

FIELD DIARY

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SELLING DRUGS IN A CORNER OF

# TEPITO

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EL COLEGIO DE MÉXICO

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Working document of El Colegio de México's

Seminar on Violence and Peace



CONSEJO PARA PREVENIR Y  
ELIMINAR LA DISCRIMINACIÓN  
DE LA CIUDAD DE MÉXICO  
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Seminario sobre  
Violencia y Paz



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## Introduction

In early 2017 I joined a College of Mexico project funded by the National Council for the Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination of Mexico City to carry out a series of in-depth interviews aiming to shed light on problems of violence and discrimination experienced by the inhabitants of the Cuauhtémoc district, as well as the networks which would need to work in order to solve them. It is worth pointing out that these networks are complex and go beyond many of the deep divisions which we specialists use for their analysis. On the street, the edges are blurred between the formal and the informal, the public and the private, the legal and the illegal. They are constantly being built and negotiated. This process involves the players, groups and institutions whose positions can often be seen to be ambiguous, when they are not downright contradictory. Against this backdrop, uniformed police agents are not always in charge, but neither are they always mere citizens, since the two roles blend in a complex manner.

The possibility of carrying out an interview in Tepito was suggested at the first planning meeting, since it was one of the district's most emblematic spaces, above all where insecurity and violence are concerned. As a native of the neighborhood I was drawn to the proposition personally as well as professionally.

As an ethnographer I was torn between two ideas. The first was that finding the right informant could become a problem because the dialog would have to cover topics generally considered to be delicate, the second was that the familiar methods for stitching together networks of trust and for obtaining informants have proven effective even in contexts where it was not expected that individuals would collaborate. This can be gleaned just from looking at the patchwork of unusual topics covered by projects in Mexico in recent years.

I met Ivan through a friend of my family who knew him. He is a middle aged man from the neighborhood who spends his days on the street corner, and who in his own words “runs errands.” This simple and almost euphemistic formula took on a weightier meaning as the days went by. Ivan had a multiplicity of activities, which included looking after cars, managing losses or doing everyday favors, and these were continuously interwoven with the small scale sale of narcotics, serving as a link between potential buyers and the neighborhood’s narcotic stores. He generally worked in the company of others, not just because there were other street corner personalities living and sharing work and leisure spaces, but there are some pointers that the street corners under observation in a neighborhood such as Tepito have multiplied in the interstices of Mexico City.

The relationship with Ivan was in a sense contradictory. On the one hand he was visibly interested in the project and would say that he was the right person

to take part because nobody else could tell stories like those he had experienced, and on the other hand it appeared to be practically impossible to carry out an in-depth interview in the traditional way. Ivan was always doing something or about to do something, sneaking away or off-grid on a particularly delicate mission. This is how what had originally been conceived as one long interview, coming into and going out of the neighborhood, turned into a series of visits.

I usually keep a small diary of the minutiae of each research project and my meetings with Ivan were no exception. This was how this document came into being. In ethnographic practice diaries are not in themselves material for publication, but rather a primary source which experts use in their work as the basis for analysis and interpretation. The fact that I, or other readers directly involved in the project, might consider this diary to be of value, is without being theoretical about it, a sign of the times of Mexico today. Every day we were faced with evidence of the merciless advance of violence, above all in relation to the drug business, but we hardly ever see it at work in everyday life, with its little violent situations and corrupt acts, its jokes and laughs, with a wide and complex range of emotions showing that the people who are enmeshed in these social relationships are real flesh and blood people, including the individuals we would seek to avoid.

In this sense the field diary proved an invaluable tool. It helped me to make sense of the expressions, sounds and feelings, in a way that I could never



have done with a recorder, much less in a context like the one I found myself investigating where even a small audio recorder, such as the technologically advanced models on the market today, could be perceived as intrusive, putting me or my informants at risk, let alone a camera or video recording device. In any case the principal means of recording in this series of encounters was the ethnographer, their senses and of course their subjectivity.

It is worth mentioning that all the names appearing in this document have been modified, as well as a few situations and places, in the interest of complying with the agreements permitting this short research project: 1) that the identities of all the participants would be protected by anonymity and 2) that the purposes for writing this document are strictly academic, and the aim is to bring a space under scrutiny which should continue to be looked at: the subjective dimension of the current context of insecurity and violence relating to the drug trade. This is just a small contribution to this academic discourse.

Mexico City, April 30, 2018

Jovani J. Rivera

## Note 1

*Tepito, Mexico City, Wednesday June 7, 2017.*

Baldy is a family friend on my mother's side who has worked as a *franelero*<sup>1</sup> for nearly ten years on a street corner at the far east end of Mexico City's best known street market. If anyone of my acquaintances was capable of finding someone to interview in-depth it was him, so I decided to contact him by text on the afternoon of June 2.

I was completely honest with him about my ethnographic aims, because I did not want to start our agreement on the wrong footing. Without any preamble I told him that I needed a native from the neighborhood who knew about drugs, whether they themselves were a user or because they were in some sense involved with distribution, to carry out an in-depth interview with

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<sup>1</sup> A *franelero* is someone who looks after cars on the streets in those parts of Mexico City where there is a shortage of parking spaces. They also provide other services such as cleaning vehicles. Their name comes from the "franela," the cloth they use for their work. They are controversial figures because they "privatize" what are in reality public spaces, and they are an important feature of the culture of insecurity of Mexico's capital. Their services would be worthless if the vehicles and belongings inside were not in any sense under threat on the streets.

the use of a recorder during the meeting, and that everything was part of a College of Mexico project. His answer surprised me not only because it was positive, but because he got into the subject straight away: “And when do you want to start?” As soon as possible I told him. We agreed to a meeting at 6.30 p.m. on Wednesday June 7 on the street corner where he usually worked, so as not to interfere with his other activities.

I turned up to the meeting on time, although I had decided to arrive a little late, knowing that Baldy might not leave his work at the street market on time. The appearance of Tepito generally begins to change at around 5 p.m. when most commercial activities wind down. While I was walking down one of the main streets of the neighborhood in the direction of our meeting place I could see the traders packing their stalls away. Some handcarts were being used, blocking the way and I had to take care not to get run over by a scooter, carrying two or three local youths at full speed.

A few blocks before getting to the appointed place I came across one of those contrasting sights of Tepito: a Module of Citizen Security and Participation with police agents continually in view, directly in front of the “White house,” one of the best known sectors of the neighborhood, whose name had been linked to illegal activity on more than one occasion. In the middle and below a footbridge there were two agents on permanent guard with

their motorbike. As I moved onwards I sensed that I too was walking between these two extremes and I felt the force of this metaphor.

Baldy was waiting for me in the middle of the desolate street. He was pushing 50, dark-skinned and medium height at around 5 foot 6 inches, possibly around 200 pounds, with hair nearly shaven, hence his name, wearing simple clothing consisting of a cotton T shirt, jeans and work boots. We greeted each other as friends and he said that if it was not for the message I sent him in the morning of the same day, he would have forgotten about our meeting completely. I joked to him that I was lucky because I was worried, thinking quite honestly that I would be looking suspicious, all alone on a street corner in the neighborhood as it got dark.

He immediately began to walk. We crossed the avenue in the direction of the streets with names of trades, which have long been infamous as the center of insecurity in the neighborhood. He did not say anything about the potential informant, he gave no names, or description of what the person does, or where to find him. I just decided to follow him. We arrived at a very striking corner. The stores are laid out in a kind of delta shape with a nearly abandoned appearance, adorned with large graffitis, or rather cartoon-like images. There were three men there, two crouched down resting against a

metal shutter. One of these was around 30 years old, dressed like a rapper.<sup>2</sup> The other, around 40, had a shaved head and wore white framed glasses. The third man, the oldest of the three, was about 50 years old, and was dozing in the trunk of a Tsuru model taxi in the current city livery (white on pink boxes).

Baldy approached quickly. First he greeted the men who were crouching down with a hand slap and fist bump.

—What’s up dudes?

—What’s up? —they responded—. After that he walked towards the Tsuru and stirred the resting man with a light touch on the shoulder:

—I was looking for you bro. Come over here.

The man quickly sat up still half asleep. His name was Ivan, he was short at about 5 foot 3 inches, with dark copper colored skin from long exposure to the sun. His hair was combed back, in part gray, or rather silver. His eyes were small and dark and his nose short and slightly aquiline. His general appearance was thin although his stomach was slightly sticking out.

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<sup>2</sup> Rap or hip-hop style clothing worn by Afro-American youths in the US, who relate to the singers of the same genre of music. It generally consists of baggy clothing: pants, sports shirts (basketball or American football), sweat shirts, well-known brands of basketball sneakers such as Adidas or Nike, wearing caps or scarves, as well as a few pieces of jewelry such as showy watches, rings and chains.

He was dressed in blue jeans, basketball sneakers and a white T shirt commemorating a pilgrimage.

Baldy took him by the neck with the right arm, as if he was putting him into a wrestling head lock, but the move was affectionate in a funny way. He brought his face up to the man's as if to whisper a secret and he said to him:

—My boy over here is doing a PhD and is looking for someone in the neighborhood who knows about drugs and who is willing to give an interview. And I straight away thought of you.

—Okay, okay —he replied frowning as he moved his head. I told him the work was anonymous, to which he said he could use an alias.

—But why? You're going to learn everything we talk about? —He asked.

I said I was carrying a recorder in my jacket which I would switch on and use for recording so that it would not interfere with the conversation. He thought it was a good idea and he said he had no problem with the use of the device. He told me he had a lot to say because he had lived for several years on the street, in a small row of stores to one side of the place where we were talking, and he added: “At one time I thought about writing a book about my life, of all my experiences, but it was a project I never got round to.”

Ivan agreed to participate, but he said that he could not start the project right then as he had something to do. He asked us to come to the same corner at 9 a.m. the next day, the time he started work. We said goodbye with the same style of greeting which Baldy had used with the men at the start of our encounter. We walked back and after walking just a few yards, Baldy told me that it did not seem convenient to him that we should arrive on time for our appointment, that it would be better for us to arrive half an hour later, at 9.30 p.m.

## **Note 2**

*Tepito, Mexico City, Thursday, June 8, 2017.*

Baldy and I greeted each other and we crossed the street nearly straight away. We met up with Ivan and the young man who looked like a rapper, who we had met the day before. He was called Beto, and in some way he is Ivan's right hand. Beto is tall, he must be approaching 5 foot 6 inches. His physique could be that of a sports person, his head is shaved and he looks very much like a young Afro-American. He could easily pass for a much shorter version of LeBron James, the well-known American basketball player. His skin is dark, although with a slight yellowish tone, which is usually a sign of drug addicts. He was wearing basketball sneakers, baggy jeans and a black sweatshirt with a back cap that had buttons on the front.

This time they were not on the graffiti corner, rather they were facing it, on the site of an abandoned food stall right in the middle of two housing units, also covered with graffiti. They hung out at the stall: Beto sitting on one of the sides, resting his back against the wall, Ivan standing in front of the stall talking to him. He was wearing an ostentatious purple colored polo T shirt.



Both were breakfasting on sandwiches and coffee, like a lot of the other traders. We greeted them and after taking a bite Ivan told us:

—Didn't we agree 10 o'clock? —As he looked at his watch.

—In reality we agreed 9 o'clock—Baldy replied, getting a laugh from the four.— I need to go to work, but I'll leave you, yeah? —He said to them as he gave me a slight nod of the head.

—Yeah, leave him here. We'll look after him.

Baldy said goodbye and walked off in the direction of the street market. Ivan kept eating and asked me what we were going to do. I replied that we could start to speak; I switched the recorder on (and that was how it stayed for the rest of our meeting) and I kept it in the left pocket of my jacket. Ivan told me a bit about his daily routine. He told me that he usually arrived at 9 o'clock in the morning and that his journey was very short because he lived in a hotel just a few blocks away from his place of work. It seemed an interesting topic so I kept asking him about it.

Ivan told me he was 54 years old and a native of the neighborhood. He was born and raised on Calle de Tenochtitlán. He repeated to me that he had lived on the street for 12 years out of the last 20 years and the rest in a hotel which served as his residence. Our conversation was interrupted by a young man who had just crossed the street and came over to say hello. Hi nickname

was Doll and he must have been 30 or younger, of medium height, 5 foot 5 inches, light skin and visibly muscular. He wore jeans and a pair of Adidas sneakers, red and white T shirt with a cap he played with and a fitted black riding jacket. His gaze was what most attracted my attention, because of two details: 1) his eyes were yellowish, which is a common characteristic of addicts and 2) he had a series of spills which seemed to show that he was up from the previous day.

Doll greeted the three of us: Ivan very respectfully, speaking out his name and nodding his head; he called me “bro” and did the classic hand and fist bump. And he spoke to Beto warmly: “Get the *chicharra* out bitch!”<sup>3</sup> the hand bump was very much louder and therefore more affectionate. Beto refused and his gesture made the four laugh. Doll told us about his frustration. The night before he had bought a bag of marijuana at “25 pesos a gram” (equivalent to 37 US dollars an ounce) and he had “lucked out” because the seller had given him a full bag, and then he went to a nearby district to do exercise and he lost the bag. He ended his story with the thought that the bag would be a prize for the lucky person who found it and he bade it farewell with an exclamation: “Now we can smoke!”

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<sup>3</sup> Remains of a marijuana cigarette that can be saved to be smoked later.

Beto stated that he and Doll are both “fucked off,” because the story reminded him that he too was carrying a bag of marijuana and could not remember where he had left it. Ivan said that he had left his inside the unit, and that he only had a gram with him (1/28th of an ounce), and he normally smoked that in one go. He explained to me that each gram of marijuana makes approximately two cigarettes and that his routine was to smoke the first during the day to pass the time and the second at night to sleep:

—I sleep like an angel! As if I owed nothing to anyone, thank God! —  
He also told me that the weed that The Doll had lost what was known as “mango gum,” a type of pleasantly flavored high quality marijuana. He then shouted at a youth who was walking on the opposite sidewalk: —Piece of shit!  
I went to the bar<sup>4</sup> yesterday and you weren’t there, fucking liar!

A teenager came over to the metal stall, at the most 15 years old. He was very thin, dark skinned and short. He must have been less than 5 foot 3 inches because he was shorter than Ivan. He wore a black cap, white vest, red surf shorts with orangey details and a pair of basketball sneakers which looked enormous against his thin legs. He carried a square black synthetic leather man’s bag strapped to his chest. This type of bag is very popular among the

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<sup>4</sup> Place for working out, which usually just has bars and handrails for doing calisthenics. They are very popular among the males of the neighborhood.

men of the neighborhood, particularly traders who usually use them to keep money from their commercial transactions, but other men also use them to store personal items such as cell phones or also drugs, for personal use or for sale. The kid was obviously drugged and given his drowsiness he seemed to be under the effect of marijuana.

The greeting ritual was practically the same as I saw earlier in the morning. The kid called me “bro” and he greeted me affectionately, also Ivan, to whom he said something nonsensical, the sound coming out of his mouth nothing more than babble. He drew a breath and he was able to speak more clearly. He told Ivan that he had bought a ball of hashish and asked him if he wanted a smoke. Ivan replied sharply that he did not. A passer-by strolled past casually and gave a friendly greeting. I observed the ball of hashish in the right hand of the adolescent. A ball of dark brown resin. He took it out of a plastic bag and in the other hand he was holding a normal dropper, from which he started to remove the plastic head.

I asked Ivan if the hashish was more expensive and he said it was not, but there was something about his body language which told me not to pursue the topic. Almost immediately a very luxurious black automobile appeared with its windows wound down. The traditional sound of the accordion in a *norteño* song could be heard. A tall man came out of the car. He must have

been at least 5 foot 9, he was thin and his hair was practically shaven; it was gray indicating that he must have been over 50 years of age. He was very elegantly dressed, with gray pants, a short sleeved shirt with a colorful combination of turquoise and pink squares, with perfectly shined brown Boston leather shoes. On his left wrist he wore an impressive silver watch, and on the right a thin gold chain.

The man asked Ivan if his female friend was around and he asked him to call her by telephone. Apparently he was given the go-ahead to enter. He nodded his head a couple of times as he looked at Ivan, who asked me to wait for him because they “had to go, but would not be long.” From the serious atmosphere of the exchange I imagined that they were talking to someone important, with one of the individuals Ivan worked for. Ivan and the man entered a nearby dwelling unit. I stayed on my own with the teenager, who carried on preparing to smoke hashish. He had pulled off a small piece from the ball and he was molding it with his index finger and thumb to make a small ball which he tried to place on the narrowest point of the dropper since it was only a thin plastic tube.

I asked the teenager how much his ball of hashish cost, and guessing that I wanted to buy one, he warned me that he had not bought it on the street corner, but rather in the vicinity of the Torre Latino. It seemed to me to be an

incredibly busy place and a rather bizarre place to buy drugs, although I imagine that sometimes the best way to hide something is in plain sight. I carried on asking whether these transactions took place in middle of the street and how it was possible to tell whether they were going on. The adolescent summed it up in a phrase:

—If you're hooked you'll find it—and as this simple logic made me feel a little stupid, all I could say was:

—Yeah man.

From what I could see, the procedure for smoking hashish was not going too well. The kid was trying to burn the resin with a lighter to turn it into smoke in the dropper, but he was not having much success. He appeared to be looking for something from his movements, but he continued our conversation, adding that the price of hashish varied between 70 and 90 pesos per gram (between 140 and 134 US dollars per ounce), and that was how much his little ball weighed, one gram (1/28<sup>th</sup> of an ounce). I asked him if it was much stronger than marijuana and he said he thought it was not, since in the end it comes from the same substance. According to him hashish is marijuana resin as can be seen from some of the everyday processes of consumption, like breaking it up in a grinder, where a large amount of resin

can accumulate depending on the quantity of marijuana, which then turns into a moldable dough when mixed with water.

Ivan returned to the stall and interrupted the conversation. He said that his workload was going to increase with a greater number of interruptions, because he was going to run errands and could not stay in one place. I guessed that this cut across our interview agreement. In fact it seemed that he had the same preconception of the framework as any social science professional; we would sit down to share a drink, while I turned the recorder on, and we would talk without interruption. He suggested that we should think of another time and date to finish it.

At first Ivan thought that the night might provide a good backdrop because he was practically free of duties at that time, but then he remembered that a lot of rain had fallen in the evenings that week. We thought about another day and he suggested Tuesday which was technically his day off, because Tepito remains closed on that day. He said that on Tuesday we would be able to sit down at the small row of stores in which he normally lived and we could talk more easily. Despite this Ivan did not ask me to leave, he took a folding metal chair that was on its own in the street and he sat down, and I decided to sit on the ground next to him.

A few neighbors passed in front of us and greeted Ivan in a friendly manner. He told me that this was something basic, that “everyone knows me” as a native of the neighborhood, and that this made his statements more valuable. The elegant man was back on the street and he interrupted us to say goodbye: “We’re off Ivan my friend,” and he got into his car effortlessly. Ivan told me in a low voice that he was a commander of the federal police who loved coke. I told him that he would have to be high up in the agency to have a car like that and to look like that. I then asked him about his relationship with the police in general and he replied that they were bought, which is why they did not trouble anyone, so long as they received their “soda money”, which amounted to around “100 pesos a week” (just over five US dollars).

This seemed to be a microscopic bribe but when you consider everyone involved with the stupeficient trade and other illegal activities in the neighborhood contributing similar amounts, this could add up to good sums of money through simple accumulation. Ivan believed that this information was very delicate and he thought he should think twice about making it public despite the fact that it was suspected or even known about in the media. Maybe for this reason he thought we should focus on a much more historical perspective, namely his personal history. All told he had served a 15 years in



jail and several more in different prisons of the capital. He advised me to bring a notebook to take some important notes.

A woman came over to ask Ivan if he had been able to take the garbage out the day before and he said he had not, and that the strong rain had stopped him from completing the task, but that he would sort it out by the end of the day. A little later a police truck passed right in front of us driving slowly. The two agents greeted the seated Ivan and raised the palm of their hands. Ivan did the same and the truck continued on its way. Ivan laughed a little and said to me: “See that?” when it was obvious that the scene was powerful confirmation of what he was saying about police collaboration.

We continued our discussion and I reminded him that the day before he had spoken about his intention to write a book about his life. He told me that it was a project that in fact he had been thinking about but had never been able to bring about, that he had just fucked around. He told me that he left prison in 1999 and that his mother, who was his sole connection to his family, had died of a heart attack soon afterwards, and that he began to live in the streets. A man interrupted the conversation to ask Ivan if he had seen the gas truck, he said he had not, but judging by the time of day it would not take long.

Returning to his life story, he said that the years he lived in the street were tough, above all where addiction was concerned. He stated that in those

days he got to the point of consuming up to six different substances throughout the day, which he listed as: 1) marijuana, 2) *chochos* (ecstasy), 3) cocaine, 4) crack, 5) uppers and 6) alcohol. He added that he kept up this level of consumption all the time he lived in the street, for approximately 12 years, and that the longest he stopped eating and sleeping while consuming drugs was for 16 days. I asked him if these were for sale in this street and he reminded me that in the street we were in, there were multiple sales points, which led to the district government labeling it a “red zone.”

I returned to the subject of addiction to ask him how he used to acquire the substances, such as the *chochos* or the cocaine, which might have been more expensive than the marijuana and the uppers. Ivan told me that he was given them, that the people who sent him on errands gave him the choice of how he was paid: in money or in drugs. He told me that he always got close to important people, to the people who imposed respect on the neighborhood. A woman who came out of the dwelling unit told Ivan that somebody above was asking for him; he got ready to go, but the woman said it was just a joke, she laughed and he told her: “You’ll see bitch!” Ivan repeated his intention to help me to share his story, intuiting that it could be well received in academic circles. He believed that he would surprise people, that they would ask how I managed to get into the neighborhood and how I met the right person.

We agreed a new date to do an interview, the following Tuesday at midday. He pointed out a food stall that could be seen two blocks ahead, and he told me that he usually ate there when he was resting, that it was very safe to meet there. Ivan believed that we would be able to talk at that place, at the bar or even to walk around the neighborhood looking at the communal places, such as the spaces for afternoon events and gymnasiums. He told me not to worry, that everything was under control in these streets: “the guys won’t give you any trouble.” Before we said goodbye he told me that with everything that was going on he had forgotten to ask my name. “My name is Jovani,” we shook hands and I slowly walked off. Beto, who we had lost sight of, came over slowly on an old turquoise bicycle and he said goodbye to me with a handshake.

### Note 3

*Tepito, Mexico City, Wednesday, June 14, 2017.*

I got to the corner to look for Ivan. It was close to 10 a.m. On that day, neither he nor Beto were at the graffiti covered corner, nor in front of the metal stall, but to the side of the small row of stores in which Ivan said he usually lived. He was sitting on the folding metal chair and wore a cherry color shirt. Beto, standing in front of him, was wearing his classic rapper outfit. Ivan saw me and straight away excused himself. He said he had to go before midday, maybe at 11.30 a.m., since they had asked him to do a delivery and he could not turn it down.

He told me that he had in any case gone to Doña Tere's for breakfast. I told him what had happened the day before, that I had sat down to eat a *gordita* and had waited for him. Since Ivan did not take me strictly as a native of the neighborhood, the detail was sufficiently convincing for him because he nodded his head and confirmed that it was what the lady sold:

—And you didn't ask where I was?

—Yeah I did.

—And what did she say?

—That you don't go out Tuesdays.

—That woman's a fucking asshole! She owes me an explanation!

Someone called Beto from the other side of the street and he went over quickly. I took the opportunity to tell Ivan that I had “done my task” and I showed him the notepad. He left his chair and took a few steps towards the row of small stores, he sat on the edge of a ramp for people with disabilities and I sat on the other side, just in front of him. I began to read the questions and he gave me some of his impressions. I asked him how he had started his activities and he replied that because of the trust he was held in, he had earned his work in two ways: 1) by being known and recognized publicly, having lived at the row of stores where we met up, and 2) because of his time in prison, where he had got to know some of the personalities who he later worked with.

I guessed that Ivan could continue talking, so I decided to switch the recorder on and keep it in my pocket. Ivan read out a question from the notebook:

—What work are you currently doing? —and he immediately replied—  
okay, well I look after cars and I'm still running errands for people.

I asked him if it had always been like that; in other words had he done the same thing before being sent to prison. Ivan said that despite appearances his life had been very normal before going to prison. He always thought of himself as a “homebody” and that this was the most radical change, maybe above all because he had spent very many years (15) behind bars.

I asked Ivan about the incident which led him to jail and he replied that it had been for “giving himself the luxury” of killing someone, which was part of a grudge with a so-called “godmother” of the then DIPD.<sup>5</sup> The man was known for extorting former convicts and young criminals in the neighborhood, and one of the latest targets had been one of Ivan’s family members, who he beat up a few times. He stated that after the beatings he decided to kill the man and he simply took his chance. Some months later he found him in a bar close to the neighborhood, passing time, or as he put it rather more punchily: “There he was, being a cool asshole with his little girlfriends.” Nobody even saw Ivan, who went up and removed his pistol from his belt and emptied the whole cartridge into him.

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<sup>5</sup> The defunct DIPD was the Investigation Division for the Prevention of Crime, still remembered on the streets as *Negro Durazo’s* police. “Godmothers” are police agents or former agents who supposedly mediate between the police agencies and criminal groups, permitting their administration and control. For years they were controversial personalities whose existence was even questionable.

Ivan told me that he was tackled by the rest of the men who were present at the event and that they handed him over to the DIPD. Since these were not good times for transparency, accountability or human rights, the legal processes were not followed in the slightest. He told me that he spent six days kidnapped, constantly being beaten and tortured. They only stopped when they transferred him to a different place.

—They did what they liked with me... apart from raping me; that was cool. —He said he felt calmer once he arrived in prison because the torture had at least finished, and despite it happening—. I got over what he had done to my relative: the dog was dead and the rage was over.

Although clearly prison is not an easy place, and even less so when you come from the neighborhood. There is a chance that some street conflicts can break out again in the institutional environment. Ivan explained that one of the inmates was the brother-in-law of the “godmother” he killed (another sign of the thin line between criminality and the law) and that they had to smooth things over afterwards. Ivan interrupted his story because someone told him they needed him. He asked me to come back and look for him in the afternoon, say at 6 p.m. and that I did not need to worry about leaving the neighborhood because he would accompany me to a safe place after our conversation had ended. I promised to return.

At 6.10 p.m. I was on my way back to the neighborhood to see Ivan. It had been raining heavily and I was worried about getting to the corner at night and finding nobody there. However I did not want to break my word or lose the opportunity to make observations at a different time of day, to look for variations or new details to describe the context. I took an umbrella and I followed the same route as the previous occasions to reach our meeting point. The street market was practically empty as a result of the weather, although there were still some traders collecting their things. There were police agents in the Module and in front on permanent guard, and although I knew they were not much use they still made me feel a bit safer.

I carried on walking past several blocks until I reached the corner. I was surprised that not only was it not empty, but there were many more people than I had seen in the mornings. Beto was talking to three youths, all very much of the same appearance as himself, and just over to his right was Ivan, who arrived in a red sweatshirt with a cap, which he was wearing. He sat in his folding seat as if it was a throne, flanked by two men of about the same age as him, around 50. The man to his left had a thick and dark mustache; and the one on his right had his head shaved. The rest of the men on the corner were wearing jackets or sweatshirts, and all were in some sort of horizontal line, sheltering from the rain on the graffitied corner thanks to a flimsy roof.



Just like the day I worked with the recorder open, it was hard for me to determine the border between the corner as an amusement space and as negotiation space. Meanwhile on Beto's side the mood was more festive and the youths were smoking marijuana, on Ivan's side the discussion appeared to be much more serious. I could not hear what they were saying, they were practically speaking in secret. Ivan's appearance was much more somber; there was something about his gaze and gestures which made me think he had been using drugs. I decided to close my umbrella and to join the end of the horizontal line, stopping a couple of paces from the man with the shaven head.

Ivan rested against more than one chair, to be able keep an eye on the back of the man with the shaved head, and he spoke to me rather rudely:

—Hey neighborhood! I think this shit can't be dealt with now, better come back later tomorrow night!

—Okay —I replied.

Ivan's tone left no room for doubt, he wanted me away from the corner and quick, so I opened my umbrella and started on my way back. As it was night by this time I quickened my step and tried not to make eye contact with anyone, until I found myself with two police who were on guard in the rain next to a motorbike, taking shelter with some thin police department waterproofs.

What struck me about the situation was not just Ivan's tough tone, but also the use of euphemisms that had appeared at other times on the corner (such as the question of his work "running errands," or when he decided he had to go for "something"). Ivan also spoke to me as if we had some business or other type of transaction, and it seemed as if his gestures in some way protected him and me too. He protected me in the sense of not revealing my identity, which in any case could endanger me from the other players on the corner, and he was protecting himself by not being taken as someone who revealed the secrets of what was going on there, with all the implications that could have. This time he did not stick to his promise of accompanying me out of the neighborhood, but you take what you can.

## **Note 4**

*Tepito, Mexico City, Tuesday, June 20, 2017.*

I arrived on time for my appointment with Ivan at 12 o'clock midday. Once again it was a Tuesday and the neighborhood was practically deserted. That was not the only repeated feature. Once again I got to the graffitied corner and Ivan was not there. I wandered around the area thinking that it would be a lost afternoon, until I noticed Beto at the metal stall with a teenager I had not previously seen there. The kid must have been close to 17, of medium height (5 foot 5), and very skinny, with quite dark skin and very yellowish eyes. He was wearing gray jeans, a cotton T shirt, a black sweatshirt with a cap and roller skates. He was playing with a spinner.

I came up to the stall and greeted them in a friendly way. I asked for Ivan but Beto told me that he had not seen him at all and I replied that I would wait for him for a while with them. I tried to make casual conversation as I passed the time. I then realized that it was the first time that I found myself with someone at the corner other than Ivan as the key player in the meeting. I asked them about the stall, whether it was really abandoned or whether it was

used at some time for selling. They confirmed that it was abandoned “fucking ages ago,” that nobody sold there any more, although it still functioned normally, for example the whole structure still had electricity and this was one of the reasons why it was a favorite meeting point, because they could always charge their cell phones and as some of them were among the youngest members of the street, they could carry on chatting by WhatsApp or Facebook, or listening to music.

The teenager asked Beto if he worked Tuesdays and he said he did not:

—I just smoke; and that’s because I love money—he added. He also told me that he was very hung over and I asked him what he was drinking the night before. He looked at me strangely and told me he did not like to drink alcohol, he was feeling bad from a night of smoking crack. Judging by his yellowish eyes, his mouth by all appearances dry and his tired look, he must have felt as if had an alcohol hangover several times over.

Maybe to try to ingratiate himself with Beto and to feel part of the clandestine life of the corner, the adolescent began to tell us the reason why he was at the corner that morning:

—I’m waiting for a guy to come in a blue Jetta.

—Ah, the fucker —Beto replied.

—Yeah, he’s going to take me to work.

—To distribute “things” in the stores?

—Yes.

The euphemism was there again, because it was clear that the things the adolescent and his boss for the day were going to distribute were illegal. Something similar was going on with the “store” concept, although it should be remembered that during the “war on drugs”<sup>6</sup> period the media popularized the notion of the “narcostore” applied to points of sale for small quantities of drugs, maybe also promoting the fact that many of these places were at the same time commercial establishments of other sorts, such as ordinary everyday stores or distribution places.

With great dexterity, Beto rolled a marijuana cigarette that was thick enough to pass for a small cigar and he played with it passing it between his fingers. He did not light it and it made me think he did not want to smoke in my presence. Another youth came towards us; he had been eating at the stall of Doña Tere, and Beto greeted him saying: “What’s up fatty?” The young man responded to the name of Fer. He was tall, maybe a little more than Beto,

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<sup>6</sup> This was the name given to the strategy of President Felipe Calderón to combat the drug trade between 2006 and 2012. Its main focus was the use of force and it manifest itself in direct confrontations with the army throughout Mexican territory, whether to capture drug traders or to guarantee the safety of the population in environments where confidence in other security agencies had completely evaporated. Although there are differences in emphasis and intensity, the policy has remained in place up to the present.

He must have been pushing 5 foot 9, with light brown skin and one of those physiques that made him look strong rather overweight (he might have weighed 200 pounds or more); his hair was very short but it was still possible to tell that it was curly. He was wearing gray pants, an orange T shirt and he had a white colored man's bag crossing his chest; he also had tattoos on both arms.

The first thing Fer did before greeting us with a hand and fist bump was to burp loudly, he took his cell phone out and told us that he was waiting for a call from one of his customers, he wanted to know if he was going to buy weed or not. It then occurred to me that neither Fer nor the teenager who spent time with us knew who I was, and maybe because of that they spoke with a lot more freedom about their illegal activities. Fer asked if he had already told us of the days exploits with the rock,<sup>7</sup> and he explained that he “lucked out” because he sold seven grams (1/4 ounce) of crack and earned 800 pesos (\$42 US dollars), “just for going three blocks from here”:

—Eight-hun-dred-pes-os —said Fer pausing on each syllable with a big smile.

—Wow —replied Beto nodding.

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<sup>7</sup> Crack is also known as *piedra* (rock). It consists of a mixture of cocaine hydrochloride with sodium bicarbonate and it is smoked, unlike powdered cocaine which is inhaled.

—800 pesos! —The teenager said to me.

—Well yeah it's a change —I replied— and a little later.

—That's how this business is —replied Beto. And since all of us were waiting Fer began his tale.

—So this asshole in a car pulled up and said to me straight up: “I want rock, how much is it at?” And I told him: “At 350 a gram (equivalent to \$530 US per ounce).” He said this was expensive and I replied: “I'm going to give it to you at 300 (equivalent to \$450 US per ounce), but how many grams are you going to want, and he told me seven. As he had the car I said I told him to get me closer to home, he gave me the money and I got out of the car. At the entrance they said to me: “What? What? Where are you going?” and I showed them the money: “To buy, bitch,” and straight away they said: “Fuck, go on then.”

Fer added that with his generous profits he had gone to buy new clothes: Pants and a T shirt. The logic of the “errands” was becoming increasingly clear: neither Fer, Beto nor even Ivan were the “stores,” rather they served as links between these. It is worth taking a look at the mathematics in the particular transaction related by Fer: seven grams of crack at 300 pesos (\$15.70 US dollars) giving a total of 2,100 pesos (\$110 US dollars) of which Fer kept 800 (\$42 US dollars), or nearly 40% of the total for serving as the

link. In other words the store kept 1,300 pesos (\$71.40 US dollars) and the direct cost of the crack for them was a little more than 185 pesos (\$9.80 US dollars). Although safe as in Fer's anecdote, few people can enter the store directly and make the transaction, and to do so places them at risk, which is why they require the service of intermediaries, in other words someone to "run the errand."

An extremely thin woman scavenger came over pushing a shopping cart; she had obviously been collecting PET bottles. She greeted us and told Beto that Ivan had passed by early, had been asking for him and had waited for him, but as he was not there he had left. It was absolutely clear that Ivan had stood me up again, but I thought it was not deceitful as Tuesdays were his days for tidying up any loose issues. I told Beto that I would return in an hour, just to make sure that Ivan had not returned and in case he thought it was me who had not made the appointment. He said sure, if he turned up, he would tell him that I had come by looking for him. I said goodbye to the three and I moved on.

An hour later I was back and I found myself once again with the teenager, Beto and Fer, who was charging his cell phone on the metal stall, and was showing them videos on his Facebook account. Given their slow speech reactions, it was at least clear that Beto and the teenager had been



smoking a marijuana cigarette shortly before. Beto told me that there had been no sign of Ivan and that maybe it was unlikely he would appear on the corner before nightfall, when he came back to say hello and sometimes to smoke, as he had told Mariana the week before. Despite this I told them that if it was alright I would stay a while and they told me it was no problem. I sat on the sidewalk next to the stall.

The man in the blue Jetta who was going to give the teenager work had turned up at the corner. The kid asked Beto for the time, he looked at his watch and replied that it was 1.30 p.m. This gesture really caught my attention because the kid was wearing a fashionable silver Casio watch, but I realized that the watch showed 4:28 p.m., I guessed that it was not working well and that maybe the kid was only using it as an accessory. The teenager said he was going and he said goodbye to us with a bump of the hand and fist.

There was a whistle and a shout, although it could not be heard clearly. It was a woman from the next block, she was looking towards us and gesticulating. Beto was almost sure that she was looking for him. Fer told him:

—I didn't catch what they said, because I had my headphones on.

—And I didn't see, fuck knows —replied Beto.

Beto decided to go and find out, to walk over to the woman, it seemed he was right. Fer and I were left alone on the corner. I was standing next to the

metal stand, he was seated inside, charging the battery of his cell phone and watching videos.

A very thin man who looked like a laborer with work boots, jeans and a lifting brace came up to us and said to me:

—Bro, do you have anything to sell, even just a toke? I only have 10 pesos (50 cents US) on me, two five coins.

The situation took me by surprise and I just moved my head to say no. I looked at Fer and gave him a gesture as if to ask whether he had anything to say to the man's request. Fer also shook his head but he rejected him with a movement of his wrist while he shook his right index finger to say no. The man went away disappointed. I made the most of the opportunity to speak to Fer about his response:

—Weed right? There is some?

—Yea there is weed.

—But what? It was too little?

—Yeah the bag costs upwards of 50 pesos (\$2.60 US dollars).

—And how does it differ?

—Quality and quantity obviously.

—How about you, what do you recommend?

—I don't recommend anything, people always come to buy from me for 100 pesos (\$5.2 US dollars).

I took a 50 peso note from my trouser pocket and I offered it to him, I said that Ivan had stood me up and I wanted to make the most of my trip to supply myself. He smiled and took the note, but as we spoke he kept his eyes glued to his phone.

—I'll bring it to you right away —and then he spoke to me as he showed me the screen of his phone —look at this video, it's sick!

It looked as if we had finally broken the ice. The video which someone had shared to his Facebook profile showed a man doing an enormous and colorful graffiti in huge letters. Fer told me that in street slang it is called a “bomb” and he told me a little about how they were done, contrary to many other painting techniques, the first part of the graffiti that had to be done was the filling of a piece and then the outlines and other details. A small mark on the screen reminded him that he had 357 messages waiting in WhatsApp in more than 30 conversations; it seemed like he was a very popular kid.

He disconnected his phone and left the stall. He said to me: “I'll leave you my charger,” and he walked off slowly in the direction of the store till I lost sight of him. I decided to sit down again on the sidewalk by the stall, but paying attention to his phone charger. Although the street seemed to be empty,

there is never a lack of incidents. Fer took 15 minutes to come back and the first thing I said was about that. He explained as he pointed to the “store” I had seen the first time Ivan had stood me up:

—They sell weed there but it is really crap. I’ve brought you a good one, it costs 10 pesos a gram (equivalent to \$15 US dollars an ounce). You will see, I’ve sat down with two or three dudes who think they are real potheads. A small toke will get you high.

Fer gave me a small bag containing the marijuana and he asked me to smell it. I held it to my nose and smelled it but he told me: “No open it and smell it.” I did as he said. The marijuana was very aromatic, and had a slight citric smell. I told him the smell was good and he seemed to be pleased with his choice. I put the bag under the hem of my boxers remembering that I would have to go back past two police check points. Our casual conversation continued and I asked him if he lived there. He looked at me with surprise and I told him I lived in a unit a few blocks back; he asked me which and I gave him the directions. It seemed that I passed the test because he dropped his look of surprise, although he still did not answer me.

The door of the unit to the left of the metal stall opened and a mature man appeared. He must have been over 50 as he tinted his gray hair. He was

formally dressed, with pressed trousers, long-sleeved beige shirt and moccasins. In a friendly voice he said:

—Hey, Fer my mother says, could you help her to unstick one of her windows? —then he looked at me and said—I don't think we will take long, if you want to wait for him, he'll be back in a minute—. I said to him, don't worry, in any case I was about to go. I said goodbye to Fer and left.

## **Note 5**

*Tepito, Mexico City, Friday, June 23, 2017.*

Since Ivan had stood me up again I began to wonder whether in fact he did not want to speak, that he was playing a double game with the trust that was so essential on the corner. His friendship with Baldy had obliged him to carry out the interview, but in reality he knew the risks that were entailed with speaking out about the matters they were dealing with. Given the obligatory nature of the meeting, he could hardly turn it down directly, but he could keep me waiting a long time hoping I would eventually give up. This is just a hypothesis to explain the events, but it does not seem outlandish to me.

Another possibility was that Ivan was disposed to grant the interview but that he was genuinely busy with his workload and personal life. Although we knew we needed time and some privacy to do the interview the situation simply did not play out in our favor. To this we could add at least another couple of factors: the first is drug consumption, which raises issues of addict behavior in relation to substances in general. Nobody seemed to be able to stay sober on the street corner, but neither did anyone see that just a few hours

of unconsciousness could have a major effect on their interactions; their state of consciousness does not prevent them from agreeing to plans in the near future. This was how I was led into the paradox that Ivan set out when he suggested that perhaps it was more convenient to look for him at night, because he seemed to be contradicted by the facts. By nighttime he was not in a good state to reply and the atmosphere of the corner became more sordid and risky, which outweighed my desire for information, at least in the form of statements.

The second factor is concerned in some sense with the subjectivity of Ivan himself, in a complex sense of the concept. It is as if these hard men of the street corner were deprived of history and the in-depth interview was a means of making it understandable. Participation requires emotional strength and often a certain amount of privacy is required in the interest of protecting the informant; none of this sounds like a problem that an old fox of the neighborhood could not resolve. It seemed to me that during the two short moments that Ivan opened up could be an example of that: first when Ivan told of the act that led him to live in the street and the cause of his hardest fall into addiction, which was his mother's death; and second when he described the type of vendetta which led him to prison in the interest of freeing a relative from the extortion of a "godmother" who worked for the DIPD.

I decided to spend a couple of days without pressuring Ivan, and I came back the following Friday. Ivan was on the corner formed by a type of delta where the Virgin Mary was located; he was eating *chilaquiles* for breakfast on the bonnet of a truck. He had a white T shirt with an enormous St. Jude Thaddeus. Beto was with him and was noticeably drugged, sending messages by WhatsApp and the teenager who smoked hashish on my first visit was there, once again with his surfer look, and he was seated on the folding metal chair with a lost gaze, as if looking at us from a distant beach elsewhere on the planet. On the opposite corner there were some police agents getting out of their truck to eat breakfast at a stall similar to Doña Tere's.

I greeted everyone in a friendly way and said to Ivan:

—Now you see! On Tuesday you left me *plancha*!<sup>8</sup> —my choice of words elucidated a loud laugh from Beto.

Ivan's tale was much the same as the previous week: he had to leave to deliver something and he did that at 11.30 a.m., he stopped to eat breakfast with Doña Tere, and I should have asked her if he had been around. I told her that it had not been necessary because thanks to a scavenger we had found out he had left the neighborhood.

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<sup>8</sup> I said I was left *plancha* (griddled) by Iván, a play on *plantado* meaning stood up.



I suggested a new agreement for the fieldwork, the result of my reflection. It seems that the only thing that produced a result was to get brief responses to precise questions and this could be achieved in a tightly defined time and space. In this way I could go to the corner and interrupt his activities temporarily on successive days, or if he preferred, on non-consecutive days. Ivan thought that this was a good idea. Once again he suggested to me the same night but almost straight away changed and asked me to come on Saturday morning since it was a day on which everything was very calm on the corner. He seemed to have intuited that I did not want to come at night, and frankly his intuition was right.

When we were on the graffitied corner I was always curious about the building opposite us. It is on three floors and is covered in graffiti, and at least on the side facing the street there are no windows, which could give the impression that it is abandoned, but on occasions I had seen people walk into it. I asked Ivan about the building's status and with a surprised gesture he replied that it had no owner, and in fact it was abandoned apart from a gymnasium occupying the top floor, which was visited by the people from the neighboring blocks, and that just on the side we could see there were rooms used by the gym owner and his son.

—But, is it accessed from the other side?

—No. You enter over there, that’s the bell —he said pointing to a big metal gate with graffiti of faces with a highly realistic finish—, but the door also opens with a strong kick, because they’re always fucking slow to open it. This is also useful if someone’s chasing you, you kick it and get in: it’s your *tuza*.<sup>9</sup>

Ivan explained to me that the wall next to the door had another use: “the wall of the gang’s fronton court,” with standard measurements from the castle next to the door; each end is guarded by graffiti: two silhouettes of boxers. Each of the figures looks at the other as if they are just about to start fighting.

This detail led me to speak about the graffiti which cover not just the corner by also the neighboring corners, because I like all of them and generally they seem well done to me. Ivan told me that he had commissioned them. I asked him who the artists were and he told me that they were his friends, they are not Mexican and that and that is why the left part of the door featured a bubble which served as a signature and this had six colors inside of which only three were from the national flag. It seems that a bi-national crew were responsible for all the graffiti on the building we were speaking about and in the block we were in, the same as the faces on the neighboring buildings.

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<sup>9</sup>A hideaway.

Our discussion about graffiti was interrupted by the appearance of an automobile. It was a silver Lupo which had its windows wound down and from which you could hear the fashionable Ricky Martin and Maluma hit at a volume to make the street shake. The driver was a man aged around 40, with white skin and black hair and mustache, although with a few gray hairs, and he wore Ray-Ban pilot glasses. He turned the volume down a bit to say hello, shouting:

—The *mona* has arrived,<sup>10</sup> in person! Everyone laughed and Ivan commented:

—You're a sucker! —Practically at the same time Beto went forward nimbly to the passenger's side window and put his hand in, taking a 50 peso note from the empty seat, and he went for the goods. The man shouted at Ivan:

—That's how I am and I'm not gonna pull myself together now! —And once again he provoked noisy laughter from those present. Beto threw a small packet onto the seat and the man turned up the volume of the music again and he was off.

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<sup>10</sup> *Mona* is a play on words, which can mean pretty girl, but is also the name given to the commonest form of consuming inhalants, using a small piece of linen cloth soaked in thinner. It is used frequently by carpenters, painters and in car paint workshops. It is used to remove paint with a vigorous movement of the wrist (*muñeca*, shortened to *mona*.)

Ivan got back to the conversation about our next meeting and the difficulties we had experienced carrying out the interview and he said to me:

—Between you and me, I have a very hectic life. Now you see me eating breakfast, but I am just waiting for it to settle and I'm off. Very soon I have to be carrying messages, money and things. —He said that nearly always they are errands inside the neighborhood limits, but on occasion he can go to other parts of the city. We agreed to see each other the following day, Saturday, at 11 a.m. I said a friendly goodbye to everyone and left.

## **Note 6**

*Tepito, Mexico City, Saturday, June 24, 2017.*

I arrived in the neighborhood at 11 o'clock in the morning exactly as Ivan had asked. Once more I speculated about what could have happened that would hinder us from carrying out the interview. The first thing that came into my head was that at that time there was a football match involving the Mexican team and that this could in some way work against me. Although I must admit that I am in a stage of feeling resigned, I guessed that Ivan's response would once again be negative and I simply wanted to corroborate it, to see what variation the discourse might take. I also had to make a few of my own observations on the new context that I might find on a day like this.

In effect the neighborhood's appearance was totally different on a Saturday, because weekends are a time of increased commercial activity. It was as if everyone had work or something to do on a Saturday. The street corner was no exception and what I saw surprised me a lot, as if all the menfolk usually passed some time there, showing off their addictions in a completely new way, integrated with the commercial life of the surroundings.

Wolf came out of the dwelling unit Ivan was always going in and out of, pushing a cart packed with boxes, followed by two men doing the same. They were in a hurry to take that merchandise to some store. Doll, the youth who told us the story about losing his marijuana, also came by pulling a cart and crossed the road at full speed.

Ivan was at the graffitied corner, snoozing in his folding metal chair. He was wearing a white T shirt which at first sight was covered with black spots, but at closer inspection were little Mickey Mouse faces, and he was wearing a cap practically covering his face. Beto was charging in a car, replying to WhatsApp messages and eating a *sevillana*, but also giving instructions to his customers when they arrived nearby about how to park their cars. It was the first time in all my visits when I saw their *franelero* side. I wakened Ivan and said hello. He told Beto to bring one of the cars entrusted to him over to the sidewalk so that he could sleep in the trunk. I suppose that it must have been more comfortable than in his chair, at least he could lie down properly.

I decided to sit on the ground next to Ivan and to talk about the reason he was so tired. He told me that the night before he had gone to a party with a few girls. I asked him where he had gone to have fun, and he replied in a brusque tone: "To the other side," with his enviable ability to waive questions. The soccer match could be heard on a radio in the used iron shop. Ivan told

me that he preferred not to pay attention because otherwise the Mexican team tended to lose. A very well dressed third age wedding passed by and as it did so the man said:

—My Ivan, you're sleeping instead of watching the match. —And he replied:

We're listening to it boss—but he was back to sleep almost straight away.

Fer passed by on the other side of the street with some bags of food, he entered a dwelling unit and a few minutes later came out to sit in the metal stall and to charge his cell phone. I greeted him from a distance and Beto crossed the street to greet him with a bump of the hand and fist. A teenager I had not seen before appeared at the corner. He did not greet or speak to me, he just went to charge in a car and looked at me and Ivan. I think that he wanted to speak to Ivan but he did not feel like waking him up, and I was in a pretty similar position. The kid left.

After several minutes I decided to wake Ivan up and ask him if he wanted to have a look at the notebook. And he responded that he would rather not, a bit like Bartleby in Herman Melville. He told me he had a nasty hangover and he asked me to come back later that Saturday at nighttime or on another day. He stated that on Saturday nights the atmosphere on the street

corner was more festive because people went out to smoke marijuana and some used the stall to play cards and bet. I told him that I would try to come back, although I knew I would not, because I knew what happened when I came back at night. I also knew that the interview would not take place. I said a friendly goodbye and crossed the street. Fer was with a woman, who, judging by her strong likeness, was related to him. She said “hi” in a really friendly way and I replied just the same as I kept on my way.



## Conclusions

Throughout this piece of work I have tried to provide a highly detailed description of my experiences on a street corner in the neighborhood of Tepito, trying to interpret the cultural dimensions of drug trafficking as well as some of the experiences of those who participate in it. It is really necessary to recover the complexity of the cultural dimension, going beyond the clichés, observing how this class of “errands” are embedded in a much wider array of practices, which in a certain sense share exactly the same logic: Ivan provides his services to guarantee his survival. His friends, acquaintances and neighbors come to him as a recognized member of the community, someone who perhaps inspires more confidence than many of the players or institutions which are perceived as alien.

In this sense it appears that the meeting with Ivan and the description of one part of his way of living, endows a certain humanity on the personalities who live from the profits of stupeficient sales, thus changing the black and white stereotypes of our public culture, which seeks to construct heroes or villains on one side or other of the law. I am not squeamish about stating, because it is something I experienced on the ground, that it is difficult to

frame an empathetic relationship with someone like Ivan, but at least as readers we can reflect on what other options Ivan might have had on returning to the neighborhood after ten years behind bars, in a city and a country which still have not resolved basic problems of poverty and exclusion, and instead have opted for policies that punish and point the finger at individuals.

I should indicate some of the limitations of the project, in order to be fair in terms of this document's focus, and to try to break the black and white stereotypes permeating public discourse. Ethnography is a method which demands a solid time investment to produce the best results, detailed descriptions and deep analysis of the people, what they get up to and the reasons they perceive as underlying these practices. The time invested in building this diary was very limited in comparison to professional practice and I will come back to this issue further on. It is an invitation to continue thinking about other actors, the police, officials, other narcotic sellers or the street market traders themselves, who have had little exposure here and whose tales and practices are also asking to be explored.

The time limits were not a product of my decisions except in cases where I really thought I was putting myself at risk; rather they arose from the same environment of insecurity and violence of the neighborhood. As I have pointed out in the text, the dialog which Ivan and I started in the street could

be seen as a betrayal by some of the people with whom transactions are made, placing both of them at risk. This ended up imposing a completely different pace on the research demanding greater flexibility of the researcher and his strategies for constructing the information.

In a country in which violence has increased in countless spheres, exercises such as the one I present here call for reflection on the factors limiting the production of knowledge, and hence the creation of public policies or interventions depending on this. I want to emphasize that this is not just a problem that concerns ethnographers with a “calling to be a lightning conductor,” as I have described myself humorously at times. In reality a great number of researchers working on much more traditional subjects such as work, health or education, have severe difficulties getting close to people to be able to document problems which can be hard to change if the conditions to understand them cannot be guaranteed.

An area little explored in academic research is the motives that lead a part of society to support organized crime. The Seminar on Violence and Peace at El Colegio de México undertook research in the borough of Cuauhtémoc in Mexico City that included the working methods of a drug seller on a street corner in the Tepito neighborhood. The study was carried out by an anthropologist and we chose to publish his field diary, as it confirms that in public space in the borough of Cuauhtémoc the boundary between legal and illegal activity is so diffuse that its study helps us to understand how negative social capital is formed in Mexico.

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Coordinator of the Seminar on Violence and Peace

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