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Article

Sanctifying Criminals? The Case of «Narco-Saints» and «Narco-Culture» in Latin America¹

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Abstract

Narco-Culture seems to be the complex of values, music, and religious practices that normalize and even legitimize the drug trade and its associated lifestyle (Cabanas, 2014). The core question of this presentation is: Why and how are criminals «sanctified», as the phenomenon goes far beyond drug trafficking, since it's a complex social and cultural movement, where power, wealth and violence are somehow romanticized. Of course, we all are aware of the recent tensions between the United States and Venezuela. The USA claims that Venezuela is a «narco-state», which somehow promotes and exports the «narco-culture» within North America. So in the next minutes, allow me to set some questions from a sociological and theological perspective, in order to approach (at least try) this strange (from where I come from) and the same time interesting culture.

Keywords: Latin America; narco-culture; narco-saints; liberation theology

1. Defining Narco-Culture

We need to see the role that Music plays in such situations. Within the context of the special Sociology of Music, Th. Adorno considers that the composer is a social subject, and of course music itself has a social character. There is also the view that the prevalence or indirect imposition of mass music culture by the globalized music industry, crushed popular culture and its derivatives (Adorno, 1958. Denaxas, 2023). Specific elements in rap or trap for example musical subgenre, seems to promote a sub culture that has to do with social apathy and detachment, easy enrichment, the use of drugs, alcohol, etc., the degradation of women and their absolute sexualization, illegality in context of a generalized and therefore aggressive and violent «anti-authoritarian» style, racist stereotypes, insults, self-destructive tendencies (e.g. suicide) etc (Tanner, 2009. Adorno, 1958: 11. Denaxas, 2023).

So, studying this particular situation, we can observe specific elements that actually constitute the «narco- culture»: a. The so called *Narcocorridos* (drug ballads) which are actually an interesting musical narrative, that celebrates the exploits, opulence, and the inevitable violent ends of capos. They function as a distorted form of folk history (Cabanas, 2014) b. Special Fashion designs: Extreme wealth on display—luxury cars, jewelry, designer brands, and often heavily customized firearms. A spectacle of success, in contrast to local poverty c. The *Narco-Novelas* (TV soap operas or dramas). It's obvious that even main stream media in Latin America, contribute to the preserve and even expand of this special culture: the drug lords and their assistants, are often described as charismatic, yet violent, blurring the lines between true crime and entertainment (Cabanas, 2012).

2. The Narco-Saints: the social constructs of Narco-Culture

Why there is a need of the existence of «narco saints»? These kind of figures, somehow represent power, swift justice, and divine protection outside the corrupt or ineffective state structures. For the marginalized, a powerful, a «deity» or a «saint» that breaks the law, seems to be more appealing.

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The existence of narco-saints in Latin America, as well as the manner in which they are integrated into the popular religiosity and folk culture of the region's people, constitutes a complex and multifaceted issue. First, it is essential to address the so-called «Liberation Theology»—an ecclesiastical and theological movement within the Roman Catholic Church. Ul. Duchrow believes that Liberation Theology is actually a spiritual and a social need in order to develop a structured and solid answer against globalized capitalism (Duchrow, 1995). Given now, the structure of the Roman Catholic Church, this «progressive» and in some cases, even «Marxist-leaning» theology seems to be strategically designed and somehow promoted in Latin American countries, combined with decolonization theories. This kind of theology seems to link popular visions of social liberation with spiritual edification and the «revolutionary», «radical» nature of the Gospel. The contemporary «narco-theology» that is connected with the figures of «narco-saints», seems to bring several concerns not only about the quality of the religiosity of Latin Americans, but mostly about the actual decline of the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in the region (Huetos, 2023).

Furthermore, it is observed that the prerequisites for canonization within the Roman Catholic Church are linked to centuries-old traditions which, however, appear to have somewhat diminished today in the light of a particular ecclesiastical-political diplomacy. In this context, the so called «God's influencer», is canonized for reasons not necessarily related to the holiness of his life or because he performed miracles when he was alive or even after his death, but rather to satisfy a popular demand. The Roman Catholic Church seems to seek providing a new perspective and a renewed dynamic for the formation of local religious communities. Conversely, in the Orthodox Christian East, the prerequisites remain clear and appear to be reverently observed even in the modern era. The primary reason for this is undoubtedly the Ecumenical Patriarchate's intent to send a clear message: that our faith is alive, it's not a «construction» or even a secular necessity. The Christian Orthodox Church specifically, which is considered to be the embodiment of Jesus who is the One and the «Great Archpriest», highlights the lives and the personalities of its saints as role models and social archetypes that essentially provide a strong and a cohesive bond for the religious communities (Nikolaidis, 2019: 129).

On the contrary, the «narcosaints», are considered as social constructions, maybe the very meaning of them. This is how a social generated sanctification happens. Since most of these figures are not officially recognized by the Catholic Church, they continue to be and live amongst the popular consciousness as folk saints adopted by those who feel (or actually are), abandoned by formal institutions. Here are some popular examples, taken from the local traditions of Latin America: a. *Jesús Malverde*: The «Angel of the Poor» or «Generous Bandit» often considered the patron saint of drug traffickers in Mexico (Calvo-Quirós, 2022) b. *Santa Muerte* (Holy Death): While her following is broad, she is heavily adopted by those involved in illicit activities for protection, vengeance, and stability in dangerous lives c. Although not a strictly «narcosaint», St. Toribio Romo (*Holy Coyote*), is considered to be the patron saint of those who want to illegally migrate from Latin America (usually Mexico), to the USA. Romo's believers, actually believe that «Coyote» will make them invisible, so that the border patrol will not be able to see them (Calvo-Quirós, 2022).

3. From Outlaw to a Role Model to a «Saint»?

Narco-Culture seems to give specific answers to main questions, contribute to a social identity, give hope and courage to people who are dealing with everyday life problems that emerge in general from the lack of empowered democratic institutions. It actually fills the gap of the lack of hope, the desperation that poverty develops and answers to the fundamental contemporary question that due to globalization and the secularization process, we all ask: who we are and where we are actually going, as a society, as a nation etc.

There is also the «Robin Hood Narrative» (Cartlidge, 2016), that is somehow mainanited by the social network is directed by the drug lords and the drug traffickers, developing and preserving a wide social network. Drug traffickers often engage in actions of «narco-philanthropy», by building schools, repairing roads, or even handing out cash to the poor and those in need, in their home

regions. This generates some kind of a regional - local loyalty and paints the capo as a benevolent provider, contrasting sharply with the absent or «corrupt government». They seem to have the power to create a parallel social universe, providing both security and welfare.

According to the above, we can also mention a slight blur considering the morality or even the moral authority. When state institutions such as the police, the judiciary or the politicians, are seen within the context of a corrupted and immoral solid and structured social system, their legal or constitutional moral authority collapses. The *capo*, who seems explicitly honest about his lawlessness, sometimes gains a twisted legitimacy over the hypocritical politician. The narco-saint, therefore is socially canonized as a symbol of an anti-establishment morality, suggesting that success and survival justify means that are outside the law. This normalization leads to what experts call the «corrosion of legality», where young people view criminal activity not as a last resort, but as a viable, aspirational, and culturally accepted career path.

4. Conclusion

The romanticization of the criminal archetype (or stereotype)—the Narco-Saint—is not a new phenomenon, but its (post) modern form is a clear indicator of governance failure. Narco-Culture has successfully exported its appeal globally: a. Its music is streamed worldwide and b. Its fashion influences global streetwear. Its media narratives captivate audiences internationally. This global consumption of the «outlaw hero» further normalizes and obscures the true human cost of the drug trade. Narco-Culture manifests as a symptom of the state's failure to provide security, justice, and economic opportunity. The veneration of the criminal is a form of desperate protest against a system that has offered no better alternative. When we look at the US-Venezuela conflict, the «narco-state» designation is a powerful political tool that draws on these cultural anxieties to serve foreign policy objectives. To address regional instability, we must look past the media spectacle and address the root causes: poverty, inequality, and institutional weakness.

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