

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.

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