (constituting an infraction of the principle of *free, informed, prior consent*[117]), they were forced to evict their homes without many other options at hand. Sometimes, the control over the indigenous land is taken through a "war tax" or other kinds of extortion and threats. In the Moskitia, for example, many observers collected empirical evidence of the dispossession of indigenous peoples due to the assault on native homelands by drug trafficking organizations[118].

Furthermore, the agrarian reform of the early 1990s has favored the privatization of lands and decreased rates of taxation. While this reform was meant to revitalize the economy of the country by making land titling more accessible to the middle class, in reality, it has incentivized foreign and elite business activities and money laundering in rural lands. Additionally, the accessibility to ancestral lands for indigenous peoples became unreachable. Members of indigenous communities became even more exposed to violence, forced eviction, and recruitment for drug trafficking. Yet, land titling has been a severe and rooted

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[116] Vanegas Díaz I., *Desplazamiento forzado interno por violencia en México y Honduras*, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 2015.

[117] C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169).

[118] McSweeney K. et al., *Grounding traffic: the cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras*, 2018, p. 14.

issue in Honduran politics. According to a US investigation in 2014, "approximately 80 percent of the land in Honduras is improperly titled or completely untitled, and only 14 percent of land in the country is occupied legally"[119]. I will discuss this matter more thoroughly in the next Chapter. Here, I only want to point out the lack of policies that favor the legal land titling of ancestral lands, grounded in indigenous peoples' customs, and an agrarian policy grounded in equity.

2. 3. 2. The influence of the 2009 *golpe de estado* in criminality, human rights, and international politics

The wave of neoliberalism at the end of the 20th century experienced a decline between 2006 and 2009, when the liberal Manuel Zelaya led the Honduran Government before the *golpe*. Despite the controversies surrounding his administration (as mentioned above), his government implemented agrarian reforms and policies favoring community and communal landholdings, and suspended mining projects that would have affected peasants and indigenous peoples. However, the proposal to call for a constitutional assembly to remove the prohibition of a double election (Art. 239) was not accepted by the dominant political class, which responded with a coup in 2009[120]. It followed a return to neoliberalism, favoring private property and the emerging business of African palm oil. The reforms on indigenous and peasant rights were abolished by the new administration of Juan Orlando Hernandez, and the grants and licenses for mining and hydroelectric projects were reestablished. Moreover, the security and military sectors were financed by the income generated by the mining sector, and

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[119] MacNeill T., *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, in "Humanity & Society", 41(2) (2017), p. 222

[120] Phillips J., *Misery Financing Development: Subsidized Neoliberalism and Privatized Dependency in Honduras*, op. cit.

the US dependence continued and was reinforced[121]. For example, although the US condemned the extradition of Zelaya, it refused to recognize the military action in 2009 as a coup[122]. This demonstrates the strength of the alliance between the two countries, which could endanger the weaker social classes by favoring the wealthy and foreign elites. This has led to several infringements of indigenous communal or property lands in favor of foreign projects, which I will address in detail in Chapter 3.

Among other examples of the replacement and debasement of the indigenous knowledge and culture, Phillips mentions the case of Darío Euraque's disempowerment following the *golpe de estado* in 2009. Prior to the *golpe*, the Honduran historian, often mentioned in the present research, was the director of the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History[123]. As soon as he expressed opposition to the militarization of cultural and historical archives, the newly established government removed him from his authority. Moreover, by opposing an older policy that reduced indigenous history and culture in Honduras to the Maya and the Copán ruins, he helped make the latter the most prominent tourist attraction, and indigenous heritage was reduced to tourist-oriented, simplified folklore. The resistance of indigenous peoples and their diversity were obscured. The coup has, therefore, emphasized the processes of trivialization and homogenization inherent in the *mestizaje* identity. Similarly, Euraque examines the repercussions of the 2009 *golpe de estado* on the cultural heritage of Honduras[124]. As I shortly mentioned in a previous paragraph, he provides many instances of how globalization and the institutionalization of *some* events of indigenous history have reinvigorated national identity. These were events of

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[121] Middeldorp N., *Violencia y represión contra defensores de tierra y territorio en Honduras, desde el golpe de Estado hasta la actualidad*, in "Golpe electoral y crisis política en Honduras", 2018, pp. 89-96.

[122] MacNeill T., op. cit.

[123] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Honduras*, p. 367.

[124] Euraque D. A., *El golpe de Estado del 28 de Junio de 2009, el Patrimonio Cultural y la Identidad Nacional de Honduras,* op. cit.

Mayan heritage, which were particularly rescued after the coup, for the sake of tourism, economic development, and strengthening national identity. Other identities, such as the Lencas, Tolupanes, Garífuna, Miskitos, Pech, and Tawakhas, have been submerged and marginalized. This is known as the "*mayanización*", which consolidated in its modern connotations with the dictatorship of General Carías in 1972[125]. *Mayanización* represents a strongly rooted process of identification for Honduras, which recognizes an ancestral nexus to the Honduran nationality while obscuring others, and has intensified after the coup in 2009, carried on by populist drifts[126].

2. 4. The evolution of drug trafficking in Central America

2. 4. 1. Current overview of drug trafficking in Central America with a focus on Honduras

Nowadays, drug trafficking organizations and actors are accountable for social and environmental changes in rural areas of Central America, as McSweeney et al. illustrate. Between 2000 and 2014, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua experienced about 15-30% of annual forest loss associated with narcobusiness[127]. Honduras, with its vast extension of rural areas and a developing neoliberalism augmenting private acquisition, energy, and transportation infrastructures, has been a perfect candidate for transnational drug trafficking. Moreover, the high rates of corruption and embedded violence towards indigenous peoples in the region have eased drug trafficking and money laundering. The impacts on indigenous peoples are multiple: from land rights abuse to dispossession, from forced recruitment to murder, just to mention some of the injustices.

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[125] Euraque D. A., *El golpe de Estado del 28 de Junio de 2009, el Patrimonio Cultural y la Identidad Nacional de Honduras,* op. cit., p. 62.

[126] Ibidem, p. 51.

[127] McSweeney K. et al., *Grounding traffic: the cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras*, Elsevier, 2018.

According to the Global Cocaine Report of 2023 by the UNODC, the dominant modality for drug trafficking in Central America is through maritime routes in the western pacific coast, where DTOs use go-fast boats, semi-submersibles, and fishing boats to transfer drugs from Ecuador to Mexico and Northern America (fig. 2)[128]. The transition in Honduras is largely dominated by the aerial routes from Venezuela and Colombia and continues via land routes, as illustrated in figure 3 from the same report. A study also shows that hundreds of clandestine airstrips are established in protected areas in Honduras, contributing to the eviction of indigenous peoples and forest loss[129]. Another important modality is through the *Cartel de Texis*, based in El Salvador, which smuggles drugs from Honduras to Guatemala along the route called "*el caminito*"[130].

It is important to point out that violence and criminality in Honduras, which in many cases affect indigenous peoples, is not only enforced by drug trafficking actors (*tranportistas*, *mulos*, and *tumbadores*), but also by police authorities, territorial gangs (maras), and territory-bound organized groups. This results in a well-structured network sustained by corruption and manipulation of local as well as elite groups, demonstrating the structural embeddedness of narcobusiness in the country. Yet, it is the overall territorial nature of drug trafficking and criminality (either organized or not) that increases the importance of land ownership[131]. With it comes physical violence, dispossession, bribery, economic intimidation, and manipulation to recruit or acquire the lands of indigenous peoples.

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[128] UNODC, *Global Report on Cocaine 2023, Local dynamics, global challenges*, Vienna, 2023.

[129] Tellman B. et al., *Narcotrafficking and Land Control in Guatemala and Honduras*, in "Journal of Illicit Economies and Development", 3(1) (2021) p. 147.

[130] UNODP, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*, op. cit.

[131] UNODP, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*, op. cit.

2. 4. 2. Historical background of narcotics trafficking in Central America

The routes of drug trafficking in Central America developed throughout history because of the smuggling of many illegal commodities, following different fashions and political trends. In the 1920s, prohibitionism in the US opened a route for the transfer of alcohol from Central America. Later on in the 1940s, it was the time for opiates, followed by cannabis and heroin during the 1960s-70s[132]. From the 70s to the 80s, cocaine was the primary drug smuggled in the area, which soon became a quite stable market that adapted to political and security changes. The peak of cocaine bush cultivation was reached in 2020, when almost 2000 tons were produced, and countries in Europe, such as Belgium, France, Spain, and Italy, witnessed an increase in demand[133]. Throughout the past few decades, however, the UNODC registered a slight decline in the supply of cocaine, which raised the prices of pure cocaine and challenged the demand in the US[134]. Some countermeasures were implemented beginning in 2010.

Up until the 90s, Colombian drug cartels dominated the cocaine production and smuggling scene, with the Medellín and Cali cartels. In the early 1980s, Mexican groups established themselves as smuggling actors from Colombia to the US, using the corridors previously used for cannabis[135]. According to Marcy, by 1989, 70% of the cocaine smuggled to the US was transported through Mexico, often using other Central American countries as storage and transshipment hubs[136]. Throughout this time, Colombia and Mexico built a strong drug trafficking alliance, where Mexico was seen as a subsidiary of the Medellín and Cali cartels.

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[132] International Crisis Group, *Drug Trafficking: Actors and Routes*, in "Latin America Report", 25, 2008, pp. 23-24.

[133] UNODC Global cocaine report

[134] UNODC TOC central america

[135] Ibidem

[136] Marcy W. L., *The End of Civil War, the Rise of Narcotrafficking and the Implementation of the Merida Initiative in Central America*, in "International Social Sciences Review", 89(1), 2014, p. 3.

Afterwards, during the 1990s, the Mexican actors began to gain greater autonomy and organization, a trend also facilitated by the decline of Medellín cartel activity and stability. By 2006, 90% of the cocaine distributed in the US was transported through Mexican organizations[137]. Within the first decade of the 2000s, the Mexican Sinaloa and Zeta cartels managed to overstep the Colombian hegemony in the drug trafficking scene. Soon, they became the most influential narcotic, human, and sex traffickers in Central America[138].

Countermeasures have been implemented in Central America with US assistance since 1982, under the Reagan administration. In recent times, the US has provided millions of dollars to fight the cartels' traffic, as well as the formation of gangs involved in drug trafficking. In 2008, the US granted $1.4 million to implement the Merida initiative, a bilateral agreement aimed at restoring security and countering the drug-trafficking-related violence[139]. Plan Colombia in 2008, similar to the Merida initiative, established measures in the drug-trafficking network of South America. However, the countries of Central America were lacking in assistance to counter the formation of gangs and illegal networks. This is one of the reasons why drug trafficking shifted to the Central American territory, developing and strengthening in countries like Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Belize.

Therefore, illegal traffic of narcotics and humans intensified in Central America in the first decades of the 2000s. The Merida Initiative was renamed the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and focused on Central American countries, which received some grants from the US to combat narcobusiness. The DEA (US Drug Enforcement Administration) and other institutions started conducting investigations in these territories regarding money laundering, bulk

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[137] International Crisis Group, op. cit. p. 23.

[138] Marcy W. L., op. cit. p. 12.

[139] Ibidem, pp. 23-27

cash smuggling, and narcotics, firearms, and human trafficking[140]. However, as Marcy explained, the core issue remained unresolved because those measures were strictly limited to military and police operations[141]. The weakness of public security in Central America, focusing on prevention and rehabilitation, led to more violence and instability[142]. An explanatory instance of this is Honduras and the increase in drug trafficking and gang violence after the coup in 2009. Moreover, corruption, which Taussig pictures as the "ferment" created by drug trafficking, often unties drug trafficking from legal boundaries and restrictions. As the author states, the War on Drugs is rather a war for drugs, driven by the interests of cocaine narco organizations and States[143].

2. 4. 3. The expansion of drug trafficking in Honduras and its threats against indigenous rights and lands

Cocaine has been smuggled through Honduras since the 1970s. Interestingly, Honduras' role as a transit hub escalated as a consequence of the US-led war on drugs, producing a "balloon effect" that led drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) to find safer routes to reach North America[144]. Nevertheless, as previously argued, it was in the early 2000s that Honduras consolidated its role in the transnational drug-trafficking market. In 2012, it was estimated that 75% of US-bound cocaine smuggling flights departed from Honduras[145]. This escalation is not only motivated by an increase in the demand for drugs (mostly of cocaine in North America and Europe), but also because of the implementation of

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[140] Marcy W. L., op. cit., p. 25

[141] Ibidem

[142] Ibidem, pp. 23-27.

[143] Taussig M., op. cit. p. 18

[144] Ziosi E., *Enduring flows: The transition of drugs in contemporary Honduras*, in "Criminology & Criminal Justice", 25(1), 2025, p. 131

[145] Ibidem, p. 127

security policies in Mexico and Colombia in the early 2000s, and the coup in 2009 in Honduras, which suspended the US counternarcotics measures[146]. These phenomena augmented a period of golden rush for cocaine trafficking in Central America.

Between 1977 and 1984, the involvement of Honduras in the trafficking of cocaine was relatively low. However, because of the decline of Colombia's cartels and the political instability in the country, its contribution increasingly grew. In 1988, an article on Times mentioned the involvement of the Honduran military in drug trafficking[147]. Meanwhile, the Sandinista revolution was taking place, and Honduras was the major ally of the US in Central America. This justified a massive expenditure of military aid from the US. Combat troops and a large air-drop of US soldiers were sent to Honduras, fomenting popular discontent and questioning Honduran sovereignty[148]. Since then, counter-narcotic and military measures, as well as the involvement of the US, have been related to one another. Many sources point out the military and police involvement in Central American drug trafficking, which sometimes peaks in controlling the illegal networks[149]. In Honduras, this process intensified during and after the coup of 2009 due to the political weakness and the strengthening of the military. The political and economic instability increased the emergence of gangs and drug-trafficking groups. Whilst the military and the police allowed the drug-trafficking network to develop and embed in the political infrastructures. As a consequence, drug-traffickers were facilitated, and the Sinaloa cartel became the most impactful cartel in Honduras by 2011[150].

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146 UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*, Vienna, 2012, p. 19.

147 Rosenberg M. B., *Narcos and Politicos: The Politics of Drug Trafficking in Honduras*, in "Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs", 30(2-3), 1988, p. 155.

148 Ibidem, p. 158.

149 Marcy W. L., op. cit.

150 Marcy W. L., op. cit., p. 22.

Figure 2. Source: UNODC 2023 p. 54.

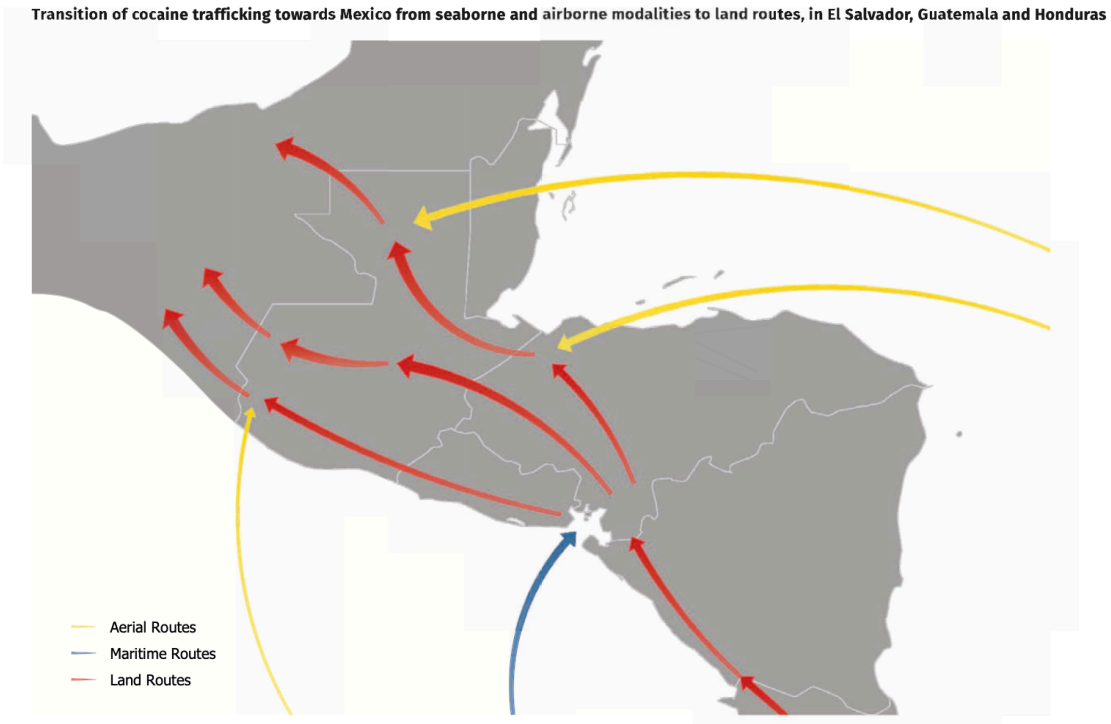

Figure 3. Source: UNODC 2023, p. 54.

3. Land tenure system(s) and land-grabbing in Honduras

3. 1. Land grabbing and the mixed nature of the land tenure system

3. 1. 1. Evidence from the Garífuna peoples in Campa Vista and Río Negro

As argued by Wolfe, settler colonialism proposed the dichotomy between dominion and occupancy. With the first term, the author refers to the domination of the settler sovereignty - the Spanish in Honduras - granted by the myth of the discovery of a territory. The latter, instead, is a concession or an entitlement for native groups to use a land[151]. In some cases, the indigenous peoples' claims to their traditional lands have been legally recognized since the 18th and 19th centuries, as is the case for the Tolupanes and the Garífuna people. These peoples were given what Wolfe defines as occupancy rights, which consisted of an entitlement to use the land independently from the State, as they had established their presence before Honduras became an independent country[152]. However, although indigenous peoples are recognized in their ethnic identity and their land rights, the actual accessibility of ancestral land accessibility for indigenous peoples depends on domestic laws and their (often corrupt and maneuvered) *praxis*. For example, the principle of *free, informed, and prior consent*, formalized in the ILO Convention, which Honduras ratified in 1995, appears to be quite flexible in the practice of land acquisition. In 1902, the Garífuna people were given communal ownership of Campa Vista in the area of Trujillo (along the Caribbean coast). However, in the early 2000s, they lost rights on the land because of two happenings: *a)* the communal titling was never officially registered by the National Agrarian Institute (INA), regardless of the requests being made by UNDP, and *b)* a local business man, and a Canadian investor named Randy Jorgensen afterwards, managed to buy the land from the Garífuna

[151] Wolke P., op. cit.

[152] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous resistance in Honduras*, 2019, op. cit., p. 223-224.

leader, violating the principle of consultation of the community. Another case is the Río Negro: contrary to Campa Vista, the land title here was not communal but private, and it belonged to the Garífuna. The at-that-time president of Honduras, Zelaya, designated a project endorsed by Jorgensen to be of "public interest", allowing the eviction of indigenous peoples and the acquisition of the land by a foreign company[153].

This event is evidence of the de-responsibilization of the Honduran State over land rights, a consequence of neoliberalism according to Phillips' studies, as already discussed in a previous Chapter. As the State incentivizes land acquisition from foreign and private businesses, it cedes to racialized and colonial social hierarchies that ultimately affect indigenous peoples the most. From an economic perspective, many scholars suggest that in countries like Honduras that share extremely high rates of poverty, neoliberal policies are a potential source of economic growth. Nonetheless, Phillips and other postcolonial approaches emphasize that neoliberal profits are unilaterally enriching the foreign and elite class and obscuring the violence and infractions on human rights, especially of the indigenous peoples. Whilst neoliberalism promises Honduras to meet the international SDGs, violence of legal and illegal activities against indigenous peoples intensifies, especially with the up-growing drug-trafficking situation.

3. 1. 2. Neoliberalism and land grabbing

Much of the discussion about indigenous peoples and drug-trafficking centers on the acquisition and use of ancestral lands. Land grabbing refers to the appropriation of land from a third party, typically a foreign company, for food production, extractive industries, or tourism activities. 'Grabbing' suggests the imposition of the third party on the landowner or the affected country. According

[153] MacNeill T., *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, op. cit.

to Edelman and León, land grabbing occurs in cycles driven by regional and global dynamics of capital accumulation, including land tenure systems, social histories, family and gender roles, environmental factors, policies, international cooperation, infrastructure, and other influences[154]. This issue impacts many regions of what are called 'developing' countries, often as a consequence of development projects aimed at economic growth. Central American countries are involved in this more than we might realize. Honduras, for example, has shifted from a large banana industry to one focused on coffee and, more recently, palm oil exports. Edelman and León note that Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica are "among the 20 principal African palm oil exporters in the world and among the five largest in Latin America"[155]. Honduras exemplifies this trend well. In this Chapter, I will describe this mechanism and explore how it is intertwined with imperialist processes prioritizing capital accumulation, often propelled by foreign investments and projects. In the following subchapters, I will analyze how land tenure, agrarian policies, and social hierarchies, along with the dominance of a capitalist economy, influence land grabbing and its extent.

Above, I have mentioned the episode of the area Trujillo, which, in the context of land grabbing, shows that, regardless of the existence of customary law, private property in Honduras tends to prevail over communal lands. This episode provides an in-depth look at the conflictual relationship between land tenures in Honduras. What I would like to consider here is the social dynamic and the prioritization given to the Canadian investor Randy Jorgensen, instead of the authority of the indigenous peoples who were residing on the land. This prioritization is an element of land grabbing in Honduras, which is aimed at closing the gaps between private properties, to develop areas considered 'empty',

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[154] Edelman M. and León A., *Cycles of Land Grabbing in Central America: an argument for history and a case study in the Bajo Aguán, Honduras*, in "Third World Quarterly", 34(9), 2013.

[155] Ibidem

or to take advantage of land labeled as *terra nullius*[156]. Obviously, the perspective that sees and pictures these lands as empty and vacant is a colonial and *mestizo*-elite legacy of those social and historical structures I analyzed in previous sections. The social consequences weigh today on campesinos and indigenous communities, who witness the land grabbing of their lands by international and drug-trafficking groups and whose political resistance and claims are silenced and criminalized. These processes of appropriation of lands and repression of political resistance ultimately contribute, as I will argue, to a long-term debilitation of the communities, resonating and damaging their ethnic and racial identities.

Aligned with the situation in other countries in Central and South America, land tenure in Honduras is characterized by a dichotomy between Western private property and the indigenous tradition of communal land use[157]. With the first approach, land is a commodity that can be exchanged by transferring legal titles in a capitalized land market. According to neoliberal supporters, acquiring land title is beneficial under this regime because it ensures accessibility to credit and long-term legal possession of the land. Indigenous land tenure, on the other hand, relies on traditional customary rights. Land acquisition and ownership depend on its use, whether agricultural or spiritual. This is determined by oral or written (*escrituras públicas*) agreements, which often produce legal documents that prove the transfer of land use or ownership and are (or should be[158]) registered by the municipal authorities[159].

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156 Edelman M. and León A., op. cit., p. 1698.

157 MacNeill T., *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, op. cit.

158 Although the State is bound to register indigenous lands acquired or owned based on customary law, this often doesn't happen because of legal maneuvering.

159 Nelson R. T., *Honduras Country Brief: Property Rights and Land Mark*, Land Tenure Center, 2003, pp. 20-21.

Given the dichotomous nature of the land tenure system, the forms of land ownership in Honduras are quite conflictual and have caused many political and legal controversies. In this Chapter, I will analyze some of those controversies by underlining the characteristics of the land tenure regime(s) in Honduras. Following, I will examine the main agrarian reforms and projects that the Honduran government implemented to meet the needs of peasant and indigenous groups. Finally, I will focus on the land-grabbing issues in its nexus with imperialism as a result of the neoliberal policies wave, which has encouraged and, sometimes, endorsed drug-trafficking agents and foreign investors to violate indigenous peoples' access to land.

3. 2. Historical journey of the land tenure systems in Honduras

3. 2. 1. *Dominio pleno* and *dominio util* in Honduras

As Nelson thoroughly explains, the three categories for land ownership in Honduras are: *baldío*, private property, and *ejidal* property (or simply *ejido*)[160]. *Baldíos* fall under the regime of *dominio util*: originally, they are the property of the national government, but are subsequently occupied by landholders and peasants under a usufruct right. The regime of private property, conversely, is the *dominio pleno,* which guarantees individual or collective titles to the lands resulting from a land market transaction. This regime is rooted in colonial times, since it was brought to Central America as a land tenure system from the Spanish. Nowadays, it is particularly profitable for multinational fruit companies and large landholders. As well as private property, the *ejidos* are a property institution established in Honduras during the colonial period. They serve as communal holdings for municipal or communal use to the locals, including indigenous groups. With time, similarly to the baldíos, these lands were *de facto* occupied and owned by the locals (mostly small farmers - *campesinos* - or

[160] Nelson R. T., op. cit.

indigenous peoples) applying the *dominio util* principle. *Ejidos*, indeed, are frequently issued by local officials, giving land title to those who generate usufruct from the land. However, it would be incorrect to frame the *ejidos* within a classification of property, since they are originally part of a customary tenure system where community rights prevail over statutory ones, especially in indigenous practices[161]. This constitutes the main difference between *baldíos* and *ejidos*.

Arguably, land titling based on communal use is the traditional regime for Honduran peasants and indigenous peoples. At the beginning of the 20th century, Western Honduras primarily used *ejidos*. As we read in Canizales Vijil, the majority of commercial products used the *ejidal* system at high percentages: 92% in Intibucá, 91% in La Paz, and 84% in Gracias a Dios[162]. While these elevated numbers occurred only in the Western regions of the country, the overall tendency was a preference towards communal over private property. Therefore, it is only with the recent agrarian reforms that the privatization of lands was advocated.

As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for indigenous peoples and *campesinos* to claim their lands or for the different tenure systems to co-exist. In the previous section, I analyzed the case of the Garífuna people in Trujillo, which represents the ambiguity of land tenure in Honduras[163]. Indeed, following a stipulation, the Garífuna people were granted collective ownership of Campa Vista in Trujillo in 1902, based on the fact that the territory had been traditionally used for farming and hunting purposes by the community. With the recognition

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[161] Sauls L. A., Galeano F., and L. Steven, *Indigenous and Customary Land Tenure Security: History, Trends, and Challenges in the Latin American Context*, in "Land Tenure Security and Sustainability, 2022, pp. 57-60.

[162] Canizales Vijil, *Liberalismo, ejidos y la propriedad de la tierra de Occidente de Honduras (1876-1949)*, Revista Rosalia, p. 96.

[163] MacNeill T., *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, op. cit.

of collective ownership came the requirement for community consultation in case of any sale or change in land acquisition. In 2007, the Garífuna president, Omar Laredo, sold 20 hectares to a local businessman for $5,000 prior consultation with the community. Nonetheless, the principle of consultation was soon violated when the local businessman sold the land to Randy Jorgensen, a Canadian investor. Without the community's knowledge, the number of hectares conferred rose to 53, as well as the value to $20,000. According to surveys, Jorgensen then extended the land tenure further and fenced 62 hectares of land. Moreover, no proceeds from the sale were received by the Garífuna community[164]. This episode clearly shows the fragility of the land tenure system in Honduras and the conflictual relationship between the colonial institution of private property and communal landholdings, the first one leading to cases of licit and illicit land grabbing.

3. 2. 2. Agrarian reforms: the road to privatization and formal land titling

The journey to private property in Honduras, as mentioned in a previous paragraph, dates back to colonial times. In his research on settler colonialism, Wolfe explains the distinction between the right of dominion held by Europeans and the right of occupancy held by the Aboriginal peoples. Occupancy is the pragmatic entitlement of the natives to possess and use the lands. However, this right has been overstepped by the dominion of the Europeans and their successors (mainly, as Wolfe mentions, the US in the American continent), which attributes effective land control rights to the settler colonists in the name of the "discovery of the *terra nullius*"[165]. This is how a mechanism of priority favors the colonial property and sovereign rights over those of indigenous communities, attributing the control of ancestral lands to the colonists. As Wolfe precisely

[164] MacNeill T., op. cit.

[165] Wolfe P., op. cit.

notes, the colonial dominion expressed through public and private land acquisition has been the foundation of the colonists' power over the aborigines and the elimination of the native societies, which now expresses itself through an imperialist ideology[166].

Since the 19th century, Honduras has experienced a constellation of agrarian reforms, which have tried to address the complexity of land tenure. In these attempts, it wasn't until the end of the 20th century that private property skyrocketed due to the boost of neoliberal policies in the agrarian system. Neoliberal enthusiasts perceived it as a way to regularize the land market and solve the controversies between the customary and formal tenure systems in Honduras. What they (intentionally or unintentionally) didn't foresee was that the privatization of property would stimulate large, foreign, and illegal businesses more than or instead of encouraging indigenous and *campesino* groups to 'formalize' their land ownership. The pursuit of economic growth and development, aligned with international goals and the US interests, has overstepped domestic and indigenous land titling systems and had tremendous social and cultural consequences among indigenous communities.

Already with the first reform in the 1950s, which granted title to parcels of public land to cooperatives and other peasant groups, Honduras became a new area of interest for international multinationals in the fruit agriculture and export. In the department of Atlántida, studies suggest that 15.4% of all agricultural land was owned by foreign fruit multinationals in the early 50s[167]. During the 60s, following a wave of public discontent, a more cooperative and collective approach was implemented. However, the new approach failed due to the restrictions on sale options for the lands granted by the law and on the conditions of eligibility for usufruct rights. Furthermore, a coup in 1963 led to a decade of

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[166] Wolfe P., op. cit.

[167] Nelson R. T., *Honduras Country Brief: Property Rights and Land Mark*, op. cit.

repression. In 1972, the military establishment promoted a new decree law valid for two years. Peasants were granted the usufruct right on the national and *ejidal* lands that they occupied. Whereas unused lands, whether private or public, could be subject to redistribution and expropriation. By this time, the relationship between the US and the Honduran administration had been forged, increasing US aid to the country[168]. Eventually, this contributed to the structural dependency of Honduras on the US in terms of economy and security, which I previously examined.

Ten years after the last agrarian reform, a new land titling project (*Proyecto de Titulación de Tierras*, also known as PTT) implemented the first neoliberal approach in the agricultural sector in Honduras. The hope was to create viable land markets in the country, fomenting formal land titles and long-term legal possession[169]. With this reform, individual private property and *dominio pleno* of lands were incentivized to replace the customs of *dominio util*. Yet, the reform was not welcomed by indigenous peoples and *campesinos ladinos*, as they were traditionally relying on customary tenure structures[170]. Those who benefited from the policy were once again the *mestizo* and foreign elite classes. According to Edelman and León, like many of the Latin American agrarian reforms, the land titling project affected only a few large landowners and "focused instead on colonization programs on state lands in 'empty areas'", which were not at all uninhabited or unused and where entire communities, often indigenous, were forcedly displaced[171]. Their study shows that, under this agrarian reform, the Aguán Valley, where Garífuna communities were established in the first years of

[168] Nelson R. T., op. cit., p. 9.

[169] Ibidem, pp. 12-13.

[170] Ibidem

[171] Edelman M. and León A., op. cit.

the 20th century, became the center of this colonization process. A peak of 31% of the total land re-distributed through the programme was in this area[172].

The final milestone for the agrarian reforms was the Agricultural Modernization Law in 1992 (*Ley para la Modernización y el Desarrollo del Sector Agrícola*). With this law, the Honduran government, led by Callejas, accelerated the privatization of collective landholdings. The idea was to promote land titling to reinforce the ability of peasants to defend their legal land claims and to mitigate gender discrimination in the sector, allowing land titles to women. Moreover, it established a commission for the registration of land property (*la Comisión Interinstitucional para la Modernización del Register de la Propriedad Inmobiliaria*) with partial funds from the World Bank[173]. Nonetheless, municipal authorities and the Commission have often proved to dismiss registration requests, as in the case of the Garífuna people in the Trujillo area. The reform was highly supported by neoliberal enthusiasts, who suggested that the State should back off the support to 'inefficient' peasant sector and should incentivize comparative advantages by focusing on cheap labour and natural resources, including land in the agricultural sector, and on exports over production for the domestic market, as well as devaluing national currencies[174]. However, this accelerated the process of dispossession advanced by liberalism and private property. Reproducing social hierarchies based on the logic of *terra nullius*, the reforms have gathered resources in the colonial and elite classes and diminished the land rights of those who were (apparently invisibly) using the lands for living and economic activities. Almost thirty years after the reform, studies show that neoliberalism brought even more unfairness to the agricultural sector in Honduras, further restricting the ownership of lands to indigenous and

[172] Ibidem, p. 1708.

[173] Edelman M. and León A., pp. 24-25.

[174] Ibidem, p. 1710.

smallholders and confronting them with the constant risk of dispossession. Foreign and elite companies, as well as drug-trafficking actors, have seemingly won the game.

3. 2. 3. Recent development strategies and land-grabbing: imperialism as a hypercolonial force

In the aftermath of the 2009 *golpe de estado,* issues such as violence and criminality, unemployment, and marginalization of indigenous peoples have intensified in Honduras due to the expansion of processes of imperialism from the Honduran and the US States[175]. While asserting that tourism in Honduras does not embrace human development, and it economically benefits only the elites, drug-traffickers, and foreign investors, MacNeill also points out that tourism is evidence of the imperialist processes brought up by neoliberalism in Honduras[176]. According to the author, the institutional, economic, and land resources, on which the tourist industry relies, univocally establish a powerful dominance of these actors at the expense of local communities. These transnational corporations and organizations, governmental agencies, and local businesses act "in the interest of speculation and capital accumulation through the dispossession of local populations" and are motivated by the "capitalist system that demands excess capital to be put to speculative work in the pursuit of profit"[177]. As analyzed before, these processes significantly involve the US due to the vast economic and military assets and subsidies that the country devotes to Honduras. As a result, the imperialist system effectively sets off the control of the US in the Honduran lands and development strategies. Indeed, a relevant consequence of this imperialist system that characterizes Honduras' economic

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[175] MacNeill T., *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, op. cit.

[176] Ibidem

[177] Ibidem, p. 232.

development since the 2000s is land-grabbing, affecting indigenous peoples and rural economies. McSweeney et al. emphasize how the land grab was influenced by global instances, such as the global economic crisis of 2007-08. Indeed, this led investors to respond to the "declining rates of profits and price fluctuations in financial markets by investing in relatively secure and stable land, agribusiness, and extractive sectors"[178].

As previously mentioned, imperialist approaches spread throughout the beginning of the 2000s and were particularly advocated by the Honduran governments after the coup of 2009 to achieve development goals and strengthen international cooperation. An example of this is the conference named "Honduras is Open for Business" held in 2011 and convened by the former Honduran President Lobo. The word "open" entails the international feature for business opportunities in Honduras proposed by Lobo, which encourages foreign investors to conduct business in Honduras. Similarly, the same post-coup administration endorsed an initiative from the Canadian government to enforce private property laws and lower taxation rates in "relatively uninhabited" rural areas in Honduras. This project, named Charter City, created two "development regions": firstly, the Special Development Regions (RED) and, at a later stage, the Special Economic Development Zones (ZEDE), known together as REDs. These areas were given a public administration and a judicial system to ensure representation at the national level. As Loperena explains, with the division in areas under special legislative protection, "the State has paved the way for extractive activities to flourish"[179]. All the more seriously, the Supreme Court of Honduras declared the Charter City unconstitutional because, with the first RED, foreign investments implied the transfer of national territory. Notwithstanding, Lobo bypassed the Court's declaration by firing four judges and establishing the ZEDE.

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[178] MacNeill T., op. cit.

[179] Loperena C. A., *Honduras is open for business: extractivist tourism as sustainable development in the wake of disaster?*, in "Journal of Sustainable Tourism", 25(5), 2017, p. 7.

According to OFRANEH, the Charter City, with its special zone, would concern 20 of the 47 Garífuna communities in Honduras[180]. This serves as a demonstration of the consequences of land-grabbing on the indigenous communities in Honduras, which range from dispossession to kidnapping and murder. For the sake of development, indeed, the Honduran government has accommodated international cooperation and businesses, regardless of the damage it directly provokes on rural and indigenous lands. Critics have claimed that this is a form of hypercolonialism or an intensified free-trade zone[181]. This would suggest that neoliberalism not only threatens indigenous peoples' lives and physical well-being, but also their identity. In this regard, as argued by Loperena, in favor of the national economic productivity and neoliberalism, we witness "the transformation of indigenous peoples into landless peasants who, once removed from their lands, become subject to the exploitative labor regimes controlled by the *mestizo* elite"[182].

Furthermore, MacNeill pinpoints that regardless of the political institutions and social capital that some indigenous communities have, issues of corruption, criminality, poverty, desperation, and drug addiction often put at stake the effectiveness of their resources[183]. Imperialism, seen as a process of taking control of economic, political, and social power and resources of a land by the government or third actors, cuts off any possibility for indigenous peoples' claims. The imperialist control of land access and rights, the dispossession of houses and institutions, as well as the displacement of indigenous communities in favor of economic activities like tourism, debilitates the political and social capital of the community and the individuals, who eventually end up in vicious

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[180] Loperena C. A., *Honduras is open for business: extractivist tourism as sustainable development in the wake of disaster?*, op. cit.

[181] Ibidem

[182] Ibidem, p. 804.

[183] MacNeill T., *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, op. cit.

circles and dependency on the powerful imperialists. Mechanism that becomes deeply dreadful when the controlling agents are drug-trafficking actors and criminal gangs.

3. 4. When narcobusiness drives land-grabbing

3. 4. 1. The narco land grab in Honduras: from social embeddedness to money laundering

Remarkably, extractivist and tourist investors are not the only businesses that have set their eyes on Honduras. As already discussed in the previous Chapter, the economic system in Honduras encourages the accumulation of capital, which needs to be reinvested. And, as Taussig steadily affirms, there is "[N]othing like cocaine to speed up the business cycle"[184]. In his work, Taussig refers to the gold mining sector to better understand the cocaine cultivation and distribution in Colombia. Cocaine cultivation and trafficking are both a transgressive and survival sector, illegal and at the same time an alternative authority to the State. As well as gold mining, it creates the conditions for capital infusion in rural and poor areas where the State can hardly reach. This concept has been a central topic for many researchers in recent years, who have proposed perspectives that challenge more traditional approaches, analyzing the closeness between neoliberalism, narco-business, and colonialism. In the following rows, I will focus on the work of McSweeney, Kerssen, Ziosi, et al., authors who bring evidence of the closeness between drug trafficking and neoliberalism.

Drug-traffickers, as McSweeney et al. notice, are conducting one of the businesses that need reinvestment the most, and this happens through money laundering and land-grabbing[185]. This needs to be taken all the more seriously at times when the drug-trafficking network in Central and South America has

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[184] Taussig M., op. cit., p. 19

[185] McSweeney K. et al., *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?,* in "Journal of Latin American Geography", 16(2), 2017.

expanded and achieved its peak in production and distribution, as it has happened since the early 2000s. By 2025, the "narco land grab" is a process through which DTOs achieved the control of circa 6million hectares in Colombia[186]. Authors like Kerssen pointed out the characteristics of land-grabbing in Honduras and how it differs from the same phenomenon in Africa and South America by analyzing the power of drug-trafficking and military actors[187]. In the following paragraphs, I will mention the many ways and strategies used by drug traffickers and their infrastructures that implicitly or explicitly affect indigenous peoples' rights on their lands, and I will provide some examples from the existing literature on the issue. As for the in-depth analysis on internal mechanisms, reasons, and ethical and racial consequences of drug trafficking on indigenous peoples' identity, I will further address the issue in Chapter 4, when discussing drug trafficking in Honduras more thoroughly.

Firstly, I would like to address the reasons why we can state that drug trafficking is causing land-grabbing in Honduras. Narcobusiness is characterized by the entanglement of legal and extra-legal relationships and networks, which allow it to maintain a certain stability[188]. These are networks consisting of the so-called "points of passage", including clandestine infrastructures, such as airstrips, roads, and checkpoints. In order to facilitate drug trafficking, these networks rely on "social embeddedness", a concept elaborated by Ziosi[189]. Social embeddedness has two components: structural and relational embeddedness, both of which affect indigenous peoples' access to lands. The structural embeddedness "refers to the physical locations, spaces and infrastructures" used by drug-trafficking

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[186] McSweeney K. et al., ibidem, p. 4

[187] Kerssen T. M., *Grabbing power: the new struggles for land, food and democracy in northern Honduras*, Land & sovereignty series No. 1, Oakland CA, 2013.

[188] Ziosi E., *Enduring flows: The transition of drugs in contemporary Honduras*, op. cit.

[189] Ibidem

actors[190]. To create this space, drug-trafficking actors take control of indigenous lands, effectively carrying out land-grabbing. Whether they do it legally or not, these actors are protected by well-established relationships with individuals who facilitate the transfer of drugs, which is what constitutes relational embeddedness. State actors, such as police officers and military officials, often take part in this relational network in exchange for bribes or under threat[191]. It is important to note that these logistic infrastructures and spaces are fundamental elements of drug trafficking. As the author Ziosi claims, these are spaces of negotiation where the actors involved decide on the flow of the exchanged products, significantly shaping the global supply chain of drugs[192].

Moreover, McSweeney et al. argue that the bridge connecting land and drugs (therefore, land grabbing and drug trafficking) is neoliberalism. The neoliberal policies under the "Washington Consensus", he says, have facilitated drug trafficking because of the incentivizing of licit and illicit flow of capital in agribusiness and extractive sectors[193]. The two consequences of neoliberalism that have given power to DTOs in South and Central America are: the expansion of infrastructures and financial deregulation. Regarding infrastructures, it is remarkable to notice that development projects have increased the amount of energy and transportation infrastructures, which have inevitably made drug transit easier. Drug traffickers promptly adapted to the new roads and ports and started hiding drugs through the newer routes. In other cases, drug traffickers become large landowners through land acquisition and the dispossession of indigenous peoples from their lands, considered "uninhabited" and isolated. These lands are essential to the smoothing of drug trafficking for two main

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[190] Ziosi E., op. cit., p. 129.

[191] Ibidem

[192] Ibidem

[193] McSweeney K. et al., *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?,* op. cit., pp. 7-8

reasons. The first one is that throughout the acquisition of lands, drug traffickers monopolize their territory-bound power, decreasing the risk of encountering rival groups. Secondly, the isolation of rural lands is a relevant characteristic to transit drugs as uninterruptedly and unseen as possible. Throughout time, drug-traffickers have also built new infrastructures to make their own routes more easily connected and have implemented their own infrastructures for the fuel and drugs storage, as well as facilitating access to food and labor[194]. In Honduras, this happened to the extent that the roads that were built by the drug-traffickers in the west of the country are now regional highways[195].

As far as financial deregulation is concerned, instead, McSweeney et al. related an increase in money laundering through banks, as it happened with the Wachovia and HSBC, which have helped Mexican DTOs[196]. Money laundering presents an issue that could sound familiar since I have mentioned it earlier: the issue of the over-accumulation of money. As in a capitalist economy, where accumulation of capital might occur and be solved through land grabbing, drug traffickers find themselves with millions of drug dollars and need solutions to launder them. Money laundering should be analyzed as an essential economic infrastructure of narcobusiness, rather than a side effect of it[197]. It, therefore, constitutes the long-term sustainability of the illicit business, and can manifest in several ways, as McSweeney et al explain:

> "a) merge illegal funds within legal flows; b) find assets that can be purchased with cash, and c) otherwise invest in ways that can simultaneously absorb cash/foreign currency and obscure its provenance (this latter technique is known as layering)."[198]

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[194] McSweeney K. et al., *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?,* op. cit.

[195] Ibidem, p. 10.

[196] Ibidem p. 8.

[197] Saviano R., Propaganda Live, 16/01/2026.

[198] McSweeney K. et al., *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?*, op. cit., p. 11.

Option A is the one explained earlier, facilitated by financial deregulation with the involvement of financial institutions. In countries like Honduras, drug-traffickers have a strong influence on the political class because of the level of social embeddedness and corruption of the country. These connections could allow money laundering through the merging of illegal assets within legal flows. Option B and C, however, are particularly interesting when discussing land acquisition and use. Assets like cattle, therefore, are traditionally cash-based or subject to barter exchanges. This feature makes it easier for drug-traffickers to buy and sell cattle, as well as agricultural enterprises and constructions related to it (slaughterhouses, meat-packing plants,…) using cash in order to launder their money. The technique of layering, moreover, is well practiced in rural areas through social labour, by paying the wages of the workers (often indigenous people) with narco-dollars, making the dollar the *de facto* currency and obscuring the traces of the illegitimacy of the money itself[199]. Intermediaries invest their drug money in and around the areas of drug transit to get access not only to the land but also to the local labor. Eventually, the lands are often converted to cattle pasture, and people, especially if indigenous, are hired for drug trafficking. Importantly, most of this land acquisition is illegal and happens on indigenous lands or protected areas (which are *de jure* not in the land market)[200]. Needless to mention, any attempt from the indigenous community to resist these infractions is dismissed through physical violence or manipulation and persuasiveness by the drug-trafficking intermediaries and organizations. This has severe consequences on the cohesion and continuity of indigenous communities, their land rights, and ultimately their identity and culture.

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[199] McSweeney K. et al., *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?*, op. cit.

[200] McSweeney K. et al., *Grounding traffic: the cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras*, op. cit., p. 15.

3. 4. 2. Social and economic repercussions on indigenous peoples: capital flow and militarization of ancestral lands

So far, my analysis of narco land grab has focused on the reasons and ways in which drug-traffickers acquire lands and clear their traces through money laundering. In this subchapter, I will address the social consequences of their activities on the indigenous peoples, focusing on the changes in their economic activities, impacting their wages and purchasing power, as well as the increase in violence, patrol control, and the ultimate criminalization they are subject to. As far as other social consequences related to their identity and indigeneity, I will discuss them in the following chapters, mostly in Chapter 4.

The previous section focused on money laundering as a characteristic of the narco land grab in areas like Honduras. I have also mentioned that money laundering can take the form of layering, which involves obscuring the origin of money by using another currency or cash flow. In drug trafficking, this often includes paying social asset wages in cash or dollars. We might now wonder if the drug profits are at least partly shared with indigenous and local communities - whose rights are violated during the process - or if the wages are fair, helping to improve their financial conditions. A study by McSweeney et al. examines the journey of cocaine as a commodity from an economic perspective, explaining the dynamics that make Honduras an accessible and profitable territory for land grabbing and drug trafficking[201]. From the study, we learn that millions of dollars in cash flooded into the Muskitia in the first decade of the 2000s. McSweeney et al. criticize traditional approaches of development economics for the same reason:

> "In orthodox development economics, criminal activities are typically understood to hinder the forms of capital investment required to develop

[201] McSweeney K. et al., *Grounding traffic: the cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras*, op. cit.

rural areas. […] Criminality creates an insecure investment climate and 'diverst[s] valuable resources away from more productive uses'".[202]

Accordingly, the drug war initiated by the US justifies the militarization of drug-trafficking areas, which is pursued to get rid of the narco-obstacle and create the conditions for corporate investments in the rural areas. However, what emerges from McSweeney et al.'s research is rather different. Drug-traffickers in Central America act similarly to neoliberal investors, establishing themselves in rural lands and redistributing the capital accumulation they get from the illicit commodity chain of drugs. Following McSweeney et al., this creates the very conditions for investment in the rural sector, rather than being a hindrance[203]. The narco profits are, indeed, distributed unevenly across the country, with larger sums going to drug-trafficking intermediaries and smaller sums to local communities to improve their living conditions (in food, clothing, housing, and, to some extent, education and health care). Nonetheless, the cash infusion in extremely poor areas, such as the Moskitia, is sufficient to indicate a wealthier economic situation than traditional jobs or self-sufficient activities. The study reports that, for only one flight in 2011, the two middlemen (an airstrip manager and a local logistics coordinator) were each given $50,000 in cash, while resident transporters were given $500 each, and the rest of the residents $50 to remain discreet. These are big sums compared to the regular wage of $10 per day, and could be a reason for the successful settlement of narco trafficking in Honduras[204].

Nonetheless, it is important to point out that, similar to what happens in neoliberal projects, the capital spread in rural areas very rarely generates a sufficient and sustainable income for the recruited local and indigenous people.

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[202] McSweeney K. et al., *Grounding traffic: the cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras*, op. cit., p. 15.

[203] Ibidem p. 16.

[204] Ibidem, p. 13-14.

On the contrary, several studies show that the drug profits are not fairly distributed, and violations of human and indigenous rights are highly recurrent. In the worst cases, scholars have indicated that drug cartels have recently started paying *mules* - drug traffickers - by replacing money with drugs like crack cocaine, making them dependent on DTOs and causing severe physical and psychological health consequences[205]. This also threatens rural areas' security due to the epidemic of addiction. As seen above, better outcomes are reported when indigenous peoples are recruited and paid wages in cash or, more often, in dollars. In these circumstances, indigenous communities can at least rely on some form of income, which is, at first glance, better than the usual income. However, wages remain very low, and the use of the dollar weakens the purchasing power of local people's bills. Drug trafficking creates a circuit of cash flow, where the same narco middlemen who traffic drugs and launder their profits become the new landowners or storekeepers of the area. Moreover, the exchange rate between the dollar and the lempira in these stores in rural eastern Honduras is steep: McSweeney et al. mention the valley of the Patuca River, where in 2012 the narco exchange rate was 10 lempiras for $1, while the official rate is 18.89 lempiras for $1. This way, they continually recapture narco dollars from the local people who depend on them to buy food, alcohol, beverages, and other products.

This narco economy entangles local and indigenous peoples in the narco circuit, where they only have "a mirage, an illusion of money", as an observer mentioned in the study says. The narco-elite continuously capture the profits of drug trafficking, whereas indigenous and local people endure poverty and dispossession. The drug-trafficking network in Honduras, therefore, often contributes to the "dissolution of the agrarian community", as well as the dissolution of indigenous communities, drug addiction, and chronic poverty[206].

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[205] MacNeill T., *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, op. cit., p. 228

[206] McSweeney K. et al., *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?*, op. cit., p. 17

Since drug profits are distributed following the neocolonial and racialized social hierarchy existing in Honduras, they perpetuate the marginalization and elimination of indigenous identities and communities, first of all by dispossessing and harassing the communities, and secondly by excluding them from the economic profits. As Ballvé states: "every narco-frontier is an extension of a much longer frontier lineage of colonial (or neocolonial) exploitation, political marginalization, and racialized geographies"[207].

Furthermore, the precarious economic situation of many indigenous and local people led to an accumulation of debt among communities, which was often resolved by the cession of lands. The sale of indigenous lands or communal lands to narco-affiliated cattle ranchers has slowly become a well-established practice. For example, in one case, a narco shopkeeper imposed a property tax on the Garífuna people in order to pay off their debts; since they were unable to cover the expenses of the tax, the land was relinquished to the municipality, which eventually sold it to narco cattle ranchers[208].

[207] Ballvé T., *Grassroots masquerades: Development, paramilitaries, and land laundering in Colombia,* in "Geoforum", 2013.

[208] McSweeney K. et al., *Grounding traffic: the cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras*, op. cit., p. 18.

4. Narco-business as colonial continuity and implications on indigeneity in Honduras

4. 1 Cocaine flow in Honduras: theoretical and operational framework of cocaine and organized crime

The role of transgression, largely addressed by Taussig, is pivotal to the understanding of organized crime associated with the cocaine cultivation and transnational smuggling. Transgression is, indeed, part of the motor of cocaine, the so-called 'flower of evil', and its global chain market[209]. As briefly seen beforehand, from the author's point of view, transgression is far more than 'acting beyond or outside the rule'; it is a break from the rule that eventually highlights its relevance. We could hereby mention the author: "To transgress is to suspend the rule such that it is heightened in its dissolution"[210]. And further, he explains that cocaine (gold alike) is a "contagion emitted by the breaking of a taboo", which eventually brings the rule back to the surface and makes it clearer to our eyes[211]. This reflection is, in my opinion, relevant to the analysis that I am approaching in this Chapter. Within the frame of the Honduran cocaine and drug trafficking, the rule that transgression dissolves and brings back more vividly to the surface is represented by the colonial and racialized structures of the State and institutions. In the following sections of my thesis, I will, therefore, dig deeper into how the cocaine flow operates in the region, and analyze the conditions, actors, and social structures it involves, and how this ultimately relates to and affects the identification process and the community organization of numerous indigenous peoples in Honduras. So far, I have illustrated the social and political implications of drug trafficking in Honduras, as well as the

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[209] Taussig M., *My Cocaine Museum*, op. cit., p. xviii.

[210] Ibidem, p. 126.

[211] Ibidem, p. 253.

historical background of Honduras as a popular and rather accessible transit hub. In the present section, I will address notions of drug-trafficking networks, such as identifying the actors and roles, relying on UNODC reports and postcolonial research.

As previously mentioned, the network that characterizes the transnational drug trafficking in Central America is widespread and deeply embedded, entangling a wide range of relationships and social capital. As a result, not only are DTOs and organized crime involved, but also politicians, influential and elite people, and smaller groups bound to territorial control. As a UNODC report analyzes, transnational crime is usually systemic or market-based, making it relevant for policies to target the market itself rather than specific groups[212]. However, Central America demonstrated a different face of the same coin. Therefore, it would be wrong to assume that Honduran organized crime and transnational DTOs coincided, as "there is also an important level of separation between them" that lies in the fact that cocaine trafficking is not the only business perpetuated by Honduran local organized crime[213]. Therefore, during the years of the cocaine boom, in the 1970s, drug trafficking penetrated the network of the already existing organized crime infrastructures and structures in Honduras. This allowed local gangs to establish extensive ties with DTOs while maintaining a sort of distance from DTOs' control[214]. This might also explain why, although DTOs are globally systemic and market-driven, the core of drug trafficking in Central America resides in groups of local intermediaries[215]. The separation is crucial to pinpoint the role of cocaine in Honduran organized crime, which is not the core

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[212] UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean*, op. cit.

[213] Bosworth L., *Honduras: Organized Crime Gained Amid Political Crisis,* in "Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle", Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Latin American Program, Washington DC, 2010, p. 69

[214] Ibidem

[215] UNODC, ibidem.

activity of gangs and groups, but rather one of their economic activities, and here I shall mention that it is the most profitable.

In short, as Bosworth notes, transnational DTOs or cartels are not directly involved in the cocaine transit in Central America, but rather use local gangs and social capital as a "muscle"[216]. This distinction is reported by the UNODC document, where the Organization identifies two main headings for organized criminality in Central America: territory-bound organized crime groups and transnational trafficking groups[217] [218]. Both are responsible for violence and murder within, between, and outside the groups, but only the second group is more dependent on DTOs' guidance and operations. Interestingly, concerning the analysis of the effects of drug trafficking among indigenous peoples is the dimension of territorial dominance, since it characterizes both groups and addresses issues of land dispossession. Nonetheless, I would like to first define the two groups and their features, postponing the latter topic to the next section. Under the first classification of organized crime groups, we find those territorial groups that take over the governance of the State, working as an alternative state entity in urban and peripheral areas. They effectively function as "State-substitutes" in those geographical areas in which public services and the formal State are substantially absent. Their role consists of controlling the territory, relying on a symbolic status quo that they defend through violence and aggression, taxation, and financial and physical coercion. Cocaine trafficking is, in their case, one of the other economic activities they carry on, as they cover the role of a working hand for security protection and logistics under the transnational DTOs and cartels[219]. The second group mentioned, instead, strictly

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[216] Bosworth J., op cit.

[217] transnational trafficking groups, hereby meaning local and small crime groups linked to DTOs but not strictly belonging to them, e.g., *transportistas*, *tumbadores*, and so on, as I will analyze hereafter.

[218] Ibidem

[219] Ibidem, p. 70

depends on drug trafficking and is largely diversified. The people involved in this are, therefore, further classified depending on their tasks and roles in the business: mainly *transportistas* and *tumbadores*. *Transportistas* are in charge of the actual transfer of drugs; they are the operative part of the smuggling of drugs. They normally organize in small groups and work in isolated areas. DTOs and other organized crime groups knowingly recruited poorer people and indigenous members. *Tumbadores* are their counterpart instead: they behave as predators to *transportistas*, stealing their cargoes and profiting from them[220]. Additionally, groups such as *maras* play a role in the violence caused by drug trafficking and land-control, even though their participation in the smuggling of drugs is seemingly less meaningful and essential compared to the other actors presented beforehand. *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13, created by Salvadorian immigrants in Los Angeles, 7,000 members in Honduras) and *Mara 18* (M-18, created by Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles, 5,000 members in Honduras) are criminal gangs with a strongly defined identity rooted in territorial control and violence[221]. Therefore, their use of force is aimed at creating and establishing their identity over and in conflict with "the others" (whether it is the elite class, indigenous peoples, or other criminal groups).

Remarkably, as reported by the UNODC, it is the territorial nature of drug trafficking that brings together these criminal groups with large landholders, peasants, and generates concerns among indigenous peoples' lands[222]. Territorial dominance is a common interest among all the aforementioned groups, becoming a central topic of conflictual situations in the legal and extra-legal realm. Therefore, territory control leads to the dispossession of indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands, perfor\med in a climate of terror. In the next sections, I will

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[220] UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean,* op. cit.

[221] Ibidem

[222] Ibidem

address this issue and analyze the colonial and racialized roots on which it is based, and that perpetuate.

4. 2. Territory control of criminal and drug-trafficking groups among indigenous lands

4. 2. 1 Conditions of drug trafficking in Honduras: territorial control, corruption, and State de-responsibilization

In previous Chapters, I discussed the extension of drug trafficking among rural lands, where many indigenous peoples reside and conduct their economic or traditional activities. As explained in the previous Chapter, spaces such as isolated areas, like the Honduran coasts and forests, are indeed very suitable for the transfer of drugs through illegal infrastructures, as testified by the region of Moskitia, which is the current primary landing zone for most of the cocaine exported to the US, resulting in anomalous deforestation for the construction of illicit airstrips[223]. Similar to development agents and large landholders, drug-trafficking actors and local gangs rely on the notion of "idle" and "underutilized" lands, which, as Loperena remarked, is linked to colonial and racist roots[224]. The idea of indigenous lands being "idle", "underutilized", or also "uninhabited" and "underdeveloped", notwithstanding their recognized indigenous land rights or the existence of a residing community, is a severe colonial and racialized stereotype that brings drug-traffickers and international or domestic large landholders together. As a consequence of these considerations, whatever activity in these lands is prefigured as an attempt to usufruct or to administer the land better. The tension accrues given the legal instability of the tenure land system, which contributes to the unfair acquisition of indigenous lands by large landholders or members of DTOs. Loperena underpins the responsibility of the Honduran State,

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[223] McSweeney K. et al., *Grounding traffic: the cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras*, op. cit.

[224] Loperena C., *Settler Violence?: Race and Emergent Frontiers of Progress in Honduras*, op. cit., p. 802

which made these stereotypes all the more concrete in the Agrarian Reform Law of 1992 as part of a larger whitening project carried out by the *mestizaje* national identification process analyzed in Chapter 1[225]. Land redistribution and dispossession by private agents are condoned as an "improvement" by the introduction of the law, leading to increases in the land's exchange value and ensuring a return on investments, underpinning Loperena's point[226]. An example of this is the transfer of lands from indigenous to state control, "with the excuse that government can manage these areas better", as articulated by Phillips[227]. This way, the government condones private and criminal activities that take control of those 'idle and underutilized' lands for two purposes: for private agencies to generate economic growth and for criminal gangs to ensure security and protection in areas where the State does not reach.

Additionally, corruption appears as a powerful and essential condition for drug trafficking, making Honduras an open door to it. Impunity is like an institutional epidemic that facilitates illegal land acquisition for drug-trafficking purposes, especially in indigenous lands. Even in Guatemala, where the bureaucracy of land legitimization and registration is more effective compared to Honduras, lands are legally acquired by narcos through force and corruption[228]. Although they are traced and traceable, the impunity of corrupt officers and narcos erases indigenous members' and peasants' rights. Land registers become "remarkable testament - rather than a barrier - to the speed and impunity with which drug traffickers amass and legitimize vast holdings", as McSweeney et al frame[229]. This might be an argument against neoliberal privatization, as it is evidence that formal land registration of property does not address corruption and impunity but

[225] Loperena C., ibidem

[226] McSweeney K. et al., *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?*, op. cit.

[227] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Honduras*, op. cit., p. 349

[228] McSweeney K. et al., *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?*, op. cit.

[229] Ibidem

rather legitimizes land dispossession. Legal maneuvering is, therefore, the condition for drug trafficking in Honduras.

Moreover, landlessness of indigenous peoples is the consequence of neoliberalism and narcobusiness, which I would like to focus on hereafter. The centrality of the topic of territoriality among local gangs and drug-trafficking groups directly threatens indigenous lands, being one of the current main political reasons for their landlessness and land dispossession. To understand the grounds of this centrality in Honduran organized crime, I once more need to mention McSweeney et al, as they explain that land acquisition is so relevant to them that it represents a source of political power through which they can climb the political ladder[230]. In this regard, the scholars make a parallelism between the bourgeois class across the global South and the drug-trafficking actors, while at the same time noting the more severe aspects related to violence of drug-trafficking agents, as they state:

> "[N]arco-bourgeois enjoy a commanding position in a global commodity chain (Beckert 2013), and, like regular capitalists accumulate capital while perpetuating a macroeconomic condition of dependent underdevelopment […]. But unlike the rest of its class, the narco-bourgeoisie is distinguished (among other traits) by the centrality of violence in organizing its business and its illicit status in the normative-legal sphere (Richani 1997, 2013)."[231]

In this description, the narco-agents appear as a capitalist class emphasizing the conditions, and I would argue the 'rules' or structures, of why indigenous lands are considered by public and private institutions "underdeveloped", justifying, through a colonial narrative, the need for an "improvement" in the use of a land. Drug traffickers apply these consolidated structures in order to expand their territoriality and prevail in the competition with their rivals. As pointed out by

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[230] McSweeney K. et al., *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?*, op. cit., p. 12.

[231] Ibidem, p. 17.

McSweeney et al, narco-traffickers are, as a consequence, “key actors” in the “ongoing process” of landlessness and destruction of indigenous and agrarian communities[232]. Moreover, as analyzed in Chapter 3, drug trafficking and the territorial dominance of criminal agents contribute to chronic poverty and unemployment in some poorer regions, creating an illusion of wealth among indigenous and *campesino* communities, who finally find themselves dependent on the organized crime groups.

4. 2. 2 Drugs and organized crime repercussions on the identification process of indigenous communities

This section aims to identify plausible correlations between drug trafficking and the processes of identification of the indigenous communities, drawing from postcolonial research, as well as Critical Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Standpoint Theory addressed in the work of Dertadian on drug prohibition and coloniality[233]. These latter approaches are based on Wolfe’s analysis of colonialism as a process rather than an event, which ultimately allows us to see colonial legacies as ongoing matters that have produced, in the past and present, “form[s] of power in the social and legal structures of settler-colonial societies”[234]. Organized crime in Honduras, similarly to drug policy, as I will thoroughly discuss in Chapter 5, is a space where we can witness these colonial structures in action, highlighted by the role of transgression and the colonial power on indigenous lands, as Taussig suggests[235]. Remarkably, as he claims that the norm is not proof of anything, but the exception is, he is suggesting relying on topics of criminality to better understand societal and political issues[236].

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[232] McSweeney K. et al., *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?*, op. cit.

[233] Dertadian G. C., *The Coloniality of drug prohibition*, in "International Journal of Drug Policy”, 2024.

[234] Ibidem, p. 3.

[235] Taussig M., *My Cocaine Museum*, op. cit

[236] Ibidem

Berg and Carranza describe that organized crime in Honduras exercises violence based on these three functions: competition, coercion, and exploitation[237]. Arguably, the capitalist nature of drug trafficking accelerates these processes in Honduras for the acquisition of lands and social labour, and ultimately, territorial control. Here, I would like to remark on the consequences that cocaine and organized crime's political power brought to indigenous peoples, especially in Garífuna and Miskito lands, as provided by researchers such as McSweeney et al, who show strong evidence of these three functions in Honduras[238]. Therefore, the manipulation of their social relations, which relies on social embeddedness of the areas where they operate, expands from bribery to torture and murder. As expressed by the authors, there is "widely-reported evidence of their willingness to maim, rape, kidnap, torture, and murder those who oppose or cross them (and their family members)"[239]. The purpose entailed in this violence is to ensure political power by establishing control in indigenous lands and enforcing internal contracts. This reflects the double nature of drug-traffickers in Honduras, as capitalist narco-businesses and as State-substitutes. As Valencia explains, the narco-business is not only aimed at "*desarrollar planes efectivos de distribución y expansión de su producto, sino también de expandir su propia legitimidad social*"[240] through coercion and violence [241].

As previously discussed, and following the literature of MacNeill and Reichman, processes of privatization have shifted the State's responsibilities, the "dispersed

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[237] Berg L. A., Carranza M., *Organized criminal violence and territorial control*, in "Journal of Peace Research", 55(5), 2018.

[238] McSweeney K. et al, ibidem.

[239] McSweeney K. et al, ibidem, p. 14.

[240] Valencia S. M., *Capitalismo* Gore, General Series, 1st edition, Melusina, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2020, p. 48.

[241] Translation: developing effective plans for the distribution and expansion of its product, but also to expansing its social legitimation.

energies" elsewhere[242] [243]. This has led Honduran and indigenous societies to seek State-substitutes in local communities, churches, NGOs, development enterprises, and organized crime groups. On that note, Castillo Guity argues that drugs in Honduras have a double effect of providing employment and money to local people (despite being an illusion, as previously discussed) and, more importantly, translating it into loyalty and social control[244]. They provide marginalized people with the authority that the State is not able to give, and they gain territorial control, as a proper State-substitute. In this regard, some studies show evidence of increased protection provided by criminal groups in Honduras. In the research by Berg and Carranza, for example, the authors note that in some neighborhoods, the safety of local people has increased since criminal groups established order[245]. The UNODC also reports that in areas where organized crime is the main authority, crime rates are usually lower[246]. However, we must not forget that this safety and protection are bound to the preconditions like dispossession of indigenous communities from their lands, which is often perpetuated through physical and psychological violence. Emblematic is the increase in crack cocaine addiction in areas like Cristales and San Martín, which is often used to pay off the indigenous and local social labour of organized crime, as mentioned in a previous Chapter and in MacNeill's work[247]. The goal is to bind the labour to the organized crime, using drug addiction as an effective tool that creates a tie of dependence between the indigenous and the *mestizo*

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[242] MacNeill T., *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, op. cit.

[243] Reichman D. R., *The Broken Village: Coffee, Migration, and Globalization in Honduras*, op. cit.

[244] Castillo Guity, R. L., *Iseri lidáwsmsri: autonomía territorial y educativa en la comunidad garifuna de Vallecito en Honduras*, op. cit., p. 39

[245] Berg L. A., Carranza M., *Organized criminal violence and territorial control*, p. 579.

[246] UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean,* op. cit.

[247] MacNeill, *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, op. cit., p. 228.

trafficker. This relationship ultimately represents the embeddedness of the chain of dependence activated by the State's privatization policies, as extensively analyzed by Phillips[248]. And, similar to Loperena's analysis on extractivism, organized crime territorial control provokes a "transformation of indigenous peoples into landless peasants who, once removed from their lands, become subject to the exploitative labor regimes controlled by the mestizo elite", emphasizing once again the colonial and racialized social order[249].

4. 2. 3 Indigeneity and drug trafficking

The latter quotation from Loperena leaves me with the following question: What is the outcome of the transformation that the author is referring to? What happens to the indigenous identity and indigeneity of their communities? To address these points, I will draw on theoretical research, mentioning the work by Colajanni, who addresses some debates regarding indigenous identities in South America[250]. Moreover, I will also use Castillo de Guity's work on Garífuna's indigenous and black identification processes and obstacles, which I have sometimes mentioned and analyzed in previous matters. The two approaches are quite distinctive, both in their methodologies and aims. I would yet argue that the two perspectives combined offer interesting elements when dealing with the analysis of drug-trafficking implications on indigeneity in Honduras. As mentioned by Colajanni, Sierra describes the identity as follows:

> "*La identidad no es un conjunto de características peculiares por la tradición, sino una representación para proyectar. No es algo hecho,*

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[248] Phillips J., *Misery Financing Development: Subsidized Neoliberalism and Privatized Dependency in Honduras*, op. cit.

[249] Loperena C., *Settler Violence?: Race and Emergent Frontiers of Progress in Honduras*, op. cit., p. 804

[250] Colajanni A., *Investigaciones y debates recientes sobre las identidades indígenas en América Latina. Un balance crítico*, in "Identità delle Comunità Indigene del Centro America, Messico e Caraibi: aspetti culturali e antropologici", Third phase of the seminar on the linguistic identity of indigenous peoples of Latin America as an integration and development factor, Istituto Italo-Latino Americano, 25th November 2008.

transmitido por la tradición, sino un proyecto renovado en cada momento por el que se interpreta el pasado para darle sentido en función de fines elegidos"[251] [252] [253].

The renovation of the indigenous identities allows every identification to be analyzed in its political, social, and historical context, which is the point of contact with Castillo Guity's research. The critical and decolonized approach of his work is, therefore, important to underline the aspects of indigeneity of some communities in Honduras, such as the Garífuna and Miskito, as ongoing processes shaped by traditional and current factors, including indigenous political activism and resistance, aimed at specific contexts and goals for political transformation[254].

To come back to the questions I proposed at the beginning of this section, allow me to analyze the effect of narcobusiness on some of these factors. Landlessness, as might be clear by now, is a condition that many indigenous communities have come across and threatens the continuity of their identification process. The reason lies, on the one hand, in the tradition and ancestrality of the lands, which are put under threat, and which are the historical foundation of self-determination. On the other hand, indigenous identities are constantly shaped in political (re)claims for land recognition and effective acquisition. Concerning this, Castillo Guity explains that, among the Garífuna people in Honduras, indigeneity is a form of reclaiming a land based on the fact that indigenous

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[251] Colajanni,A., *Investigaciones y debates recientes sobre las identidades indígenas en América Latina. Un balance crítico*, op. cit., p. 151

[252] Sierra M. T., *Esencialismo y autonomía: paradojas de las reivindicaciones indígenas*, in "Alteridades", VII(14), 1997.

[253] Translation: "The identity is not a conjunction of peculiar characteristics for the tradition, but rather a project that is renovated every moment, through which the past is interpreted in order to make sense of it in relation to the chosen aims".

[254] Castillo Guity, R. L., *Iseri lidáwsmsri: autonomía territorial y educativa en la comunidad garifuna de Vallecito en Honduras*, op. cit.

peoples hold ancestral knowledge around that geographical space[255]. Therefore, not only lands and spaces, because belonging to the tradition and ancestrality, but also the social and political ties around them in the reclaim and protection of those lands, become part of the indigenous identity. This is, in my opinion, a demonstration of what was afore-quoted from Sierra's: indigenous land is a traditional heritage whose concept keeps being renovated in order to attribute new meanings and purposes to it and to strengthen the community's integrity. Some of these activist purposes of ethnic identity among the Garífuna community are resistance as a survival process against processes of criminalization, and will be discussed in the next section with the support of Castillo Guity's work.

According to Colajanni, we could understand identity through several perspectives, one of which is the *conciencia étnica*, a concept that he borrows from Bartolomé and Barabas[256] [257]. La *conciencia étnica*, or ethnic consciousness, results from an identification process within a community, thanks to the intra-social relations of an ethnic group[258]. If we think of how indigenous communities are recruited and controlled by criminal and drug-trafficking groups, we might realize that these State-substitute groups undermine the *conciencia étnica* among the community's individuals. Previously, I mentioned the case of Campa Vista, a land that was torn from the Garífuna group without their consent and sold to businessmen by their community leader. This episode caused mistrust within the community since it was their leader who withdrew the

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[255] Castillo Guity, R. L., *Iseri lidáwsmsri: autonomía territorial y educativa en la comunidad garifuna de Vallecito en Honduras*, op. cit.

[256] Colajanni,A., *Investigaciones y debates recientes sobre las identidades indígenas en América Latina. Un balance crítico*, op. cit., p. 158

[257] Bartolomé M., Barabas A., *La resistencia Maya. Relaciones interétnicas en el oriente de la península de Yucatán*, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México, 1981,

[258] Colajanni, ibidem.

land without consulting the community to achieve better economic prospects[259]. As MacNeill mentions, the lack of trust was strongly and commonly felt by the community, and it is associated with corruption, criminality, drug trafficking, and addiction[260]. As he states: "This lack of trust is severely debilitating the community's ability to organize and take effective action and marks a severe drop in social and political capital resources of the community"[261]. As a result, the entire community is weakened in its actions, resources, and structure, disrupting the group and its identity from within.

4. 3 Political aspects of indigeneity in Honduras: criminalization of indigenous peoples and resistance

One of the most interesting outcomes of postcolonial research in Honduras is the concept of criminalization of indigenous resistance and communities, which makes indigenous communities responsible for crimes and local violence. This translates into systemic repression, the murder of activists, and death threats, often involving local political or governmental figures who protect with impunity killers and drug traffickers. According to Phillips's work, written in 2019, the Tolupanes community lost fifteen of its leaders under the rhetoric of "passive acquiescence and protective impunity"[262]. The more neoliberal and extractivist projects and drug trafficking are established in Honduras, the more the government seems to accuse indigenous resistance of criminal acts and endorses their suppression.

As pointed out by Detardian, postcolonial perspectives fail to adapt to the current political situations and discriminations to which indigenous peoples are

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[259] MacNeill, *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, op. cit.

[260] MacNeill, *Development as Imperialism: Power and the Perpetuation of Poverty in Afro-Indigenous Communities of Coastal Honduras*, op. cit., p. 227.

[261] Ibidem, p. 231.

[262] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Honduras*, op. cit., p. 350

subject[263]. To adjust this position, Detardian draws on more critical perspectives stemming from Critical Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Standpoint Theory[264]. From this point of view, the colonial and imperial roots of settler-colonial societies, like the Honduran, become crucial to understanding the development of crime control and punishment. In doing so, the author proposes a decolonized reflection on the State's responsibility for the criminalization of indigenous and black people in South America, which inspired me to apply it to the Honduran context[265]. One of the key points of the research is to define drug policy as the place where a racialized ordering of society is generated and is central to the perpetuation of the colonial consideration of indigenous and black communities as 'savage' and 'deviant' groups[266]. This way, the author says:

> "[T]he 'overrepresentation' of Indigenous peoples in crime statistics for drug offenses is more accurately understood as an articulation of the way police target and criminalize Indigenous peoples and their drug use."[267]

Specifically, this work is reflected in Honduras to the extent that indigenous and black vulnerabilities, such as the recruitment for drug trafficking, drug addiction, as well as resistance, political participations, and protests, lead to the criminalization of indigenous individuals and communities *a priori*, based on and perpetuating racialized and colonial stereotypes and constructs. As I will argue later, resistance is an important component for the integration of indigenous communities and their individual and collective identification. However, the narrative that the Honduran State outlines is that of considering indigenous communities as 'others' and anti-establishment or anti-development groups, threatening the economic growth of the country. The State marginalizes

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[263] Dertadian G. C., *The Coloniality of drug prohibition*, op. cit.

[264] Ibidem

[265] Ibidem

[266] Dertadian G. C., *The Coloniality of drug prohibition*, p. 3.

[267] Ibidem, p. 5.

indigenous activism, depicting it "as narrow and selfish" within the context of *mestizaje* and justifying (and endorsing) the repression and acts of violence against indigenous communities[268].

Moreover, the way that systemic criminalization of indigenous peoples affects them is strictly related to their individual and collective identification process and community organization. The immediate consequence of criminalization is aimed at terror and shutting down resistance attempts. Phillips presents this phenomenon under the name of 'debasement', whose name gives the idea of criminalization as a disrupting force, like an earthquake threatening indigenous identity and roots from underneath[269]. The author also claims that, although these processes do not constitute the same massive elimination of the native expressed by genocides, there are other ways we can interpret them[270]. The loss of lands, unity, guidance, and security perpetuated by criminalization, to which "social pathologies and self-destructive behaviors sometimes follow", are expressions of "ecocide (destruction of a people's land base and environment) and ethnocide (destruction of their cultural identity)" that "can be seen as the accompaniment to genocide, understood here as the physical elimination of a people"[271]. Moreover, according to inter-ethnic relations studies, there's a strong nexus between the representation of an ethnicity and social-political processes[272]. This means that criminalization could be seen as a long-term settler-colonialist project, which leads to the destruction of the indigenous identity. Defining indigenous people's rights, struggles, and political participation as criminal or illegal activities shifts the focus from the actual illegal activity to the indigenous population. Altogether, this rhetoric is justified by well-rooted and established racialized and colonial

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[268] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Honduras*, op. cit., p. 373.

[269] Ibidem, pp. 364-65.

[270] Ibidem, pp. 370-71

[271] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Honduras*, op. cit., pp. 370-71.

[272] Colajanni, p. 137

stereotypes and constructs, making it easier for the *mestizo* society to be blessed by impunity. The colonial and racialized hierarchy here only reproduces itself in an order where activities like drug trafficking, development, ecotourist, or extractivist projects - despite being unlawful or illicit - are protected by impunity, while the indigenous and black people are depicted as 'deviants'. McKittrick states that "Black geographies become principally apparent through the historico-racial schema: the captive, the dispossessed, the ungeographic"[273]. Something valid also for indigenous and black communities in Honduras, and that highlights the roots of the marginalization and criminalization to which they are subject.

Taussig reminds us that gold mining, cocaine cultivation, and transnational trafficking are not only associated with transgression and motivating organized crime, but they are also necessary for survival[274]. This is a reason why indigenous peoples in Honduras engage in drug trafficking and extractivist activities and businesses. Facing coercion, manipulation, poverty, and physical violence, they do not really have room to decide whether to keep their lands and communities or to survive. Surviving, nonetheless, is for many authors considered a component of political resistance and self-determination[275]. It forms part of a daily ongoing process of renovation mentioned beforehand. When approaching this topic, I was specifically referring to the Garífuna community, based on the study by Castillo Guity[276]. The author explains that Garífuna communities, individually and collectively, face daily challenges from their resistance to survive as biological humans, as languages, social and spiritual practices, social relations, traditions and customs, art, and food[277]. The author

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[273] McKittrick K., *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006.

[274] Taussig M., *My Cocaine Museum*, p. 4.

[275] Castillo Guity R. L., ibidem.

[276] Castillo Guity R. L., *Iseri lidáwsmsri: autonomía territorial y educativa en la comunidad garifuna de Vallecito en Honduras*, op. cit.

[277] Ibidem

considers resistance among Garífuna communities a means of an ongoing project of self-determination and autonomy that aims to effectively reclaim the indigenous and black identity, and is an essential component of community integration[278]. To survive is a form of political participation, and he describes it as follows: "*[S]obrevivir es resistir. Y resistir es sobrevivir. Sobrevivir es reiventar y recrear estrategias de resistencia y de lucha*"[279] [280]. The concepts of survival and resistance become all the more interesting then, since they embody the tradition and history of a community, while at the same time creating new strategies for the political and community integration. Altogether, it is a political participation that resonates, in my opinion, with what Phillips called "impetus in defense", a conscious form of resistance that speaks for unity, history, ancestrality, and tradition. Phillips analyzes in his paper the different strategies pursued by the Honduran State to debilitate indigenous communities by disrupting what represents their unity and strength: identity[281]. He states that "One of the strengths of Indigenous communities is the sense of identity that fosters unity", integrated into a:

> "deeply rooted cultural understanding of […] ancestral, historical, cultural, and spiritual significance that Indigenous peoples have been able to reference consciously and use as a strong impetus in defense"[282].

Attacking indigenous resistance in Honduras means attacking the individual and collective indigenous identification process. This mirrors Tarasti's relationship among history, the individual, collective memory, and resistance, as mentioned

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[278] Castillo Guity R. L., *Iseri lidáwsmsri: autonomía territorial y educativa en la comunidad garifuna de Vallecito en Honduras*, op. cit.

[279] Ibidem, p. 40

[280] Translation: "Surviving is resisting. And resisting is surviving. Surviving is re-inventing and recreating strategies of resistance and social fight".

[281] Phillips J., *State Violence and Indigenous Resistance in Honduras*, op. cit.

[282] Ibidem, p. 372.

by Verdugo de Lima[283]. There's a bridge that connects all three concepts, since memory and resistance constitute historical narratives that eventually contribute to the identification of a community[284].

[283] Verdugo de Lima L., *Identidad y memoria de los mayas guatemaltecos,* in "Identità delle Comunità Indigene del Centro America, Messico e Caraibi: aspetti culturali e antropologici", Third phase of the seminar on the linguistic identity of indigenous peoples of Latin America as an integration and development factor, Istituto Italo-Latino Americano, 25th November 2008, p. 18.

[284] Ibidem

5. War on Drugs in Honduras and US Imperialism

5. 1. US drug war and counternarcotics policies

5. 1. 1. Overview of the US foreign policy and contemporary considerations

In the last Chapter of my thesis, I would like to address the topic of the US-led drug war and the counternarcotics policy framework, endorsed by the international community and recommended by the UNODC. For this reason, in this section, I will analyze the drug war, providing a historical and political context and identifying its policies, drawing on evidence from Honduras and South America. Specifically, I will concentrate my discourse on militarization, since it has constituted a threat to indigenous communities, and it has probably been the most paradoxical measure in the attempt to interrupt transnational narcobusiness. Taussig emphasizes an 'extraordinary' nexus between justice and cocaine in Colombia, where, accordingly, the *guerrilla* satisfies the demand of the population as it brings both justice and cocaine, whilst the State fails in both providing justice and defeating criminality because of corruption[285]. It created an illusion of security, counterposing criminality and protection. The militarization of rural and red zones, often indigenous lands or protected areas, as a counternarcotics and security measure, brought a similar environment in Honduras, where only the military and criminal gangs effectively exercise authority. From a broader point of view, militarization falls under the umbrella of the US prohibitionist agenda, entangling controversies and imperialist interests in South and Central America, which are all the more relevant in the two Trump administrations in 2017-2021 and 2024-today. Although there is substantial evidence that drug prohibition has contributed to enlarging drug trafficking, this policy framework has consolidated as a geopolitical strategy of the US to establish diplomatic relationships and military presence in countries of Central

[285] Taussig M., *My Cocaine Museum*, op. cit., p. 142.

and South America, perpetuating a colonial imperialist vision[286]. These latter issues and the alternatives that literature suggests are topics that I will discuss in the following sections, drawing on political science and geopolitical literature, analyzing the point of connection between the War on Drugs and the US involvement in Honduras.

The War on Drugs was introduced by Nixon in the 1970s in order to expand the US prohibition and counter the opium production in Asia, and it was soon adopted by Reagan's administration to counter the coca eradication in the Andes[287]. Since then, drug prohibition has consisted of an enriched US foreign policy agenda varying from diplomatic pressure and international participation in the UN and OAS to military aid and training, financial and security assistance, and military operations and infrastructures in the countries of cocaine production and transit[288]. In Honduras, it was in the 1980s that the US foreign policy significantly imposed itself. Seizing the opportunity of alliance with Honduras during the conflict against the Sandinista regime, the US boosted foreign aid and military reinforcement and presence in Honduras. In the years of the conflict, the CIA was operating in the isthmus, and the Honduran military was involved in cocaine trafficking[289]. According to Ziosi, the US agency would have used the participation of the Honduran military in drug trafficking to fund the conflict against the Sandinista regime and, consequently, allowed the drug flow to reach the US[290]. As in this example, prohibition soon started contradicting itself, as the interests it pursues are shown to be imperialist visions of the US in other

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[286] Blume L. R. et al, *Militarized margins: Counternarcotics policy and the struggle for territorial governance in Central America*, in "Geoforum", 170, 2026.

[287] McCoy A. W., *The Stimulus of Prohibition - A Critical History of the Global Narcotics Trade*, in "Dangerous Harvest: Drug Plants and the Transformation of Indigenous Landscapes", Oxford University Press 2004.

[288] Regilme S. S., *Militarised punishment: the Trump administration's escalation of the U.S. war on drugs*, in "Cambridge Review of International Affairs", 38(5), 2025.

[289] Ziosi E., *Enduring flows: The transition of drugs in contemporary Honduras*, op. cit.

[290] Ibidem, pp. 130-131.

countries in South and Central America. Political instabilities like the several political crises in Honduras, which peaked with the *golpe* in 2009, and the spread of military and drug-trafficking areas, like the Moskitia, have been perfect grounds for this. US foreign aid and security assistance increased with Bush's Andean Initiative in 1989, allocating $100 million to the Andean region[291]. Since the 1990s, given the severity of the cocaine availability to lower-income individuals, as well as the eruption of crack cocaine, the drug war under the Bush administration expanded further, opening the discourse to the international community[292]. With the Obama administration, drug policy started addressing domestic social and health issues, initiating "mildly progressive" reforms[293]. Nonetheless, the expenses designated for foreign security assistance reached higher levels in comparison with the previous administrations: between 2008 and 2011, the US allocated $1.2 billion dollars to the Central American Regional Security Initiative[294]. Honduras alone received, in 2008, $4,469,000, and, in 2012, $17,613,000 from the same initiative[295]. Furthermore, since 2017, Trump's cabinet reintroduced a heavily militarized drug policy. The author Regilme describes Trump's counternarcotics efforts as:

> "[P]olicies that reinforced systemic racial violence within the U.S. but also expanded the coercive power abroad, exporting militarized counternarcotics efforts to Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia under the banner of security cooperation."[296]

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[291] Ziosi E., *Enduring flows: The transition of drugs in contemporary Honduras*, op. c

[292] Murano A. J., *Decolonizing the Drug War: Bolivia's Movement to Transform Coca Control*, Universitetet I Tromsø.

[293] Sirin C., *From Nixon's War on Drugs to Obama's Drug Policies Today: Presidential Progress in Addressing Racial Injustices and Disparities*, in "Departmental Papers", University of Texas El Paso, 2011.

[294] Eventon R., Justifying Militarisation; 'Counter-Narcotics' and 'Counter Narco-Terrorism', Policy Report 3, Global Drug Policy Observatory, 2015, p. 8.

[295] Ibidem

[296] Regilme S. S., op. cit., p. 607.

As I will discuss in the following paragraphs, the author underlines the situation of this approach into larger International Relations "debates on the role of great powers in global governance, reflecting a neo-imperial logic that reasserted the U.S. dominance through coercive and punitive approaches"[297]. Explanatory, in this regard, is the episode of the seizure of the Venezuelan President Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores in early January of 2026. Alleged as a law enforcement intervention to counter drug trafficking, this operation has raised criticism among international relations scholars, who saw an infringement of Venezuelan sovereignty and independence[298]. Seemingly, drug trafficking and especially drug prohibition need to be understood in a wider framework of international relationships, where racialized and colonial roots determine the foreign policy. Mejia and Restrepo, in this regard, conclude that "Prohibitionist drug policies can be understood as a transfer of the costs of the drugs problem faced by consumer countries to producer and transit countries"[299].

5. 1. 2. The contradictions and issues with drug prohibition: evidence from drug interdiction in the cocaine traffic

Drug interdiction, fostered by the US drug prohibitionist foreign policy, has been used as a justification to send equipment and aid, to coordinate military units, and to consolidate the US presence in countries for the eradication and transit of cocaine, such as Honduras[300]. Kerssen brings up evidence of the increase of militarization within indigenous lands justified by the implementation of counter-narcotic policies, bringing along more uncertainty to the self-determination of

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[297] Regilme S. S., op. cit., p. 607.

[298] Ahmed M., *The Politics of Kidnapping: U.S. Intervention and the Detention of Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro-Implications for International Law and State Sovereignty*, in "SSRN Electronic Journal", 2026

[299] Mejia D and Restrepo P., *Why Is Strict Prohibition Collapsing? A Perspective from Producer Countries,* in "Ending the drug wars: report of the LSE Expert Group on the economics of drug policy", LSE IDEAS, 2014.

[300] McSweeney K. et al, *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?*, op. cit.

local and indigenous communities, as well as more violence, land-grabbing, and dispossession[301]. Moreover, many scholars disagree with the logic of the US foreign policy to counter narcobusiness, as drug interdiction through security measures fosters violence and creates new transit and production hubs. McSweeney et al describe drug interdiction operations as "predictable and ongoing cat-and-mouse dynamic[s]", which, on the one hand, encourage the further development of the drug-trafficking network and, on the other hand, augment violence and dispossession among *campesinos*' and indigenous lands[302]. In fact, these operations consist of delaying or destroying drug shipments along their transit route, incentivizing drug-traffickers to "seek to stay a step ahead of their pursuers", rearranging routes, and shifting the transit hubs[303]. In short, it is the US drug prohibition that activated the balloon effect, resulting in newer drug-trafficking hubs and new areas for cultivation and production of cocaine. Emblematic of this are Colombia and Honduras. In Colombia, Reagan's efforts to slow down the eradication of coca in Bolivia simply shifted the cultivation to northern countries, making Colombia the new center[304]. Similarly, as previously analyzed, Honduras became a new transit hub for cocaine as a consequence of the balloon effect, after the implementation of drug policies in Colombia and Mexico.

Moreover, the militarization endorsed by drug interdiction has several repercussions on indigenous and local rural communities. Under this rhetoric, troop deployments are sent into indigenous and smallholder lands with orders of repression, augmenting the violence against indigenous peoples and peasants, while counterproductively increasing the global supply. Indeed, the spread of

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[301] Kerssen T. M., *Grabbing power: the new struggles for land, food and democracy in northern Honduras*, op. cit.

[302] McSweeney K. et al, *Why Do Narcos Invest in Rural Land?,* op. cit., p. 7

[303] Ibidem

[304] McCoy A. W., op. cit.

drug trafficking across indigenous peoples' and *campesinos*' lands has legitimized military onsite interventions, evictions, and acts of violence by officials or police, resulting in a comprehensive abuse of authority[305]. In this regard, recent data and analyses, as well as several events, have shown the US prohibitionist imperial interest and the failure of its counternarcotics measures. Cross-country research in Bolivia suggests, for example, that there is no correlation between lack of governmental intervention, such as police or military enforcement, and a decrease in homicide rates, but the opposite is statistically true[306].

On the other hand, the repression fostered by prohibitionist policies to reduce drug availability has, in contrast, shown an increase in global supply of drugs, especially cocaine, which reached its peak of production in 2023[307]. McCoy, analyzing the global opium traffic and the US foreign drug policy, states that repression policies "require[s] both elastic demand (i.e., rising prices reduce consumption) and inelastic supply (i.e., rising prices do not increase supply)", which are unrealistic conditions of the global drug market[308]. These two assumptions do not take into account two characteristics of the global drug market: drug addiction and the resilience of drug supply. The first characteristic, drug addiction, implies that the demand for drugs is relatively inelastic. This means that although the price of the drugs increases after the prohibitionist policies, the consumer would ask for approximately the same quantity of drugs by increasing their income or reducing other consumptions[309]. At the same time,

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[305] Blume L. R. et al, op. cit.

[306] Murano A. J., op. cit., p. 72.

[307] UNODC, *UNODC World Drug Report 2025: Global instability compounding social, economic and security costs of the world drug problem*, 25 June, 2025, https://unis.unvienna.org/unis/en/pressrels/2025/unisnar1499.html#:~:text=And%20we%20must%20strengthen%20responses,market%20breaking%20its%20own%20records.

[308] McCoy A. W., op. cit., p. 29.

[309] Ibidem

as already analyzed before, drug providers would seek alternatives to maintain production and satisfy the drug demand. This means that the global supply of drugs is, in contrast to the assumption of drug prohibition, relatively elastic in the long run: to a variation of the drug price, the suppliers respond with reorganization, involvement of new suppliers and traffickers, providing a similar or larger quantity of drug produced. Therefore, as McCoy notices, the "spurring traders and growers to sell off stocks, old growers to plant more, and new producers or areas to enter production"[310]. The result is that prohibition policies implement a repression that stimulates the global supply of drugs, leading to "rising drug production, increased consumption, powerful crime syndicates, police corruption, and political collusion"[311].

5. 2. US drug prohibition in Honduras

5. 2. 1. US-led militarization and systemic violence in the Moskitia

The US counternarcotics operations in Honduras saw a significant increase in 2007, when a cooperation between the at-that-time Honduran President Zelaya and US President Bush approved the deployment of US special forces in the Moskitia, including coastal and naval bases, resulting in sexual and physical exploitation of local populations[312]. In the aftermath of the *golpe* of 2009, Honduras became "a blend of right-wing extremism, neoliberalism and militarism"[313]. The US security assistance, consisting of militarized law enforcement, drug interdiction, and financial aid, consolidated in the country, becoming one of the main factors for land grab among indigenous and *campesinos*' lands[314]. In the years after the *golpe*, the US spent millions of dollars

[310] McCoy A. W., op. cit., p. 25.

[311] Ibidem, p. 28.

[312] Blume L. R. et al, op. cit.

[313] Kerssen T. M., op. cit., p. 9.

[314] Ibidem

in its security campaign in Honduras, providing two naval bases, six military bases, and updating the only US air base in Central America, the Soto Cano air base[315]. Obama's administration expanded the Foreign-Deployed Advisory Support Teams (FAST) initiative in Central America as an interdiction programme under the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)[316]. The FAST was first implemented in 2005 to counter drug traffickers in Afghanistan and assists other countries in building drug-trafficking cases; they conduct undercover and interdiction operations, financial investigations, and serve as advisors and training groups for law enforcement units[317]. In 2012, in Honduras, FAST operations were responsible for the deaths not only of drug-traffickers, but also of four indigenous people in the Operation Anvil in the Moskitia, justified with self-defense[318]. Thereafter, the FAST has no longer been operative in Honduras. The authors Bird and Main bring up evidence of the responsibility of the US DEA and the legal maneuvering that silenced justice in the case[319]. The victims were two drug-traffickers who had recovered hundreds of kilos of cocaine, two women (one pregnant), two young men, one of 14 years old and the other of 21 years old. The findings of the study suggest that the DEA played a central and leading role, and that the investigations of both Honduran and US cooperation offices were limited and delayed[320]. Moreover, the indigenous population of the interested region in Moskitia, the Ahuas, noticed before the Operation Anvil the expansion of militarization justified by counternarcotics operations. A growing number of drug-trafficking and counternarcotics

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315 Eventon R., op. cit, p. 10.

316 Ibidem, p. 3.

317 Ibidem, p. 2.

318 Ibidem

319 Bird A. and Main A., *Collateral Damage of a Drug War - The May 11 Killings in Ahuas and the Impact of the U.S. War on Drugs in La Moskitia, Honduras*, Center for Economic and Policy Research and Rights Action, 2012, Washington DC, USA.

320 Ibidem

operations before the 'incident' in Ahuas, therefore, had increased the violence in the region and affected "life in the Moskitia in a variety of ways"; for example, fishing nets were destroyed, and fishermen were killed in naval accidents, followed by unconfirmed reports[321]. Another counternarcotics measure implemented in the Moskitia that generated debate among scholars is unofficially declaring it a "Red Zone". McSweeney et al state that by 'red-zoning' this region, the State washed its hands of the problem, showing "inability to secure the region" and offering "'carte blanche' license to traffickers to seize land and resources"[322]. These are examples of how both drug-trafficking and US-led counternarcotics militarization have contributed to forms of violence targeted at indigenous and rural communities in the Moskitia, as argued by Blume et al[323].

Furthermore, Eventon quotes an article from The Times, where a US Colonel based in Honduras explains that counternarcotics measures, therefore militarized interdiction operations, "promote stability, which is necessary for external investment, economic growth and minimizing violence"[324]. Apart from being partially untrue (as we have discussed above, counternarcotics measures are positively correlated with violence), this statement offers an interesting point of view on which actors are favored and which are silenced under the militarized approach for countering transnational drug trafficking. Therefore, these measures benefit the dominant elite class, creating the conditions for neoliberal projects, regardless of whether they actually mitigate drug trafficking and protect civil society, or they don't. As argued by Eventon, this perspective:

> "[C]an be used to justify a military presence; has no real metrics; narrows the public focus, diverting attention from important context; it removes any

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[321] Bird A. and Main A., op. cit., p. 13.

[322] McSweeney K. et al, *Grounding traffic: the cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras*, op. cit., p. 22.

[323] Blume L. R. et al, op. cit., p. 7.

[324] Eventon R., op. cit, p. 28.

political element behind the existence of insurgencies; and the US role is conveniently sidelined in the face of a malignant national security threat."[325]

The focus of these policies and operations is, therefore, not 'minimizing violence', but rather the economic purposes of the dominant or foreign groups. The other element is the suppression of indigenous communities and political resistance, through repression, dispossession, militarization, and criminalization. As evidenced by McSweeney et al, these anti-drug approaches alienate and gate-keep indigenous organizations from their national and international network of NGOs, isolating them and destroying their resources[326]. According to Blume et al, this results in an authoritarian tendency where the State (Honduran and, in most of the cases, US) intensifies its control over indigenous territories through coercive acts and restricting civil liberties[327]. Regarding this, it is relevant, in my opinion, to analyze Trump's drug policy and imperialist visions in Central and South America.

5. 2. 2. Trump's imperialism and dominance in Honduras: the pardon for Juan Orlando Hernández

During his first cabinet (2017-2021), US President Donald Trump escalated the drug war, expanding domestic and international coercive measures. Regilme states that these efforts were carried out through three mechanisms:

"(1) rhetorical and legislative rollback of Obama-era criminal justice reforms, (2) amplification of federal prosecutorial discretion and sentencing

[325] Eventon R., op. cit, pp. 28-29.

[326] McSweeney K. et al, *Grounding traffic: the cocaine commodity chain and land grabbing in eastern Honduras*, op. cit.,, p. 22.

[327] Blume L. R. et al, op. cit.

severity, and (3) securitization of drug control by conflating immigration, gang violence, and narcotics trafficking.[328]"

These mechanisms are carried out in a War on Drugs that promotes a militarized approach, where training units and equipment are provided to the recipient countries, and where the DEA is highly influential and often leads the anti-drug operations. Moreover, the diplomatic pressure, the financial aid cooperation, and the US participation in the UN and OAS have played an important role in shaping the expansion of the drug war. The author continues saying that through this expansion of law enforcement authority, the Trump administration strengthened and perpetuated a racialized system in anti-drug policies, targeting as criminals the Black and Latinx communities and granting impunity to police authorities[329]. Moreover, in 2018, he suggested reducing US foreign aid, and he integrated a more militarized anti-drug policy in countries of Central and South America. By weaponizing the drug war, Donald Trump found an expedient to justify anti-immigration policies on the one hand, and on the other to broader geopolitical and imperialist goals[330]. Emblematic of this rhetoric is the recent episode of Maduro's seizure in Venezuela, previously mentioned. Already in 2020, the Venezuelan President was accused by the U.S. Attorney General William Barr of narco-trafficking and narco-terrorism. The accusation escalated in the events of 2026, when Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores were seized in the Operation Absolute Resolve, involving air strikes and special forces actions in the Venezuelan capital.

Interestingly, these events strongly contrast with the political and diplomatic relations of President Trump and the Honduran ex-President Juan Orlando Hernández. Juan Orlando Hernández is the former leader of the Honduran right-

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[328] Regilme S. S., op. cit., p. 612-13.

[329] Regilme S. S., op. cit.

[330] Ibidem

wing party, US-endorsed, and the only two-term president of Honduras due to a controversial constitutional reform that removed the prohibition of reelection. Furthermore, Hernández was extradited in 2022 to the US and sentenced in 2024 to 45 years in prison for drug trafficking. Based on the US Court's decision, he was a key figure in the drug-trafficking scheme, abusing his powerful positions and authority and bringing 400 tonnes of cocaine into the US[331]. In the document, it is also mentioned that during his time in office, Hernández protected and enriched the drug traffickers[332]. In November 2025, President Donald Trump announced the pardon of Juan Orlando Hernández, claiming that his sentence was a result of the 'wrongs' carried out by the justice department under the former President Biden[333]. This occurred in the same month of the Honduran presidential elections, during which President Trump endorsed the leader of the National Party, the same party as Juan Orlando Hernández[334]. These episodes serve as examples of how the anti-drug and narco foreign policies may not reflect a genuine purpose of interrupting drug trafficking, but rather a broader geopolitical strategy, reflecting neo-imperial and neo-colonial structures in Central and South America.

Here, I would like to propose a reflection based on a question that MacNeill asks when analyzing development projects in Honduras: in whose interests are they (in this case, drug control policies) being prepared? The juxtaposition of events in Honduras, followed by those in Venezuela, reveals the US geopolitical rationale for controlling resources in Central and South America: the seizure of Venezuelan oil on the one hand and economic and political control on the

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331 Press release, *Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Sentenced to 45 Years in Prison for Conspiring to Distribute More Than 400 Tons of Cocaine and Related Firearms Offenses*, in Archive of U.S. Department of Justice, 2024. https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/juan-orlando-hernandez-former-president-honduras-sentenced-45-years-prison-conspiring

332 ibidem

333 Yousif N., *What was Honduras ex-president convicted of and why has Trump pardoned him?*, BBC, 2025. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9qewln7912o

334 Ibidem

other[335]. Toussaint remarks, in this regard: “Washington wants to acquit or punish according to its interests, whether it is supporting a political ally in a foreign election or seizing strategic resources, such as Venezuelan oil”[336]. This trend is a legacy of colonial geopolitical strategies. To say it with Regilme’s words, within this geopolitical framework, the US “appears to be a hegemonic narco-state influencing smaller states’ drug governance approaches”[337].

While the seizure of Nicolás Maduro was justified by U.S. authorities as a law enforcement effort aimed at dismantling a narco-state, and was later linked to the relevance of Venezuelan oil, the historical alliance between the United States and the Honduran government reveals a more ambiguous pattern. In Honduras, U.S. security cooperation and diplomatic support persisted for years despite mounting allegations that high-ranking officials were directly involved in drug-trafficking networks. This inconsistency suggests that counternarcotics policies do not operate solely as instruments to combat transnational crime, but are often embedded within broader geopolitical calculations. Honduras has indeed a long history of US endorsement and influence in the political occurrences, such as the presidential elections. In 2009, for example, the Obama administration refused to recognize the Honduran coup because it would have otherwise triggered the US financial and military aid to the country, interrupting the ongoing drug war[338]. In both his mandates, President Donald Trump has seemingly reached more explicit and threatening expressions of this logic. The drug war under the Trump administration has, in fact, legitimized state violence against other States to affirm the US control[339].

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[335] Toussaint E., *Former Honduran narco-president Hernández pardoned, Maduro kidnapped: Trump’s cynicism,* 2026. https://www.cadtm.org/Former-Honduran-narco-president-Hernandez-pardoned-Maduro-kidnapped-Trump-s

[336] Toussaint E., op. cit.

[337] Regilme S. S., op. cit., p. 618.

[338] MacNeill T., op. cit.

[339] Regilme S. S., op. cit.

5. 3. Decolonizing drug policy

5. 3. 1. The colonization of drug control

Among many others, the previous topics concerning the criminalization of indigenous peoples, drug prohibition and its controversies, narco-land-grab, and the imperialist goals of the US counternarcotics agenda pertain to a common system of drug control based on racialized and colonial structures. As we read in Daniels et al's work, "Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples have been disproportionately targeted for drug law enforcement and face discrimination across the criminal system", being more likely to be subject to arrest, prosecution, and incarceration for drug offenses[340]. The authors Blume et al highlight how the US counternarcotics interventions not only have created the conditions for drug trafficking in countries like Honduras, but they also have indiscriminately weakened indigenous territorial movements through the militarization of their lands[341]. Many authors also emphasize that the criminalization of narcotic substances is *per sé* a product of this colonial legacy, which has often made indigenous and local substances illicit products, leading to a criminalization targeted at local people[342]. If we analyze this and how drug trafficking affects low-income, Indigenous, Black, Brown, and Latinx communities in the American continent, we might see the ongoing repercussions of the War on Drugs and violations of human rights. We might map what Dertadian calls the "unbroken chain of violence" of coloniality[343]. Daniels et al describe the colonization of drug control as:

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[340] Daniels C. et al, *Decolonizing Drug Policy*, in Harm Reduction Journal, 18(1), 2021, p. 3.

[341] Blume L. R. et al, op. cit.

[342] Dertadian G. C., op. cit.

[343] Ibidem

> "[U]se of drug control by states in Europe and America to advance and sustain the systematic exploitation of people, land and resources, as well as racialized hierarchies, which were established under colonial control and continue to dominate today."[344]

This retraces some of the characteristics of imperialism according to MacNeill: (1) dominance of political institutions, economies, and resources in the interest of capital accumulation through dispossession of local populations; (2) the dominance is based on the interest of elite and powerful economic actors; (3) the control is asserted on local, national, and international scales, coordinated through a set of interests and ideologies[345]. The imperialism expressed by the US in Honduras consists of dominance according to these three pillars, where the more powerful agencies or States prevail in controlling drug trafficking to obtain various resources. From an international perspective, more powerful States, such as the US, impose themselves, illustrating modalities for governance and drug control[346]. In this way, the States of Central and South America, as well as those of Africa and Asia, are constantly depicted as States lacking authority and democracy, in need of financial and military aid and security assistance, in accordance with colonial premises. According to Blume et al, there is clear evidence of these hierarchies in the way more powerful countries "dictate modalities of government" to less powerful ones, considered "ungoverned", and increase militarization based on their neoliberal agenda[347]. In the case of the US, especially under the Trump administration, this hierarchy is represented by the US foreign policy and drug control, as it externalizes and weaponizes it to achieve specific geopolitical interests. This ideology indiscriminately attributes

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[344] Daniels C. et al, op. cit

[345] MacNeill T., op cit.

[346] Blume L. R. et al, op. cit.

[347] Ibidem

crimes to certain categories: domestically through the criminalization of the Back, Brown, and Latinx communities; and internationally through the dominance of drug control and the externalization of racialized practices. As Regilme explains, "the U.S. foreign policy - particularly in the realm of security assistance - projects internal fears of racialized crime and social disorder onto foreign context by conflating drug trafficking, immigration, and transnational violence", legitimizing authoritarian practices in other countries[348]. As a result of this dominance and control, indeed, countries that receive US influence and assistance, like Honduras, reproduce the US hierarchies and feel empowered, by rule of the cooperation, to adopt repressive and racialized counternarcotics measures.

As a consequence, on a domestic level, the Honduran security agenda has also fostered a tough and punitive approach, consistent with that of the US. The so-called *mano dura,* implemented in 2002, was intended as a security agenda with a punitive approach in contrast with the preventive policy framework of the 1990s. With the new policies, military and police raids in poorer neighborhoods have been allowed, and incarceration is based on the physical appearance of the accused individuals (including tattoos, clothing, and haircuts)[349]. This was thought of as a mechanism to identify gang criminals more effectively (since the gangs often demand some physical characteristics), but it actually reproduced a class- and ethno-racial discrimination[350]. As a result, as described by the authors: "black and indigenous groups or persons with dark skin colour, who were at the bottom of Latin American societies and perceived as 'racially' inferior, populated the modern prisons in the late nineteenth century […]"[351]. This argument is

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[348] Regilme S. S., op. cit., p. 610.

[349] Rivera L. G. et al, *Coming of Age in the Penal System: Neoliberalism, 'Mano Dura' and the Reproduction of 'Racialised' Inequality in Honduras*, Chapter 9 of "The Social Life of Economic Inequalities in Contemporary Latin America", Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2018.

[350] Ibidem

[351] Ibidem, p. 213.

relevant to the analysis presented in the next section. Although we understood the Honduran government as a State that is US-led and whose legitimation is often under threat, we can also see by the evidence of dispossession and criminalization of indigenous lands and people that the State holds a lot of responsibility too. The US and domestic counternarcotics militarization that the Honduran State implements provides both the US and Honduras "a tool to expand in historically autonomous areas", like the indigenous lands of the Moskitia, that "in the name of drug trafficking […] undermine indigenous territorial projects and suppress [their] activism"[352]. According to Blume et al, these counternarcotics strategies intensify State control (whether foreign or Honduran) over indigenous lands and strengthen authoritarian shrinks in both countries[353]. Under this point of view, the State is not an absent actor in the realm of security but rather strictly controlling and establishing its authority through racialized and repressive rules and operations.

5. 3. 2. The presence of the State authority among the indigenous lands in Honduras

In the previous Chapter, I emphasized the role of territory for the organized crime groups in Honduras, stating that criminal gangs and *maras* often serve as "State-substitutes" and cover the role of authorities when the public ones do not reach. However, the situation is far more complex, and leaving this argument as a conclusion would not suffice and would (and has indeed) mislead policymaking. Therefore, the authors Blume et al have considered this a mistaken assumption in counternarcotics policymaking that resulted in the opposite of what it was intended to achieve[354]. According to them, as in newer decolonizing perspectives,

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[352] Blume L. R. et al, op. cit.

[353] Ibidem

[354] Ibidem

organized crime does not result from State absence, but rather needs a particular kind of State presence[355]. A certain form of State presence is, in fact, a condition for drug trafficking to run smoothly; as I previously argued, this constitutes the social embeddedness of drug trafficking and consists of the involvement of high-ranked political figures to move tons of drugs in disguise. An example of this is surely Juan Orlando Hernández and the testified involvement of his party, the National Party, in the drug money laundering that takes place among indigenous lands and causes land-grabbing[356]. Consequently, stating that organized crime is territory-bound and serves as a State-substitute does not mean that the State is not somehow present. On the contrary, the way that State and international actors shaped their policies, knowing that illicit economies would be beneficial for them through militarization, marginalization, and criminalization of certain lands and peoples[357]. In other words, counternarcotics policies have fostered militarization and criminalization in Honduras by virtue of the assumption of State absence, using drug trafficking to get more control in rural and indigenous lands.

Based on Blume et al's research, this approach led to a rising authoritarian control of indigenous lands in Honduras, which mirrors other situations in regions of US influence and has severe implications for indigenous lands[358]. Since the 2010s, Honduras has indeed experienced an authoritarian shift, demonstrated by the increase in militarization, supported by the US-endorsed, right-wing and populist National Party, but also restrictions on civil liberties[359]. State violence has been exercised selectively and targets specific communities or organizations, labelled as 'others', in order to marginalize them and withhold indigenous governance and land rights that are attributed by *de jure* rights. As

[355] Blume L. R. et al, op. cit.

[356] Ibidem

[357] Ibidem

[358] Ibidem, p. 9.

[359] Ibidem

Blume et al explain, the Moskitia, for example, is an area where several indigenous communities have, throughout history, conserved strong autonomy from the Honduran and Nicaraguan States[360]. In recent years, however, it has reported increased regional violence, motivated by militarized counternarcotics and security measures, undermining those indigenous collective and local authorities[361]. It results in a repression of indigenous communities and human rights and environmental organizations, whose members are criminalized and targeted by State authority, and it denies their self-determination and control of lands.

5. 3. 3. Alternatives to US-led drug policy: feminist and decolonizing approaches

In the previous sections, I tried to assemble occurrences and theories to identify the neo-colonial and racialized US-led drug policy that has been implemented in Honduras, similarly to other parts of South and Central America. Something that I have not discussed is the gendered approach of drug policy. While this is not a central topic of the thesis, I believe it is a feature that needs to be considered when theorizing alternatives to security and militarization policies. In her book "Using Women - Gender, Drug Policy, and Social Justice", the author Campbell offers evidence and discussions of how drug policies in the US are based on racialized and gendered social and cultural structures, justifying punitive and controlling measures based on stereotypes related to motherhood and the role of women and girls in society[362]. Her feminist approach suggests another focus, rather than security and the military, to address the issues of drugs and to cope with addiction and criminalization of marginalized groups like women, Black,

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[360] Blume L. R. et al, op. cit.

[361] Ibidem, p. 9.

[362] Campbell N. D., *Using Women: Gender, Drug Policy, and Social Justice*, Taylor & Francis Ltd. / Books, Abington, Oxon, 2000.

Brown, Latinx, and indigenous. Granting women political empowerment and autonomy, through economic and social reforms to promote gender equality, "could lessen the inroads of addiction and mitigate some of the effects of the 'war on drugs'", she states[363]. Similarly, Blume et al claim that indigenous autonomy and governance, rather than just land titling and security agendas, are needed to counter drug trafficking and mitigate its effects on indigenous communities[364]. Militarization and surveillance of security agendas demonstrate that indigenous communities have neither control nor governance over their lands. Instead, the State should embrace the indigenous political activism and organization. This would help reduce the marginalization of the individuals, groups, and communities that are most affected by drugs and the war on drugs, and the violence that is caused by militarization.

Moreover, decolonizing approaches, according to Daniels et al, reshape drug policy leaning on three pillars: decriminalization of drugs and their consumption, a reduction of incarceration linked to drug consumption, and a redirection of the funding from punitive drug control to social and health programs[365]. This would mean for Honduras to abandon the hard-line framework of the *mano dura* that has underlined structural racialized and gendered marginalization of indigenous and black groups and communities[366]. In 2015, the UNODC published a briefing paper that advocated the decriminalization of substances, which states:

> "Member States should consider the implementation of measures to promote the right to health and to reduce prison-overcrowding, including by decriminalizing drug use and possession for personal consumption […]"[367].

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[363] Campbell N. D., op. cit, p. 17.

[364] Blume L. R. et al, op. cit.

[365] Daniels C. et al, p. 6.

[366] Riviera L. G. et al, op. cit.

[367] UNODC, Briefing Paper - Decriminalisation of Drug Use and Possession for Personal Consumption, 2015.

However, the Organization also claimed that the paper was not an official statement, showing a timid and insufficient shift in the policymaking approach[368]. At the same time, we should not forget that the delegitimization theorized by Phillips offers a broader interpretation concerning the relationships between the US and Honduras, where the US is imposing a neo-colonial and imperialist control over Honduras[369]. This structural dependency constrains Honduras' capacity to pursue alternative drug policy approaches, such as health-oriented or decriminalization frameworks, as these could potentially challenge the foundations of bilateral security cooperation with the US. In this context, drug policy should not solely be understood as a State's choice, but rather as a reconfiguration of the international cooperation framework. Therefore, a shift toward decriminalization, social and health-based interventions, and greater recognition of indigenous autonomy would depend on a broader transformation of the global drug policy regime and on the creation of alternative forms of international collaboration that are less dependent on militarized prohibition.

[368] Murano A. J., op. cit., p. 74.

[369] Phillips J., op. cit.

Conclusions

This thesis aimed at examining the relationship between drug trafficking and indigenous identities, identifying the colonial structures and issues of narco-land dispossession and militarized drug control in Honduras. The analyses sought to approach these phenomena as part of broader historical and political processes, both international and domestic, drawing on anthropological, political, and economic literature. The findings suggest that the expansion of the cocaine and drug-trafficking economy in Honduras has reinforced pre-existing colonial and racialized patterns of indigenous land control. Firstly, the historical contextualization suggests that the marginalization and invisibility of indigenous peoples in Honduras stems from colonialism and *mestizaje*, which systemically applied the rhetoric of the Self-Other. Moreover, the close relationship with the US reproduced similar colonial structures in the international dimension. This translated into a chain of dependence, where Honduras has become the main US ally in Central America, and the Honduran State followed a process of delegitimization. In the second Chapter, the analysis brought up the contemporary consequences of this in the socio-economic and political dimensions of marginalized indigenous groups. Focusing on the Garífuna people, this section presents matters of racial and ethnic identity and the political framework of Honduras. On the one hand, the discussion aims at framing the notions around indignity in Honduras and, specifically, in the Garífuna people. On the other hand, it analyzes the controversies of multiculturalism, the role of folklore, and intersections with political instabilities, like the 2009 *golpe*. This latter, provoked an overall state of uncertainty and violence that significantly influenced indigenous peoples and drug trafficking. Therefore, among these

consequences of coloniality, the final focus of the section is dedicated to the issues of drug trafficking in their evolution and historical dimension.

Historical controversies extend to land tenure systems, where recent neoliberal agrarian reforms created structural conditions that facilitated land grabbing and territorial concentration by both organized crime and international and domestic large landowners. In this section, the thesis presents an overview of the land tenure systems in Honduras and highlights their contradictions. As illustrated by the empirical evidence of Campa Vista, formal systems are often broken because of racialized and colonial structures that benefit international companies or elites. Privatization is, overall, seen as the main responsible for these occurrences, which cause land-grabbing, migration, and internal displacement, especially among indigenous communities. In this regard, narco-business is treated as a capitalist elite that produces land-grabbing by virtue of money laundering and increases the military and controlling efforts of the Honduran State and the US in indigenous lands. Following, the thesis offers an analysis of the territorial-focused dominance of the Honduran organized crime and drug trafficking. Narco-land grabbing, therefore, has not only concentrated on land grabbing for money laundering purposes, but also for territorial governance. This contributed to the disintegration of indigenous communities, which faced dispossession from their lands and internal social and identity fragmentation. Here, the discussion combines political and anthropological literature, analyzing the dispossession of indigenous peoples from their lands, but also identifying the implications for their ethnic and racial identity. In particular, land grabbing in indigenous lands, criminalization of indigenous peoples, and militarized counternarcotics measures are interpreted as undermining the political elements of indigenous identities. Resistance, which constitutes a significant part of indigenous communities, is constantly oppressed by organized crime and State military interventions because of colonial and racialized structures. Following the Self-Other rhetoric,

indigenous communities are considered ‘anti-establishment’, ‘anti-development’, and ‘deviants’, and therefore criminalized and marginalized. These findings highlight the ethnic damage of drug trafficking and drug control policies. Therefore, not only the drug war and the increase of drug trafficking produced violence and territorial displacement, but phenomena like the criminalization of indigenous peoples threaten their political, ethnic, and racial identity, being marginalized and labelled as ‘deviant’ and ‘savage’ groups. This rhetoric responds to a colonial marginalization of indigenous people, which separates them from the concept of national identity and sees in their political efforts attempts to counter the projects for economic growth. It is a process of ‘othering’ that protects the *mestizo* elite and, even more importantly, the international businesses and relationships with the US at the cost of indigenous communities and lands. In this regard, the discussion also focused on the involvement of the Honduran State as the authority responsible for criminalization and militarization of indigenous peoples and lands, amplifying those racialized and colonial structures that threaten the indigenous political movement and their identity processes.

Finally, the last Chapter examines the function and aims of the War on Drugs and the current drug control policy framework in Central America. The thesis proposes criticism towards the US-led militarization of rural areas and the dependence mechanism that binds the US and Honduras. The consequences of this are authoritarian forms of territorial control that do not reduce drug trafficking, cocaine cultivation, or drug production, but rather undermine indigenous and local communities and infringe on their land and human rights. Drug prohibition and interdiction are counterproductive anti-drug measures that show the resilience of the drug-trafficking actors and are grounded in misleading assumptions about the drug market. More importantly, for the discourse on indigenous peoples, the militarization justified the implementation of systemic

violence among indigenous communities. The witness of the Miskito people, in this regard, is insightful into how indigenous lands have transformed since the establishment of militarized controls and counternarcotics operations. Moreover, the evidence brought in recent occurrences in Venezuela and Honduras shows a broader picture of the War on Drugs, fostered by the US to accomplish specific geopolitical strategies and goals where the interruption of drug trafficking seems only secondary.

The thesis, therefore, suggests that alternative approaches to drug policy should move beyond punitive and militarized strategies. Decolonizing perspectives emphasize the importance of indigenous autonomy, social and economic reforms, and public health approaches to drug consumption. Some aspects not addressed in this thesis concern the relationship with the European Union. European States are, similarly to the US, but probably more silently, involved in issues of land grabbing in Honduras, financing extractivist projects. Moreover, much of the cocaine that enters Europe is transited in Honduras, making these issues in indigenous land dispossession and the disintegration of communities something that European States should address more when planning their agendas. Future research could, therefore, examine the cooperation and relationship between Honduras, European Union States, and the US, and explore potential alternatives to international dialogue and policy proposals.

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