Francisco Thoumi has written an insightful, intriguing, even provocative treatise on Colombia's political economy and illicit drugs industry. He considers the two a culmination of a historical process that conventional "mainstream" and "left" economists have interpreted unsatisfactorily. Thoumi advances an alternative "institutionalist" perspective as a better interpretive model. The policy implications for illicit drugs are as astonishing as they are sobering.

Thoumi's analysis leads him to argue that for a quarter century or more Colombian political and economic institutions have progressively lost their legitimacy. The resulting caldron of violence, distrust, greed, and manipulation has all but invited the illegal drugs industry to step in and take advantage of a deteriorating situation.

Colombia's historical political economy, now overlaid with an illicit drugs industry, serves to delegitimize a capitalist, democratic economy and polity. Current drug-control efforts produce the unintended consequence of hastening the process through an increase in violence, militarization, and compromised government.

To reclaim legitimacy Colombia needs to implement a profound "national project of economic democratization." Doing so will require substantial political and economic reforms. However, because the delegitimation process is so advanced, the existence of Colombia's illicit drugs industry is a large obstacle to any such reforms: it promotes violence, concentrates income and wealth, feeds the underground economy, opposes some socially progressive reforms, and weakens the state. All these unfortunate consequences are exacerbated by a U.S. policy that focuses on supply suppression abroad as a means to control illicit-drug consumption at home.

Unfortunately, the elimination of the illegal industry itself as one way to enhance a national project depends on factors outside the
control of the Colombian government—resting largely in international demand for illegal drugs or major consumer countries' domestic policies that promote clandestine profits through illegality. Because such outside factors are unlikely to change soon, the ability of Colombia's government to undertake a nation-building project after the fashion of democratic capitalism is not good.

Nevertheless, there are opportunities within Colombia which, if seized, could ameliorate the difficult national situation. In discussing them, Thoumi argues that the first task is to gain a clear understanding of the intermeshing of Colombia's political economy and the illegal drugs trade—their historical roots, the cultural ambience out of which both have developed, the cyclical reinforcement of a regime of control that is now totally counterproductive for Colombia's long-term well-being with respect to illicit drugs or anything else. On this understanding hinges the consequential impact of all illicit-drugs control initiatives.

Beyond dealing with matters of production, traffic, illicit-drugs control policies, and the socioeconomic and political impacts of all three, Thoumi's wide-ranging discussion treats a matter seldom discussed in political economy studies of the illicit-drugs traffic: the consumption of psychoactive drugs and drug addiction within principal producer countries. Contrary to expectations, Thoumi's findings— informed by an analysis of psychological and economic theories of drug consumption and addiction—show that alcohol and tobacco are the chief drug problems in Colombia, although the drugs under discussion here (principally coca derivatives, heroin, and marijuana) are making inroads. Among these, bazuco (coca paste mixed with tobacco and then smoked) is more frequently associated with multiple addictions. It is seen as a problem because of its link with violence, criminality, and difficulties in the workplace and home. But these drugs do not constitute the epidemiological problem in Colombia one would normally expect on the basis of availability, price, and social correlates. Drug-control policies for Colombia must therefore be considered in a different context than, say, for the United States.

Thoumi's excellent book is part of a multicountry study of the socioeconomic and political impact of production, trade, and use of illicit narcotic drugs. The project has been sponsored by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the United Nations University (UNU), and Brigham Young University (BYU).

The project has been developed in two phases. The first, a review monograph and annotated bibliography entitled Handbook of Research on the Illicit Drug Traffic: Socioeconomic and Political Consequences (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press), was issued in 1991. The second phase is a series of country-specific books and monographs that both
describe and analyze the interplay of economics, politics, society, and illicit drugs and drug-control policies through a careful analysis of causes and consequences of production, trade, consumption, and control.

Since the early 1980s the national and international traffic in and consumption of cannabis, opiate, and coca derivatives has exploded, perhaps now tapering off in the United States but vigorously expanding in Western and Eastern Europe and the republics of the former Soviet Union. Consumption has also rapidly increased in the principal so-called producer countries (e.g., Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, Myanmar, and Afghanistan).

The socioeconomic and political costs of consumption and efforts to suppress it have mounted. Unfortunately, policy initiatives to reduce those costs have, in the worst cases, simply aggravated the problem, and in the best cases, they have apparently had only marginal impact.

Although the literature on illicit drugs is now rapidly expanding, most of it has focused on consumption and drug-control problems in major industrialized countries. Less attention has been paid to the impact of production, trade, and consumption of illicit drugs and international control policies in the developing countries. This is highly unfortunate, because illicit-drugs control initiatives have been mostly concentrated on supply-reduction efforts in developing countries. In the wake of a general failure of these supply-reduction strategies to control consumption anywhere (indeed, they may have served to expand it), a strong shift is now expected in international drug-control efforts.

The purpose of the country studies in this Studies on the Impact of the Illegal Drug Trade series is to expand the level of information and awareness about costs and consequences of the present policies and to consider the implications of proffered new solutions for developing areas. We desire to contribute to an enhanced quality of policy review discussions by bringing together a rich array of historical and contemporary information with careful analyses regarding specific countries. Francisco Thoumi’s book makes a substantial contribution to this effort.

Aside from acknowledging the financial support of the UNRISD, the UNU, and BYU, we thankfully acknowledge the excellent support from Chelita Pate and her BYU staff of assistants in preparing the country study manuscripts. Lani Gurr, in particular, has rendered matchless service to this project. Susan Manning Sims, associate managing editor of publications at BYU’s Kennedy Center for International and Area Studies, lent her substantial expertise to an editing of the entire manuscript.

LaMond Tullis