ILLEGALITY, EXCLUSION AND EVERYDAY LIFE. TEPITO

Iván, survival as a small-time drugs dealer

Iván is a native of the Tepito neighborhood who is almost fifty years old and who, like many of his fellow people in the district, earns his living from multiple sources. He states it in a simple way: “I dedicate myself to running errands for people,” a formula that encompasses his work looking after cars, undertaking commissions for neighbors and merchants, and selling drugs on a local corner. It all started almost two decades ago, when Iván had served a long sentence for homicide. His mother—his main family bond—had passed away and he had taken refuge in the streets of the neighborhood, consuming drugs and alcohol.

Seeking to guarantee his subsistence, Iván began to perform favors in exchange for modest tips. He had on his side at least a couple of factors: the first was the trust of the neighbors and local merchants, who knew him (and recognized him) whether because (despite his long absence) he had always been a native of the area or because of continuous

contact in everyday life. The second was the incessant flow of objects, messages and people in a place whose core is formed by the most important commercial spaces in the history of Mexico City. Iván swelled the ranks of those hundreds of informal and floating workers that the *tianguis* or street market of Tepito brings together day after day: people who sell, transport merchandise, pick up trash, deliver errands.

At the same time, Iván's work took on a different character. Prison, he admits, had left a mark on him and had changed his form of thinking and acting; it had endowed him with new knowledge and new contacts too. Leaving the prison he met again a number of figures, "people who imposed respect in the neighborhood," who although they operated in a different sector, also needed those small favors. The logic was the same, it was about taking money, merchandise and messages throughout Tepito and even beyond its borders. In return, he had the possibility of a better payment and to continue with "the party": "What do you want," they asked Iván about the payment for his work, "money or drugs?" At present, Iván is just one more of the dozens of men and women, some surprisingly young, who act as links between the *narcotienditas* ("drug stores") and the consumers, and who are scattered along streets that seem precarious and insecure, in spite of the government's intervention plans and heavy investment. "In all this street they sell," our informant affirms while making a gesture that extends almost until the edge of the

neighborhood, “it’s a red zone, it’s already been identified by the delegation.” Everything seems to indicate that for those involved, as well as for the local residents, who have learned to coexist with the consumption and sale of narcotics or with the violence that it entails, it is a reality that is accepted and is little questioned. It is a reality open to a limited or even no possibility of change.

Tepito, a space of illegal activities

Although Tepito has traditionally been a space associated with various illegal practices, linked to its emblematic *tianguis*—such as contraband, piracy or theft—it was not until the last two decades that it took a leading role in the debate about the sale of drugs and the violence that accompanies it. To take an example, while the current government of the capital tried to deny that the main drug cartels had a presence in Mexico City, the media reported that in the “Barrio Bravo” of Tepito there operated between ten and twenty-five groups linked to the distribution of narcotics and other crimes such as theft of vehicles, kidnapping and extortion; which leads us to ask where the drugs and the weapons that were central to their transactions came from (Cruz y Servín, 2010; Jiménez, 2013; De Mauleón, 2016.).

The data also report a considerable and alarming increase in the crime of homicide in Tepito, which in just one year rose 70%: it went from 17 murders in 2016, to 29 in 2017, of which twenty involved firearms, in a context that the capital city's police admit concerns disputes over the control of the neighborhood and in which five criminal organizations are involved (SDP Noticias, 2018). In the words of Iván himself, in regard to drug dealing "everything is controlled," but he admits that in recent times the violence among the different groups operating in the locality may have worsened, above all, "due to greed, due to the perception that: 'you're selling more than me and I'm not putting up with that.'"

The statistics only serve to put the finger on the sore spot at the "heart of the city." It is worth recalling that Tepito does not even occupy a complete district, showing just how small it is. It is a portion of the Morelos neighborhood that officially extends from the avenue Eje 2 Norte to the avenue Eje 1 Norte at its northern and southern limits, and from Reforma to Avenida del Trabajo in its western and eastern limits, respectively. It comprises some 56 streets that are home to around 60,000 inhabitants. The "Barrio Bravo" of Tepito is only separated from the Historic Center by an avenue and shares its boundaries with other emblematic parts of Mexico City that are similarly famous for their

culture and lack of safety such as Plaza Garibaldi, the Guerrero neighborhood and the La Lagunilla district.

Spending time with Iván, the regulation of his activities becomes clear. The small groups or one-on-one encounters are circumscribed by their spaces: street corners, stores, entrances to apartment blocks, and although they are always on high alert at the same time they appear relaxed. They seem to share cordial relations, sharing jokes, food, and perhaps a drag of a joint, but over the course of the day the consumption builds up and the atmosphere takes a grimmer turn. When work activities come to an end, it also gives rise to quarrels and adjustments of accounts. The following morning the headlines of some newspapers announce a new *"tepicrime*," with new, anonymous victims.

In the Barrio Bravo transactions are quick and casual. A passer-by who doesn't know about these activities might note something odd about these brief encounters, and perhaps suspect that something illegal is happening, but wouldn't easily understand their logic. Customers approach in their cars or on foot, generally with an amount of money already prepared—a 50 peso bill, for example, which is the minimum amount for a transaction—and casually chat with the liaison, who takes the money, enters and leaves the store with the product and delivers it while keeping up the conversation, then he and the buyer say goodbye amiably.

Although rumors say that everything is for sale in drug dealers' stores in Tepito, on Iván's corner the deals seem to be limited to cocaine in its two forms, powder and crack, and marihuana, which is a substance consumed on a daily basis in the neighborhood and which is available in numerous varieties and presentations. All the transactions between buyer and seller take place in an atmosphere of trust (which Iván admits is one of his main tools). Of course, all these activities are illegal, and another aspect that is exploited is the security that the transaction will be carried out smoothly. That is to say, without the police turning up. Iván's admission is lapidary: "the police have always been paid off." As a result, the aim is not to make big sales for high values, but lots of small deals that build up. Each week Iván pays a modest sum for the police foot patrols, with a *chesco* or 100 pesos. This obliges us to ask ourselves how many Iváns there are in the neighborhood, and the total amount handed over in this way. No one in Tepito is surprised that in the old days, when informal trading was still discouraged, deals were done in the same way.

Another issue that has given cause for concern in public debate is the young age of those involved in drug-dealing in Tepito (De Mauleón, 2016). While it is true that Iván is an old hand in this sense, of those who are constantly seen on his corner most are young, and at least a couple lead us to ask why they are not in school, or where there immediate family are. The stories they tell are of disaster they treat as personal: they

like “partying” or became addicted to drugs early on, they were never any good at school, or they like the easy money. All the possible responses that may reflect the social problems of a class of young people with few opportunities and serious deficiencies.

In this regard, Iván’s own life story is similar. At the age of 18 he had already been sentenced to a long spell in jail and the possibility of re-entering society after two decades were almost zero. He makes no comments or give no details about attempts to return to formal work to even to family life. The tough streets of the neighborhood became a refuge that provided with a means of survival that is sometimes even decent, yet always carries risk. It is also a kind of bubble that protects the identity of these young people from an outside they find hard to deal with, and where they would undoubtedly be discriminated against for their form of dress and of talking, for their lack of education, and for their drug addiction.

Iván as part of a network: community practices between legality and illegality

Iván’s role as a drug-dealer is strongly rooted in the logic of his mode of survival, what he calls “errands.” If we take this practice into account as

an element for analyzing Iván's social capital, we will see how it notably involves networks for legal and illegal ends. We are interested in the illegal networks, since many of these activities may be categorized as services for the community, which give them a series of characteristics that local residents find desirable, and lead them to acquire charisma and authority, and most notably trustworthiness.

Since their activity requires them to spend much of the day in the same space, Iván is well apprised of the various movements that take place on the streets in the immediate area. This means that he can keep watch over illegal activities, as well as legal ones. The local residents turn to him regularly for news of service providers from outside the area—such as LP gas sellers—who are always anxious not to spend to much time on these streets. The same happens if they want to find out if a friend, family member or other local resident has been past. Most tend to greet Iván and hold brief conversations with him. Both Iván and his colleagues provide a series of favors that are much less abstract for the local residents and merchants. These may range from carrying trash to the designated collection points in the street to be picked up by the garbage trucks (for obvious safety reasons the borough's garbage collection personnel don't enter the residential buildings in the neighborhood and stay on the streets for their work) to carrying out small repairs to homes

and stores, when there are no specialists to hand or money to cover their fees.

More recently, the media have noted that stalls selling drugs in broad daylight have appeared in Tepito, though they are quickly removed (Ortiz, 2017); however spending time with Iván it becomes clear that in the collective imagination they are part of the local trade along with the rest of the merchants. In Tepito there is a secondary market of those who make a living from the merchants themselves, selling food, water, newspapers, who operate public washrooms, who look after cars. It is not at all surprising that they include clients such as Iván and others who sell drugs on the streets. At the microscopic level, money moves from legality to illegality and back again in the blink of an eye. It is plain to see that Iván and the rest form part of the community, that they are friends, neighbors, family and clients of countless local inhabitants.