

## Book Review

Gundur, R. V. 2022. *Trying to Make It. The Enterprises, Gangs, and People of the American Drug Trade*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press

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“**A** good ethnographic piece of work!” Those were the first words that popped into my mind after reading the work by Gundur. This monograph is precious to me, so my review is also personal. I highlight issues that are both salient for me and present in my research.

This monograph is intended for anyone, regardless of the reader’s background, education, and research experience. Gundur speaks in simple words and inclusive language about complex issues related to drug trafficking, street/prison gangs, drug trafficking organizations, corruption, politics, and violence. He paints a fascinating story about the mechanisms

of drug trafficking and perfectly operates with data and literature. The author applies a micro-field-based perspective on organized crime to utter on macro processes and domestic and international policy on drugs and organized crime. Combining these two perspectives (micro and macro) is a challenging endeavor. He did it flawlessly. Based on his numerous interviews and direct field observations, Gundur gives us insights into individual decisions behind involvement in illegal drug-related activities of many people he spoke with. He also discusses the roles of national/regional regulations, politicians, journalists, NGOs, border agents, and law enforcement in shaping the institutional response to crime. As I mentioned, it is also a pivotal monograph for

me for several reasons. First, the development of qualitative research in criminology and, second, making a clear division between gangs (both street-based and prison-based) and drug trafficking organizations (informally termed “cartels”).

*Trying to Make It* advocates for ethnographic research and the use of qualitative work in delivering explanations in the field of criminology, breaking the ‘monopoly’ of the quantitative approach (Jacques 2014; Copes, Tewksbury, and Sandberg 2016), even if the most prominent criminological journals are more willing to accept quantitative and mixed papers (Copes et al. 2020). Gundur provided a clear added value beyond the reach of those choosing only a ‘hard data methodology’ and proved that qualitative methods are indispensable for accessing difficult-to-obtain information (rather than the traditional idea of their strength in accessing difficult-to-reach populations) (Chomczyński 2018; Treadwell 2020; Chomczyński, Guy, and Cortés 2022). The ethnographic approach Gundur successfully applied in his study allows for valuable, serendipitous findings that are rarely obtainable via quantitative designs. I am still curious how many interviewees partook in the research and what were their affiliations and positions. Still, I believe the author had good reasons not to reveal all information. I am also greedy enough to know how the author managed his emotions in the fieldwork and how he won the gang members’ trust and convinced them to share their life stories.

The second contribution to the literature on organized crime is an attempt to clarify the division between gangs and drug trafficking organizations. Knowing how hard that task is, I am grateful for it. Having had repeated experiences of struggling with reviewers who advocated for referring to gang lit-

erature to discuss “cartel”-related issues, I greatly appreciate it. Few researchers maintain that distinction, including Fraser and Hagedorn (2018:22), who caution that the term gang “does not easily map onto these groups.” Gundur also does it by trying to differentiate between the two types of organized crime (Chomczyński and Clark 2022). “Most drug trafficking organizations appear to have structured the ways in which gangs provide protection and assume trafficking tasks in order to constrain them. Gangs typically engage in only intermediary trafficking activities and do not have access to suppliers in the countries from which precursor products originate. This arrangement generally benefits both gangs and drug trafficking organizations: gangs generate income while using the skills they already possess, while drug trafficking organizations defray risk to themselves by accepting a modest cost for having gangs assume riskier roles” (p. 94). I also appreciate Gundur’s efforts in delimitating the term gang by providing some rules respected by its members: “Ideally, the gang wants to recruit only members who are fully committed to gang life” (p. 82) or “Moreover, to join the gang, ‘there was no blood in, blood out,’...Membership was informal” (p. 80). The last rule probably differs even among the same-named gangs according to the country from which they originate and where they operate. For example, an 18<sup>th</sup> Street gang member (Mara Barrio 18), deported from Los Angeles and imprisoned in Mexico, with whom I recently spoke, claimed that the “blood in, blood out” rule still prevails on American soil. Yet, gang members from the 18<sup>th</sup> Street gang imprisoned in Honduras told me that “the only way out is through the church” (p. 85). To my best knowledge, in the case of drug trafficking organizations in Mexico, it is always “blood out” that helps distinguish them from street gangs and clarifies the boundary between the two types of organizations. The differ-

ence also lies in relations between drug trafficking organizations and street gangs. “Cartels” sometimes “outsource” plaza protection and “use gangs to enforce protection at the street level” (p. 120).

Gundur’s research stands in the same line as Venkatesh’s (2008) groundbreaking study of the street gang and very few others. Both researchers collected first-hand data by shadowing gang members’ daily routines, decision-making processes, and organizational dynamics. From my standpoint, it is exceptionally valuable when a researcher is also an eyewitness, reducing personal risk as much as they can. What makes me particularly enjoy reviewing the chapters and following the author’s insights is the transparent methodological section, which allows the reader to become familiar with the researchers’ data-gathering methods and reveals the backstage setting as positionality (Bourke 2014). Such an in-depth methodological reflection and critical approach make the outcomes well-explained and reliable.

Going into detail, Gundur proposes a comprehensive, evidence-based reflection on the drug trafficking panorama. The chapters, like puzzle pieces, create a complex big picture of organized crime on both sides of the US-Mexican border—El Paso and Juárez. The author carefully and respectfully reveals to his readers the activities of street-gang members, including street, border, jail, violence, and family. Turning pages, I felt immersed in the gang reality and as if I were accompanying the author in his fieldwork, seeing and hearing with his eyes and ears. *Trying to Make It* also responds to stereotypes and ‘official narration’ promoted by mainstream media that have arisen around criminal organizations in the US and Mexico, reducing ambiguity in the literature. Gundur’s work is rich in examples—

the violence described is one persuasive evidence. Gundur shows the mechanisms underlying violence split among competing criminal organizations (Ríos 2013) and factors decreasing violence. Despite public opinion and media releases, drug trafficking organizations use violence also for instrumental reasons because of bloodshed: “violence may drop when competing drug trafficking organizations engage as an economic cartel and collude with one another. This practice serves two purposes. First, it minimizes the human, monetary, and security costs of violence, which after a certain point become so expensive, when taken in the aggregate, that an enterprise cannot survive and grow. Second, it allows the drug trafficking organizations to work more efficiently in terms of trafficking” (p. 98).

The monograph is highly accessible for readers who are not familiar with the field of criminology, especially organized crime. The historical background, where one can find the path of criminal organizations, is helpful. It also informs about the dynamics of criminal groups’ *modus operandi* over time. For example, Gundur highlights the changes in drug trafficking organizations that had a strong impact on the whole Mexican society we witness today: “the cautious old-school bosses favored corruption over violence to facilitate business, an arrangement that had become normalized in Mexican political society” (p. 57; see: Lupsha 1991). The division between old-school bosses (and the organization they are in charge of) and ‘modern’ military-based organizations (e.g., *Los Zetas*, *Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación*) is crucial for understanding the changes in organized crime in Mexico that took place in recent years. Magaloni and colleagues (2020; also see Maldonado 2018) also bring up the difference between “old school” and “military-based” drug trafficking organizations. It

is their relationship to the communities, where the first ones used to be cooperative while the second ones were antagonistic.

In summary, this is a fascinating work suitable for a broad audience. The monograph is rich in exam-

ples based on first-hand data the author collected. This work also contributes to organized crime criminology by clarifying certain inaccuracies related to drug trafficking, gangs/drug trafficking organizations, recruitment, and the role of local and national institutions in the fight against drugs.

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