Abstract

Shortages in the supply of marijuana, which became acute around 1981, caused Rastafari marijuana distributors very reluctantly to disregard religious injunctions against the use of any psychoactive substance except marijuana, and to experiment with the use and distribution of cocaine hydrochloride powder for intranasal administration and, later, for smoking (freebase and crack). This experimentation proved ruinous, and many were retired ignominiously from drug distribution. In the crack era they have been succeeded by completely new social, cultural, and economic arrangements.

Key words. Marijuana shortages; Oversupply of cheap, highgrade, cocaine hydrochloride powder; Freebase; Crack; Resistance to crack
“When you hear you get your little something, with eagle eye you got to keep on watching/’cause ah done tell you already/black man don’ get nuttin’ easy” is the caution which Black Stalin (a Rastafari calypso champion) sang to his coreligionists (Calliste, 1976). Revenues accumulated in noncapitalist enterprise, as well as talents and skills developed here, have been routinely incorporated into the capitalist economy (Geertz, 1963; Ju Kang T’ien, 1956). Lenin’s The Development of Capitalism in Russia describes processes by which the transfer is made; while E. P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class shows not only how people and resources are co-opted, but also how diverse ideologies become compatible with those appropriate to a class society (Lenin, 1864; Thompson, 1966). The supplanting of the marijuana economy by the cocaine (and crack) economy offers a contemporary example. When such economies die, social arrangements, ideological edifices, identify structures, and ego-defense mechanisms are also destroyed. Persons are left resourceless and prone to addiction, violence, and criminal involvement.

By 1981, Musa of Flatbush Avenue, Icob in Crown Heights, and Rafi and Blackheart in East New York (whose operations were more or less combined at Brooklyn and Manhattan “gates”) had emerged as important and influential Rastafari in Brooklyn (see Note 1). Between them, they operated six “gates,” each of which had generated $6,000-$10,000 weekly for the past 5 years. Of them, Musa was strictly a middleman who kept bulk supplies from several importers at his apartment. Many “gates” in Brooklyn and Manhattan depended on his good offices. Indeed, because Musa regularly offered them several pounds of marijuana on consignment, Icob, Rafi, and Blackheart were able to “see” their profits in huge lumpsums and to manage them more creatively. Among the four, therefore, Musa’s seniority was respected. It was enhanced by his graying locks and educated manner, and by the diverse roles he played as Rastafari ideologue, mentor, and financial advisor to many other Rastafari brethren.

Rafi, however, had been the pioneer of successful street selling operations or “gates” in New York, thus creating a need for the services Musa provided. A refugee of the Black Power Revolt (1970) in Trinidad, he had come to New York a jump ahead of the police, without skills and unwelcome at his mother’s home in Brooklyn. He had spent several years as a vagrant, hustler, and petty criminal before opening his first “gate” in Harlem in 1976. He was quickly able to command a more or less reliable labor force of 10 brethren to assist him; and by late 1977 he had opened another, near the George Washington Bridge. Then, about the same time, he joined with Blackheart to help operate the latter’s Brooklyn “gates.” Under combined management, it prospered.

Icob was a late starter who rapidly became the wealthiest of the group. A child of the informal economy (his mother was a Grenadian market vendor), he was given consignments of sinsemilla (intensively cultivated, “seedless” marijuana) by Musa in the summer of 1978, which he retained in “dime” ($10) bags at Washington-Square Park in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village. Soon he was making some $700-$1,000 a day, and with his savings was able to open a “gate” in Manhattan and subsequently two more in the same block near Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn. These three “gates” were virtual mints. Icob commanded a team of 12 associates to whom he paid salaries of more than $300 weekly.

These four Rastafari had considerable holdings. All four supported several other Rastafari brethren and “daughters” in their arts, crafts, and cookshop ventures. They maintained several apartments for the mothers of their children and for their associates, reserving luxurious apartments for themselves which became centers of Rastafari thought and action. They hosted elaborate, well-attended celebrations on Rastafari fastdays, or to honor African heroes. In addition, both Icob and Rafi had bought houses for their mothers in Brooklyn and California, respectively. Blackheart maintained his mother in Trinidad, and Rafi had renovated his father’s home in Central Trinidad and had converted the basement into a very popular “reggae yard” (dance hall). The four were negotiating a joint purchase of 100 acres on the east coast of Tobago for conversion into a tourist resort and Rastafari retreat.

In December 1981, a series of recessions began to afflict the marijuana economy. “Gates” or “blocks” in New York and throughout the Caribbean came under relentless police attack. Several large shipments were intercepted by custom officers, while plantations in Colombia, Jamaica, other islands, and California were destroyed in DEA-directed campaigns. Marijuana became scarce.

Meanwhile, Andean peasants in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru had recently joined Bolivians in the cultivation of coca. Bumper harvests of coca leaves permitted Colombian laboratories to quadruple the production of cheap, high-grade cocaine hydrochloride powder from 14 to 70 metric tons (Morales, 1986). As production soared, several Colombian youths arrived in Port-of-Spain, St. George’s, and Kingston seeking markets. To the islanders, they also diffused their practice of “freebasing,” or cooking up quantities of cocaine hydrochloride powder with baking soda, and smoking the precipitate in water pipes or, crushed finely, in cigarettes and marijuana joints (Hamid, 1986).

In New York, because of the heavy stakes they had in their reinvestments, Musa, Rafi, Blackheart, and Icob were among the Rastafari most inconvenience by the scarcity of marijuana. After Rafi’s discreet “gates” on the Manhattan side of the George Washington Bridge had been raided several times, a citizen’s group grew alarmed at the repeated commotion. When one of their rallies against the “gates” was televised and broadcast on the 6 P.M. news, Rafi was forced to move. Icob’s “gates” were fully stocked grocery stores, and the police routinely destroyed bulletproof partitioned refrigerators, other equipment, and goods during raids. Musa had to exert himself to find new suppliers when he came away empty-handed from his steady ones.

While searching for marijuana, Musa made contact with several Hispanic suppliers in Manhattan. When he was first invited to snort cocaine hydrochloride pow-
der by a young Puerto Rican, he refused indignantly. He felt it was an affront to his religion. In time, however, he relaxed his resistance. When he did so, he discovered that Rafi was already snorting cocaine. Rafi explained that the powder was a wonderful energizer which gave him the endurance for the night-long searches he had been making for marijuana (Hamid, 1986; Kozel and Adams, 1985; Brody, 1986; New York Times, 1986).

As more Rastafari experimented with intranasal use, they greatly enriched the few distributors of cocaine hydrochloride in Brooklyn's Caribbean community. They were delighted, therefore, to learn from their island co-freres that supplies were cheap and plentiful on the islands. They were even happier to learn about freebasing. As smoke, and the act of smoking, held religious meaning for them (smoke "rose to the Father," as it did from the "burnt offerings" so regularly prescribed in the Old Testament), it quickly replaced snorting altogether. Because freebasing steeply increased the quantities consumed, they outstripped the retail capability of the current distributors and actually drummed them out of business (Hamid, 1986).

As befitted their status in drug distribution, Musa, Rafi, Icob, and Blackheart were among the first to assume the mantle of cocaine distributorship. For the first time, they formalized their friendship, and in their own words (or in the words of Musa and Rafi, who were especially cooperative in this research), formed a "consortium" to import cocaine hydrochloride powder from the islands. In December 1982, Rafi traveled to Trinidad with US$100,000 to purchase some. On arrival, he struck up an acquaintance with a Colombian who had 2 kilos for sale. After Rafi bought them, the Colombian offered him a contract to deliver large quantities of cocaine and marijuana for a small initial down payment; the remainder was payable after Rafi had disposed of the shipment in New York. The two were fast friends, and the visitor was invited to live during his stay in Trinidad at Rafi's Central Trinidad home. They freebased daily together, and the Colombian taught Rafi some of the finer points of the ritual.

In mid-December 1982, a Rastafari "daughter" (woman) was sent to Trinidad and returned to New York with the 2 kilos strapped to the insides of her thighs. Custom officials at JFK airport, acting predictably, examined her luggage for bulky packages of marijuana and released her to Blackheart. Officials learned that the Caribbean islands and Latin American nations were being used as transshipment depots only years later.

The remainder of the consortium in New York were surprised by the quality of cocaine they had received. Smoking it ushered them into 2 years nonstop absorption with cocaine freebase use and trafficking, two busy years in which the consortium smoked incessantly as it established cocaine distribution networks.

The center of the consortium's selling operations and of use was Musa's apartment. His supplier-to-distributor system was most in place, and he had a sizable street-level clientele who bought quantities as small as a "dime" ($10 for snorting rather than for freebase). The telephone rang without stop. To deliver cocaine, very many cab rides had to be made all over New York. And constantly, the consortium members' custom-made waterpipes bubbled and glummed. The sense of ordinary time was lost, they ate and slept rarely, and devoted all their time to handling cocaine and money.

Musa's apartment now acquired the look of a permanent party. A large apartment, its six rooms were constantly filled with people. Many of these permanent fixtures were African-American females. A contingent lived in Musa's apartment building. Supported on welfare, they had been regarded with this disdain for many years. Until he had been brought into street-level drug distribution with freebase, Rastafari "daughters" (women)—those serious-minded weavers, knitters, and culinary artists (Hamid, 1991)—soon joined them. When the women realized that their welcome had worn thin, they offered sex to prolong them.

Within the first 3 days of business, Musa had sold nearly a kilo of the first shipment by himself; the entire shipment of 2 kilos was sold in 10 days, barrin some 4 ounces which the consortium had consumed itself (and then some). Musa today confides that the cocaine was usually sold uncet, so good had been Rafi's buying prices in Trinidad, but sometimes, to conceal from themselves the extent of their own use, no more than 4 grams of Inositol—a sugar—were added per ounce, the 4 grams of cocaine thus saved being then consumed by the brethren or sold. Total revenues amounted to $75,000, of which $50,000 was sent to Rafi in Trinidad while $25,000 had gone to the remaining brethren in proportion to the amount each had sold. A lion's share of that went to Musa. Rafi and the Colombian would have cleared $25,000 each.

With marijuana sales still proceeding, sometimes in great spurs reminiscent of pre-1981 times, the additional earnings of some $6,000 each over 10 days produced an exceptional good feeling which overwhelmed the persistent nagging uneasiness concerning the compulsiveness of freebase use and its heavy expense, and the unpleasantness of one kind or another which always seemed to accompany it. It took Rafi until the end of January to send a second shipment of 5 kilos, ferried over this time by two Rastafari daughters and their children. But in the meanwhile, Christmas and New Year's (1982-1983) passed in the round of the continuous party at Musa's and at the other members' apartments. Demand had increased around the festive time, and Musa kept the consortium's trading networks alive by finding other suppliers. But by this time the business urge was only half the motive; equally important was having cocaine for one's own use.

The toll of heavy freebase smoking at last weighed heavily upon the consortium. In spite of every ingenious technique they could invent to curb it, they could not. By sharing freebase or exchanging it for sex, they had neglected their marijuana businesses, were sustaining heavy, current losses with cocaine, and had already depleted their previously accumulated fortunes. Continuing apace was their nagging religious aversion to stimulants other than marijuana, which was some-
what allayed when Icob found a biblical reference which appeared to justify freebase (see Note 2).

The second shipment of cocaine saw the brethren through the end of February 1983. Raising $50,000 for Rafi, however, was difficult, and the rest of the consortium in Brooklyn was disconsolate to find that they could not account for any profits. Very quickly, the whole lively flow of business ebbed and soured. Down the line, from supplier to distributor to consumer, everyone was being embarrassed by the tremendous expense of freebasing. From consumers came stories of homelessness, "double up," and domestic disputes and violence. A steady flow of TVs, gold, cameras, and watches started up in hope of exchange for cocaine. There were reports of muggings and violent crime (Johnson et al., 1986; Hamid and Johnson, 1983). Raising a time when Musa's interim suppliers were out of stock, so that a goodly portion was immediately sold. But none of the money went back to Trinidad, and all the brethren were in financial trouble when the shipment was gone. Musa had become totally absorbed by the freebase pipe and so had Blackheart, who had been wavering between the pipe and base cigarettes (later to be called "wulla" joints). Icob strayed from them, marooning himself at his "gates" or apartment in his own extensive circle of freebasers.

In September 1983, Rafi returned from Trinidad. He had had a serious setback: a shipment of cocaine and marijuana (worth several million dollars, according to the Trinidad newspapers clippings which Musa has saved) had been intercepted by Trinidian police close to the Central Trinidad harbor whither it was bound. Rafi lost his down payment and nearly lost his life in the attempt to escape arrest. He had spent 5 days on a small skiff on the open sea and had finally been rescued by Venezuelan fishermen. He was very annoyed to learn that there was nothing coming to him for the last shipment. Consumed by his own craving for cocaine.

From September 1983 to December 1984 was the period of the consortium's final dissolution. Supplier after supplier emerged who showed brief periods of prosperity before succumbing to problems with own use. Musa, by now penniless, moved to Manhattan, thus ending his 8-year career in drug distribution. Blackheart also lost his "gates" and apartment. For a short time he worked as a helper at a "gates" at Park Place, but in the end he joined another Rastafari on a trip to Zambia where the latter had leased land for agricultural development. At the time of writing, he has not returned to New York. Icob, the remaining brother, saw his well-stocked "gates"/grocery stores reduced to bare shelves. He himself sat behind the bulletproof partition at the main gates near Grand Army Plaza, an Uzi in one hand and his freebase pipe in the other. By December 1984, he had sold his Volvo, had lost the remaining store and his apartment, and had become an itinerant crack peddler, selling in Greenwich Village and close to his mother's house on Cortelyou Road.

Drug trafficking arrangements in Brooklyn have been transformed entirely as crack replaced marijuana and the brief period of cocaine powder and freebase trafficking. The crack and cocaine traffic has resembled nothing so much as the swiftest whirlpool, drawing money with bewildering rapidity out of the hands of customers and then whipping it out of pockets down the line of distributors until huge volumes have been accumulated in the hands of a few who control large-scale coca cultivation, processing, and export. Smaller fortunes settled in the hands of their corporate sector accomplices. A monopolistic tendency is thus encouraged which had been curbed previously. The middle echelon is depressed. Down the line of distributors, therefore, there is a rapid succession of personnel. Only a few hardy plants can entrench themselves, otherwise the BMWs and Beepers (tools of the cocaine trade) change hands continuously. Today's selling operations depend heavily upon the individual pusher, the undistinguished African-American, Caribbean, or Hispanic youth acting on his own, and selling out of his pockets at the curb or in the lee of an abandoned building. In light of the account given here, and with evidence provided by newspapers (New York Times, 1987), the following schematic representation of contemporary cocaine/crack trafficking can be offered.

- **Top level**, profits > consumption (pure profits), transactions involving billions of dollars and tons of cocaine. Located in Colombia, these operators include the Medellin and Cali cartels (New York Times, 1987). It is hypothesized that these enormous revenues find their way into the corporate capitalist economy, thus underwriting it significantly.
- **Second level**, profits = consumption (pure profits offset by spectacular busts), transactions involving millions of dollars and several tons of cocaine. Located both in Colombia and the United States, these large-scale importers also invest in the corporate economy.
- **Third level**, profits ≥ consumption, transactions involving hundreds of thousands of dollars and several kilos of cocaine. Mostly US-based, these are the suppliers to celebrities, the celebrities themselves, and the corporate executives who report to the cocaine hotline (see Washton and Gold, 1985) that cocaine is destroying them. In this level, operators are responsible for bulk purchases from levels above them and for bulk sales to levels below.
- **Fourth level**, profits ≤ consumption, transactions involving thousands of dollars and several ounces of cocaine. Operators at this level assure regular sup-
plies to those dealing at street-level in minority communities. They may be suppliers to crack houses or their proprietors, or they may work with dependent chains of free-lancers or users. They will also supply purchasers in the more affluent neighborhoods who buy “eights” [1/8th of an ounce], quarters, and half-ounces. In the aggregate, consumption at this level probably exceeds profits, although there may be several individuals or associations who do amass modest fortunes. Eventual own use accounts for a rapid turnover in personnel.

- Fifth level, profits < consumption, transactions involving hundreds of dollars and quantities under an ounce. At this level are the masses of persons who sell cocaine to finance their own use and the free-lancers (who may be moderate users, having discovered techniques to conquer compulsion). These operators sell from their pockets. Some may accumulate enough money to maintain comfortable lifestyles without having to supplement their drug incomes from other sources. Most will need to supplement their drug incomes (from crime or jobs: Johnson et al., 1987) or may lapse periodically into pure consumption.

- Sixth level, pure or terminal consumption, transactions involving $5, $10, $20, and up to a few hundred dollars and from one to several vials of crack. This is the level of the street clientele from whom ultimately the bulk of the billions accumulated at higher levels is derived. Trafficking is either nonexistent or serendipitous, and it is always profitless. Purchasers use nondrug incomes to finance use.

This schematic logic works effectively to transfer money upward and out of minority communities. Thus, another relationship between the informal economic sector and the corporate capitalist sector is confirmed. The drug trafficking economy which was pioneered by Caribbean youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s utilized and augmented indigenous or community developed capital, talents, and skills, as Part One of this paper has described. In that phase it returned considerable revenues to its operators who reinvested them in community initiatives and small-scale industry. With crack, however, drugs have been “commoditized.” (Indeed, crack is the perfect commodity, which obliges the consumer to continue buying until his resources are completely exhausted.) Indigenous operators, whose role had been elaborated into the Rastafari “Prince of Zion,” were reduced to being vagrant pusher/junkies or slave laborers. At the same time, the involvement of corporate sector personnel has increased. The billions of dollars produced are thus incorporated directly and invested in corporate sector enterprise. To this day, the crack traffic has not supported a single vegetarian cookshop in a local community.

The institutions of the crack economy are still very much emergent and therefore offer an exciting field of study. At the fifth level, for example, efforts are being made by entrepreneurs to retain some of the capital they generate. Either the entrepreneur controls or discontinues crack use, or is a nonuser entirely, and he employs users to distribute his product on the street (Hamid and Johnson, 1987; see also Mieczkowski, 1986). These employees are usually short-lived, in the sense that they quickly become unreliable and unemployable as their habit overpowers them. Labor costs are therefore kept to a minimum and are made in kind (by paying with vials of crack instead of cash). Many Rastafari brethren, having reformed their own use patterns, have risen from penury to proprietorship of such “businesses.” Apparently their number is increasing (Hamid and Johnson, 1987). If they resolve the problem of unreliable labor and thrive, crack use will be even more ubiquitous and problematic by 1990.

Future research in these areas will provide important insights on the nature of drug distribution and drug use/misuse and on their relation to the wider community.

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NOTES

1. Fictitious names are used throughout.
2. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches: to him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna. I will give him a white stone and in the white stone a new name written which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it (Rev. 2:17, King James Bible).

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