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## Fentanyl, the New Boogeyman Of U.S. Anti-Drug Geopolitics and Crime Fighting

“Fentanyl is a U.S. problem,” said Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) from his daily morning pulpit in March 2023 when the United States blamed China and Mexico for the availability of illicit fentanyl on its city streets. Fentanyl consumption has killed more than one million U.S. Americans and takes the life of more than 300 every day. Joe Biden’s administration did what half the Mexican population does when the president calls anyone who criticizes him a conservative: he took it as a jibe from a pinko megalomaniac.

However, this time AMLO was right. The fentanyl crisis is the responsibility of the United States due to its laws

and policies regarding health, poverty, crime, and drugs, which have their gravest consequences among the most impoverished, racialized population. Until 2019, these were fundamentally white Appalachian communities in Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky; now it is hitting men in African-American communities all over the country.

Illicit fentanyl is produced in China and Mexico. Starting with the two-year quarantine following the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Mexican fentanyl replaced that made in China. It is of lesser quality, but it is also more readily available because of the geographical proximity and the established drug routes by the Mexican cartels with more far-reaching infrastructures and networks of institutional corruption: the Jalisco New Generation (CJNG) and Sinaloa cartels. However, the name of Mexican fentanyl

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Fentanyl is becoming the new villain. This enemy allows not only the classic U.S. intervention in its area of influence (Mexico and Colombia), but also the racial and class materialization of those who make it possible: the Mexican cartels and their slaves (migrants and young men).

points to the origin of the problem: the little blue pill with an “M” on one side is known as “Mexican Oxy.”<sup>1</sup>

Mexican fentanyl covered the demand for a product that was withdrawn from the market but had been massively produced and distributed legally through doctors’ offices and pharmacies in the Appalachian region: Oxycontin, manufactured by the U.S. pharmaceutical company Purdue Pharma. Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán’s sons, known as “Los Chapitos,” have been accused of trafficking fentanyl into the United States. One of them, Ovidio Guzmán, has been extradited to stand trial for these charges, which he claims are false, saying he is a “scapegoat” for a problem that has not been caused by the Sinaloa Cartel. And he may just be right, because it would be a mistake to reduce the problem of U.S. fentanyl overdose deaths to the actions of the Mexican cartels, and even to the operations of Purdue Pharma, owned by the Sackler family.

In Mexico, we became aware of the Sacklers in 2023 thanks to streaming television series like *Dope Sick* and *Painkiller*. These dramas, starring Michael Keaton and Matthew Broderick, respectively, presented the Sacklers as a classist clan that had no difficulty profiting from chronic pain felt by “white trash,” the masses of “hillbillies,” the “rednecks” dedicated to manual, physical labor, who they blamed for their own addiction. The brains behind Oxycontin, Rickard Sackler, is presented as a sociopath who can only show affection for his dog. After this series premiered in 2023, the U.S.

Supreme Court revoked in August the decision that exonerated the Sacklers, and they were fined US\$600 million when they lost a civil suit. It would seem like an incisive criticism of those responsible for the “opioid crisis” and a kind of *mea culpa*, a recognition by the United States of its own responsibility, which overnight is talked about everywhere. It would be naïve to think that this were the case. Rather, we have to look what’s at the bottom of this, politically. Making the Sacklers responsible creates a scapegoat that allows those who are really guilty, the other legal corporations, to continue to operate.

Helena Villar says in her book, *Esclavos Unidos. La otra cara del American Dream* (United Slaves. The Other Face of the American Dream) (2021), that behind the opioid crisis are three of their manufacturers: SpecGxla, a subsidiary of Mallinckrodt; Actavis Pharma; and Par Pharmaceutical, a subsidiary of Endo Pharmaceutical. Together with them are the distributors, six enormous companies: McKesson Corp., Cardinal Health, Walgreens, AmerisourceBergen, cvs, and Walmart. These companies wield huge lobbying power vis-à-vis the Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Congress, founded on the existing legal framework. According to Villar’s analysis, the high price of medications leads people to seek out drugs on illegal markets, which is how they begin to take Mexican fentanyl, or legal medications not intended for human use, such as antibiotics for fish, which have serious consequences for their health.



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## The Racialization of Fentanyl Overdoses

From the mid-1990s until 2018, the main victims of the opioid overdose epidemic were white people living in states with the highest cancer rates and number of accidents that cause chronic pain. But, since 2019 and then the beginning of the quarantine in 2020, deaths have increased among African-American males beyond the Appalachian region, in places like Pittsburg and Los Angeles.

The fact that the epidemic has moved into the African-American community, already affected for decades by heroin consumption, means that institutional attention has shifted from being a public health issue to being dealt with in a punitive framework derived from the “war against drugs,” the “war against crime,” and the “war against poverty.” Since the 1950s, these have been the classist and racist policies used to deal in an authoritarian way with the poverty and structural discrimination suffered by Afro-descendant and Latinx communities.

## Renovation of U.S. Geopolitical Dominance over Its Area of Influence And Forced Migration

With other drugs falling into disuse and fentanyl becoming the drug that kills the largest number of poor U.S. Americans (whites, but also increasing numbers of Afro-Americans and Latinxs), the U.S. government is able to update its anti-drug policy, broadening it out to its area of influence, which is also a source of forced migration: Mexico, Central and South America, and its de-territorialized borders (Puerto Rico).

Fentanyl is often found among overdose deaths together with other recreational drugs like heroin or cocaine. It is not known if it is intentional or accidental, but the former is part of the cocktail. This drug is surpassing the others at the same time that marihuana is becoming accepted and legalized for private production and consumption. This means that fentanyl is becoming the new villain.

It is no longer Colombian cocaine or Mexican marihuana or heroin, but rather Mexican and Chinese cartels’ fentanyl that is the enemy. This enemy allows not only the classic U.S. intervention in its area of influence (Mexico and Colombia), but also the racial and class materialization of those who make it possible: the Mexican cartels and their

slaves (migrants and young men). This shapes a new profile for its urban, migratory and anti-poverty policies based on the racialization of crime, at the same time that it renews its international war against drugs. **MM**

### Notes

**1** These pills’ markings are designed to mimic those of what was the legal prescription drug oxycodone hydrochloride 30 mg tablets. [Editor’s Note.]

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