

## **Terror zones: Fact and fiction in the war on drugs**

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The line between fiction and reality often blurs, especially when it comes to the drug wars in the Americas. Steven Soderbergh's film *Traffic*, Don Winslow's crime novels *The Power of the Dog* and *The Cartel* are based on years of painstaking research, and it shows.

"There is nothing to do but be still" – that's the resigned conclusion of Winslow's anti-hero Art Keller, an agent with a US drug squad, at the close of his furious vendetta against fictitious Mexican drug boss Adán Barrera. Barrera's life displays a number of similarities with real life events, including his spectacular escape from a 'high security' prison. Art's frustrations in the novel are also firmly rooted in reality:

*"The war on drugs drags on in its desultory fashion. In Mexico, in the States, in Europe, Afghanistan. The drugs still flow out of Mexico [...] A few of the machine's most monstrous cogs are missing, but its wheels still turn [...] – the cartel carries on."*

### **Violence from all quarters**

It's a testament to the complete failure of the policies of prohibition and criminalization pursued by the USA and its epigones in Europe. The destructive effects of these policies have been evident for decades, in Colombia since the 1980s and spreading with time to Central America and the Caribbean. Violence is ubiquitous: police, military and drug cartels have fused and are all part of the same beast. The authors of the book *"TerrorZones. Gewalt und Gegenwehr in Lateinamerika"* (*TerrorZones. Violence and resistance in Latin America*) published recently in Germany argue that violent excesses should not be seen as irrational counterpoints to modernity, civilization or democracy; instead such violence can represent a rational and functional occurrence in these contexts.

It's not enough to lay the blame solely at the feet of the drug dealers, corrupt local politicians and police. The global trade in drugs, weapons and money only runs so smoothly because everyone plays their part: the banks, the arms industry, consumers in the USA and Europe. It will take a radically different drugs policy to break the lethal cycle that is dominating large parts of the regions south of the Rio Grande.

### **Responding to terror**

The authors of "TerrorZones" provide some suggestions for engaging with terror and resistance in a productive way. Colombian author Patricia Nieto describes an Indian community that set up a graveyard for the unknown victims of repression and ended up cultivating a close relationship with the dead; the German culture scholar Anne Huffschmid details the "bone work" undertaken by a transnational network of non-state forensic scientists who gather evidence for court cases but also information for the relatives and for memorial projects. Together with those affected, artists have created an artwork on the site of a mass grave in Tijuana, a city on the US-Mexican border where much of the crime unfolds. The artwork is called RECO, which stands for *recordar, reconstruir, reconciliar*: recollect, reconstruct, reconcile. It examines the way people live under such conditions, how they build

new communities and revolt against terror. Similar to what many young activists in Mexico have been doing in the aftermath of the disappearance of 43 students in Iguala, Guerrero: they are successfully using social networks to report, to explain and to mobilize protest movements: their response to frustrations that are all too real.