

The city and urban practices: in the uncertain frontiers between the illegal, the informal and the illicit

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Photo Juca Varella/Folha Imagem - 7.11.2002



It has been calculated that more than one third of the bleach and disinfectants consumed in the country are clandestine and sold piecemeal from door-to-door or in small businesses. These are among the principal causes of intoxication of children and adolescents in the city of São Paulo.

In a 1997 article Ruggiero & South suggested a metaphor – “the city as bazaar” – to describe the intersections between formal and informal markets, illegal or illicit, as they have occurred since the middle of the 1980s, in the metropolises of contemporary capitalism’s principal countries. With obvious polemical intention, the metaphor self-consciously evokes the traces of Orientalism associated with bazaars, to call attention to what is found at the present time encrusted in the same nuclei of modern (and western) urban economies. In the

authors' view, there is an urban scenario in which a broad grey zone is expanding that is making uncertain and indeterminate the differences between precarious work, temporary employment, survival expedients and activities that are illegal, clandestine or delinquent.

It is precisely at the boundaries that might better be considered as fuzzy frontiers between legal and illegal, formal and informal that these modern examples of the urban worker travel, discontinuously and intermittently, taking advantage of the legal and illegal opportunities that coexist and are superimposed on the work markets, oscillating between badly paid jobs and illicit activities, between unemployment and minor street traffic, negotiating the criteria of moral acceptability, of their choices and behavior in each situation and in each context. It is this that properly characterizes the metropolitan bazaar: this intermingling of the legal and illegal, this permanent displacement of its frontiers under the logic of a form of urban or "sideways mobility," workers who move between the legal, the informal and the illicit but without thereby engaging in "delinquent careers."

The metropolitan bazaar, according to the authors, began to take form in the middle of the 1980s. In the case of England and the United States, a turn toward the dismantling of rights and social guarantees by conservative governments was the starting point for the precariousness of work and the redefinition of urban work markets. In general terms, years of productive restructuring and the so-called flexible paths in work relations ended by smudging the differences between work, unemployment and expedients for survival, to the extent that what was then called informal was installed at the heart of modern productive processes and, in the same step, was expanded through networks of subcontracting and various forms of temporary work mobilization, sporadic and intermittent, always within the uncertain limits between legal, illegal, clandestine or even illicit and criminal (Ruggiero, 2000).

Those, however, were also years in which illicit activities changed their scale, internationalized and reorganized themselves under polarized forms between, on the one side, the entrepreneurs of the illicit, in particular drug trafficking, who would go to each locale connecting (and redefining) with the common urban criminal; and on the other, the small street vendors, who operated on the margins of the true drug economy and would transit their entire time between the street and prison. Those are the "precarious workers" of the drug, who proliferate to the extent that retail sales expand and are scripted into urban dynamics (cf. Bourgois, 1995), post-Fordist capitalist criminal modulation - "*just-in-time*" criminality as defined by Ruggiero (2000), which responds to variability, oscillations and territorial differences of the markets. It is precisely at this point that illicit activities - not only drug traffic - go on to interact with urban dynamics and to compose the metropolitan bazaar at the points of intersection with equally expansive irregular markets, those uncertain terrains of the "sideways mobility" of workers who travel on the uncertain edge of borders between work, expedience of survival and the illicit. And, also, between street and prison.

Certainly, the questions proposed by Ruggiero are far from accounting for a problem that today has been treated in a vast literature about the traffic of drugs in

its various dimensions, scales and forms of territoriality. In truth, our interest here is not to offer explanations much less to get into these controversies. Above all the interest here is to remain on the plane at which Ruggiero presents his questions, putting the city – the metropolitan bazaar – in perspective, and as a reference plane for positioning drug traffic in its interactions with modern urban dynamics.

We know well that the metropolitan bazaar is not exactly a novelty in Brazilian society. For this, as Michel Misse (2006a, p.215-6) says, the analysis should be deterred not so much by an opposition to a type of modern city that has never been completely realized in Brazil, above all by the different conjunctures of urban history, the ways such as this relation between informal and illegal configured themselves through the years, “the continuities, discontinuities and metamorphoses of social types and the widened reproduction of their illicit markets.” In other words, this movement between informal and illegal, possibly the illicit, has always been present and was always important in cities that since olden times have been marked by a market that today is an expansive informal market, always close to and tangential to illicit markets that also have a history that would be important to reconstitute at another time.

If there is an updating of that long history today, there is also a considerable displacement in the order of things. And it is precisely at this point at which it interests us to delimit the metropolitan bazaar Ruggiero describes to point up its contemporaneity and the resonances of what occurs between here and elsewhere. That is to say, that which has always been considered evidence of the incompleteness of our modernity, “the exception of underdevelopment,” as Francisco de Oliveira says, (2003), was not only transformed into a rule (it is here to stay, without the fulfillment promised by “progress”), as though it had been projected from the extremity of a capitalism that mobilizes and reproduces “informal work”¹ at the same time that the illegal circuits of a globalized economy were generalized along the paths opened by financial liberalization, the opening of markets, and shrinkage of state control (Naim, 2006), so intricately between the official and the parallel, between the legal and illegal, the licit and the illicit that these binaries have lost their meaning and become obsolete in terms of the classic controversies that revolve around formal and informal (Botte, 2004; Bayart, 2004).

On the other side, if the Brazilian situation has to be seen from a transverse (and globalized) angle of the processes that it is crossed by, it is also important to witness the styles of its territorialization, in interaction with local contingencies, history and received traditions, asymmetries and inequalities that are their own. And it is on this plane that the reference to the contemporary bazaar also interests, by the extent to which the urban scale urges a description of recomposition, redefinition and displacement in the relations between the informal, the illegal and the illicit or, then, more specifically, a recomposition of the illicit in its interactions with present urban dynamics (cf. Kokoreff, 2007). It is with these concerns that we would like to continue the discussion.

Before that, it is worth pointing to two orders of questions. First, the necessary calibration of the point of social criticism: the city from a descriptive

perspective offers a reference plane which allows dismissal of myths and fictions surrounding so-called Organized Crime and drug traffic (cf. Kokoreff, 2004 e 2007), those types of phantasmagoric entities to which are attributed all and every kind of city blight or as Misse (2006c, p.269) suggests, the various names of an omnipresent and omnipotent Subject that responds to the name of Urban Violence and which is the locus and unity for the most varied conflicts, crimes, daily infringements, behaviors, facts and events. We will return to this in the final part of this article. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that this is the critical sense embedded in Ruggiero's descriptive use of the notion of "crime as work" in order to discuss the proximities and similarities, contiguities and intersections between legal and illegal markets, locating there, in their interfaces, the repositioning and generation of social cleavages, asymmetries, diverse discriminations and also the violent forms of regulation of its modes of internal segmentation. For Brazil the works of Misse (2006a,b,c) and Zaluar (2004) show how fertile the urban scale can be for the critical description of the illicit in its relations and interactions with the informal market, with the urban circuits of circulation of wealth and the relations of power inscribed on their intersecting points.

Second, as we have already had the opportunity of discussing at another time (Telles & Cabanes, 2006, p.48) the construction of critical parameters that at the same time imply the construction of descriptive parameters that place in perspective the mutating urban realities. In other words, retaining the city as a reference presupposes a descriptive strategy that goes beyond the terms of the current debate, which to a great extent is polarized between the emphasis on the one side on transnational mechanisms from so-called organized crime, and on the other the discussion which is conventionally called "populations at social risk," exposed to violence and supposedly captive to (or under threat by) the local ramifications of drug traffic. Between the one and the other, between facts and fictions in these two extremities of the current debate, there is the entire urban mesh that remains to be known. It is precisely here that is the challenge of understanding the manner in which the lines of force which approach the current urban world, very briefly indicated on previous pages, interconnected and conjugated themselves in social meshes and in the requisites of the daily intermediations of present urban life.

It is worth saying here that this is a question that corresponds to our own lines of interest. We are neither researchers of drug traffic nor of urban violence. In recent years, since 2001, we have been following the traces of urban mobility in the peripheral areas of the city of São Paulo and, by means of them, of their events and inflections in time and space, we are attempting to understand the manner in which segregations, asymmetries and inequalities occur in the spaces and territories of a city in transformation (cf. Telles & Cabanes, 2006). Along this route the profiles of a city going through an expanding mesh of illegalities (new and old) intertwined in urban practices have been delineated, their circuits and social networks, which seemed to put an order of questions no more susceptible to being treated in terms of the much discussed disorder between the "legal" or ideal city and the "actual" city. Strictly speaking, what is required is a more

detailed interrogation of the new mediations and other connections that seem to be intertwined and that compose themselves within the requisites of the daily intermediations of present urban life. This was our starting point.

In other words, we began from practical daily life activities in attempting, in what follows, to unravel the threads (some of them) that make up the warp of the urban mesh. It is by this let us say transversal means that we intend to indicate the capillaries of drug traffic in the social world and in the urban mesh, taking as an vantage point some facets that are rooted in a peripheral neighborhood of São Paulo City. This is a descriptive perspective that allows the placement of criminal practices in their relations with what could be defined as the management of illegalities that are inscribed in the requisites of the daily intermediations of present urban life. Strictly speaking, this is the focus of the discussion we intend to develop, that is to say: not as much the traffic of drugs in itself, but this growing and broadened, undifferentiated zone between the legal and illegal, the licit and the illicit, and which is expressed in re-defined relations between the informal, the illegal and the illicit.

If it is true that the urban world – “the metropolitan bazaar” – in its local modulations – is intersected by structuring forces that redefine the relations of work and non-work, between the formal and the informal, and the legal and illegal, these processes operate positioned in time and space. Processes thus situated are affected by mediations and natural connections and of varied nature and extensions. Because of this, they can only be understood in these situated constellations (cf. Telles, 2007, p.207-8). And it is exactly this that requires a descriptive strategy. As our methodological-theoretical presupposition, we opted for the exercise of an “experimental ethnography,” taking as reference “descriptive scenes” that allow us to catch in the act the new mediations and connections by which the displacements to the frontiers of legal and illegal have been progressing. It is not starting from objects or “social entities” such as have been the convention to define according to scientific protocols of the social sciences, but rather from social situations and configurations that are taken as descriptive scenes which allow tracings to be followed of this constellation of processes and practices, the mediations and connections by which the illegalities (new and old) have been interwoven in urban meshes.

Based on recent (and ongoing) research, we take as a point of departure – our first viewpoint – a framed urban scene in terms of banal survival expedients in a peripheral neighborhood of São Paulo, put in focus its mediations and connections and, from there, following the routes of a small local dealer, the urban profiles in which the porous frontiers between legal and illegal, and the illicit, are drawn.

An ordinary scene within the Paulista periphery. A point within the municipality of São Paulo, a neighborhood made up of various and overlapping irregularities. Occupations and areas of uncertain propriety. Everything very improvised and everything highly precarious, dwellings built here and there conforming to the dweller's arrival, spreading themselves in the traces of the pot-holed unpaved streets that are turned into true traps on rainy days. But

the networks of water and electricity, finally, have come to these confines of the city. This expansion of the urban networks happened in recent decades. However, in the same step and the same rhythm, their clandestine connections proliferated. Together with “urban progress,” the kingdom of “cats” and kludges or illicit hookups also spread everywhere. None of this is very different from what happens over a long period of time, compounding what has become conventional to discuss in terms of the breakdown between the “legal” city and the “actual” city, a distinction common in Brazilian discussions that has yet to be subject to formal analysis.

Nothing very different, if it were not for the way that this peculiar urban artifact has been produced and intermediated in recent times. In truth, it is the city or the power lines of the present that pulse in this (and other) urban artifacts. And these are the grids that intertwine and (re)compose themselves in the regular practices of daily life: connections and mediations of urban life that would remain unexamined, unless we insist, as is common in so-called studies of urban poverty, in fictions that populations are encapsulated within their “communities” or enclosed within a narrow circuit of social networks that is supposedly (only) local.

Parked nearby is the maintenance service company car of a large telephone company. At last the telephone service has come to the farthest points of the city. “Thanks to privatization,” is what is said. The technician talks with one of the local people. He is the one who is going to perform the service. That is to say, pulling the lines from the main street and, as a result, guaranteeing light and telephone for everyone. He is an outsourced employee of a privatized company. He has no job stability and in the end is badly paid, a precarious worker. Like so many others, he can’t avoid the opportunity to supplement his meager incomes, with the peculiarity that, now, a third-party service opens a passage between the formal and the informal, between the legal and the illegal, and the traditional scamming that is possible in the overlapping between the one and the other.

Finally, it is our popular well-known old “go-to guy,” but now with other mediations, wired into modern - more than modern - circuits of urban life. Something, in addition, that also happens on the other side. Since service provision has its own means of regulation, everything has to be well-negotiated, beginning with the price and the costs to be shared by all. Besides this, there needs to be agreement about the placement of the wires, the houses that will benefit, the extension of the clandestine grid, where it will pass and what its ramifications will be. That is to say, it is all a delicate aspect of the daily intermediations of present urban life, and it is this which is the focus of the conversations.

The resident is a 28 year-old young man, who lives with his wife, children and mother, siblings and nephews. He ably conducts the negotiations. No one knows for certain what he does and, if they do know, act as if they don’t. But this is not very important from the angle of the always difficult daily management of lives that are structured on a razor’s edge of overlapping lives of various fragilities. What is important is that the young man is a respected youth who is gentle with everyone, with a well-structured family, an adorable little girl and a helpful wife,

always willing to assist whoever is going through a tough situation. Well, the youth makes a living selling drugs. He is the “chief” of a busy point of sale. It isn’t where he lives. That is in a nearby neighborhood, near the place where he was born, grew up, married and started a family, until, by one of those pirouettes of fate (a fight with family and neighbors, that resulted in a blood feud), his perspectives as a worker (yes, he had worked in the formal market and had a promising career) went up in smoke and he saw himself entangled in the webs of the so-called economy of illicit goods.

He, however, doesn’t mix his business with his private life. In the neighborhood where he lives he lives as ordinary a life as anyone else. But, if he is the one who is in charge of this sort of management of multiple illegalities that make up the urban world, it is because he knows how to make use of practical intelligence that combines a sense of opportunity and the art of getting around difficult situations.² Toughened by life, he has developed special abilities in intermediating life through the overlapping of legal and illegal and balancing, that fragile balance that takes place in the illicit intermediations: starting with the heavy game of buying protection and police extortion, in truth a ferocious game of power that takes place in the fuzzy frontiers between legal and illegal, and the illicit – it is from this that the functioning of intermediation depends, from this sort of overlap between the two sides, which activate consecutive episodes of violence, banal occurrences that, on the one hand very often turn extreme and devastating (cf. Misse, 2006b), and on the other hand (and at the same time) involve the management of the routines of his business, which connect with the circumstances of local sociability, between respect for the rules of the reciprocity of daily life (after all, it was there that he was born and grew up, built ties of friendship and solidarity), the reflected calculations required in order to guarantee the complicity of the residents against the attacks of the police and also provide strategy for controlling the territory against rival groups that are always engaged in conflicts.

Here, in this neighborhood, so many other stories can be told, myriads of them, micro-scenes of a world made up of multiple illegalities that overlap and are interwoven. Or better, a social world made of a special intermingling of the formal and the informal, the legal and the illegal, and the licit. From there the interest in deterring in mobilized expediciencies around a very prosaic scam of an illegal hookup to the electrical grid, this peculiar artifact that bears diverse strata of urban history that communicates and is intertwined in the daily intermediations of present urban life.

Besides, the same proceedings or the same mediators turn on a light that illuminates a small, too tiny favela or shantytown that was quickly established in a neighborhood where the youth assumed command of his business. This is an older neighborhood, its urbanization having been consolidated over some time. It was, however, on a vacant plot that the first residents appeared who, lacking other options, installed their house and family in order to get on with their lives. A favela was being formed there in front the eyes of all. All fine, alright, nothing much different than everyone knows, and has known for a long time, which is why

even in its origins in the long-gone 1970s, this neighborhood was also known as an illegally occupied area. But first one and then others appeared, also residents of the region, who acted as a kind of popular squatter, taking possession of a plot to later be rented or the spot sold to new arrivals. The youth and his partners (those, all of the old residents of the place) reasoned that it was necessary to guarantee that things would function, as they say, “fair and square.” They expelled these merchandisers of misfortune, divided the lots correctly and established the rules for their distribution among those, who in fact, would need them. Later they took care to guarantee “urban services,” light and water, making use, of course, of the professional services from those who understand the subject and are able to do the job well – and there thus there is the “cat” or electrical kludge, the light grid and the clandestine water hook-ups, all functioning properly for the well-being of all.

The fact is that the youth and his partners, little by little, took charge of local subjects. It was thus also with the “basic basket” [the name given to a combination of products considered essential for a family’s survival, including various foods as well as products for personal hygiene and cleanliness], another urban artifact around which social relations are woven, connections woofed and social networks mobilized. Around this artifact, as in many much collectives, others are mobilized.³ Before anything else, it is clear, the impoverished families whose lives seem to hang on social programs, without other means of survival: problems of health, unemployment, orphaning, abandonment; also the imprisoning of the providers, parents or children, or even the violent death from one of those feuds, as is said, recurrent episodes that make up part of the local (and not only local) history and that are not only at the present but from past times, in which police violence (and the practices of extermination) are mixed, the action of murderers and vigilantes, territorial disputes and retributions, “getting even.”

For a long time, the basic baskets have been distributed by a highly traditional community leadership. The resident from among the oldest of the neighborhood has performed this solitary undertaking from the very beginning. And from the beginning and subsequent years, spared no effort in soliciting everyone’s help who could mobilize resources, which is to say: voluntary (and uncertain) donations from the local merchants, intermittent payments from philanthropic associations and also, above all, the “paybacks,” and, in this case, the donations follow the changing paths of political interests and the rhythm marked by the electoral calendar.

More recently, in the last five or six years, when the youth and his partners started this “business,” other networks and other mediations were mobilized: merchants and unregulated passenger vans were themselves acting in these uncertain zones between the informal and the illegal, always around the “forces of order” (inspectors and policemen) by means of blackmail and extortion, besides the muggings and robberies of the young local delinquents and, in the case of the vans, arguments, at times lethal, involving rival groups for the control of the profitable routes of the so-called alternative transportation. In exchange for protection, partially solicited, partially imposed, they all came within the circuit of

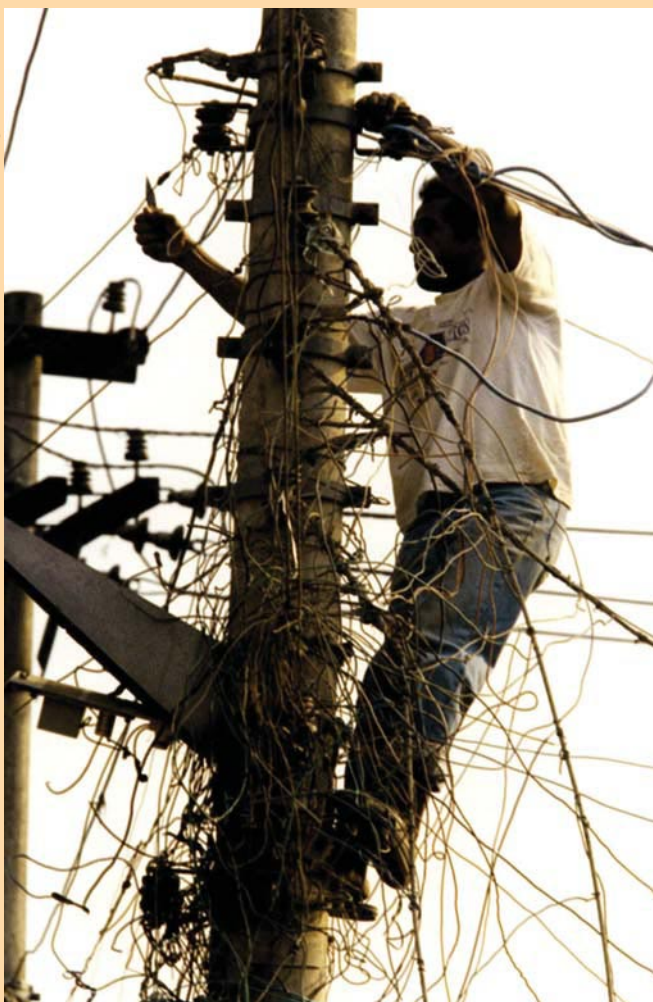
popular solidarity, guaranteeing resources and also the quasi-legal façade for the basic baskets that continued to be distributed and managed as they always were, since the beginning.

In truth, a very modest and traditional basic basket operates here as one of those points of interconnection for the networks that operate on varied scales and connections. Impoverished families, community leadership, local drug dealers, merchants and van people are residents who share a common history of the same neighborhood, know

each other's fortunes and misfortunes. Each who and, in various ways, moves from one side to the other, in the uncertain frontiers of legal, informal and illicit: families whose children are jailed or were killed in some of these passages between legal and illegal; the dealer who had previously been a worker in the formal work market, another who has inserted himself into various informal market expediencies as well as the drug business or the one who tries to consolidate a small store in the area with the expectation (or dream), of one day leaving the life of crime, the transporter who dealt drugs at another time and resolved to take a new path for his life (or the opposite); the merchant

whose son is a van person and knows the complications that are to be encountered on his way in the city; the community leader, who was an embattled militant from other active residency movements, who at election time is converted into a very effective electoral activist for local representatives, with a son who drives a van

Photo Ormuzd Alves/Folha Imagem 27.8.1996



In 24 municipalities of the Metropolitan region of São Paulo there are nearly 300,000 illegal power grids that guarantee light for a million people, according to estimates by the company Eletropaulo.

and a daughter widowed - her young husband had been executed by police for obscure reasons - who earned respect and admiration not only by her solidarity, but also for the daring with which, over many years and successive times, she interposed, physically and despite threats of public accusations, between the police and those who, for whatever reason, had become the target of violence, murder threats or arbitrary arrests.

We can endlessly follow this game in which urban characters move, interpose, displace, exchange, commute among their various social roles: this is properly the circuit that we could reconstruct around a basic basket, a circuit that, at each of its points, draws the profiles of a social world in which “mini-stories” travel, delineating, in each, the modulations of this state of permanent exception coded in each one of them in the constellations of the daily intermediations of present urban life.

But, let us continue: the distribution of basic baskets accompanies their routines. The “patron” of the local business is now its guarantor, and he guarantees that everything will follow a certain route. And thus this also happens with the celebrations that he decides to sponsor and organize on commemorative dates: Mother’s Day, Children’s Day, Christmas and New Year’s Eve. In June the fields used for soccer are transformed into spaces for the June Festivals [annual Brazilian celebrations which take place in June, around Saint John’s day]. There are other local examples of the daily intermediations of present urban life the youth and his most trusted assistants negotiate with local teams for the use of space, talk to people from the Municipal Sports Center (official, legal mediation who manage the space, the games and local teams), sponsor the mounting and organization of the stands used by residents to sell the appropriate June Fest food and drink. And, above all, the guarantee that everything will be illuminated by the scammed grid and the light poles spread at strategic points – once again and always by the same means.

The Fest is a public and critical success. So great was the success of the initial attempt that they resolved to extend it for three months, every weekend. Relatives, acquaintances, neighbors, dating couples circulate happily there. Children play climbing a wooden pole. And the families celebrate this, let us say, local variation of economic solidarity since the stands offer a not negligible source of income for those who are always getting ridiculously low salaries, uncertain jobs and extended unemployment. As we can see, all this is attuned to current times.

Economic support and solidarity

With time the youth has become an important person in local life. Not infrequently while walking in the streets, he’s called, with an obvious sense of irony, the mayor. Some ask for work, money, a car to take a sick family member to the hospital, general favors. In practice he acts as an agent for daily problems: neighbor’s fights, conflicts of the family, abused and scrapping adolescents and excessive noise at late hours of the night. That is to say: all and anything that could attract police attention or which could provoke hostility and bad will of



According to the Institute of Economic Agriculture, the number of baskets distributed by the government of the State of São Paulo: from 288.2 thousand in 2000 to 926.3 thousand in 2004.

the residents in delicate and dangerous situations, since it is always like this that fearful anonymous denunciations arise that bring about the violent intervention of the police.

In truth the “mayor” functions there as a kind of sounding box for everything that happens in the neighborhood: the information or rumors circulate there, and the patron and his “managers” talk, discuss, ponder and decide how to intervene and arbitrate the usual conflicts and difficult situations. Or then, they say, the “right side of the wrong” when the situations are provoked by people involved in crime business.

The fact is that all this is mixed up with the daily management of the local drug business, which depends to a great extent on its anchoring in this network of sociability, at the same time the point of sale and “chief” foster so many other relations in the neighborhood, themselves structured in unstable balance and always susceptible to breaking into tensions, conflicts, hostility, misunderstandings, betrayals, fights or stories of personal vengeance, which can be fatal – lethal, for one and others, or for all. It is an acting on the local relations also mobilized to guarantee the loyalty of the “assistants” and the complicity of their families, to arbitrate conflicts that many times are mixed up with personal misunderstandings or mistakes from other times and other places; or then to define the absolute limits, above all for the youngest, in truth boys, almost children, when they come to think of themselves as important and powerful, and create problems for the residents and the neighborhood.

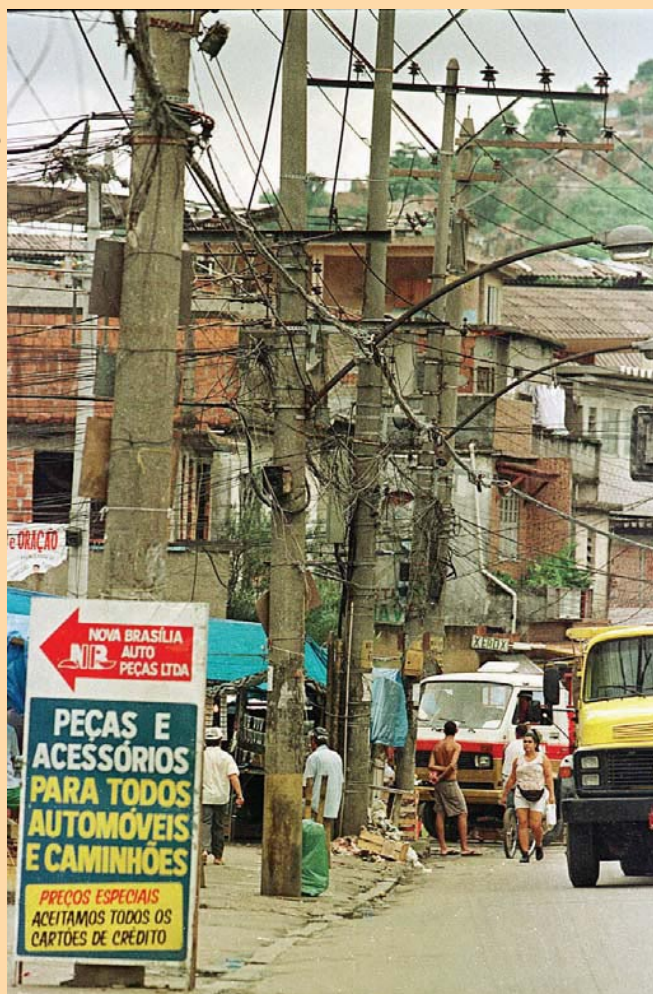
An unstable balance, even because it is structured between this local dynamic and the equally unstable agreements with the police: the routine of “regular” protection payment very frequently breaks into an open practice of blackmail and extortion, and this directly and openly is related to this interweaving of relations which passes for business connections with the local life: beatings and blackmail for some, prison threats for others, real kidnappings, very frequently, with a very high price required for the “rescue.” As the target of some there are the “children of the drug.”

But not only that – it is anyone who, in this criss-crossing of the blurred boundaries of legal and illegal, can offer some pretext for the pressure, blackmail, prison threat: little local stories, “minuscule histories” or “infamous stories,” that range from minor infringements or sporadic episodes to the illicit, cases badly resolved from other times or are still in personal disagreement, rumors that circulate and populate the local life, that mix with “day to day life,” that are activated on these points of friction of the local life and which, in some way, are condensed in the retailing of the drug, in the various dimensions of their local regulations.

The fact is that this management of the daily intermediations and relations is tangential to so many other illicit practices, that it isn’t always

necessarily connected to the drug business, but also interacts with the networks of local sociability at the uncertain boundary between the informal and the illegal: the most traditional car shops, which are multiplied throughout the periphery, in

Photo Patrícia Santos/Folha Imagem - 13.4.1998



The illegal commerce of buying and selling stolen car and truck parts moving the clandestine market.

which informal work mixes with the transactions of pieces of dubious origin, in connection (or not) with various points of stolen car disassembly, all this feeding an amazing popular market of “second-hand” parts, motorcycles and cars; or the very modern markets of pirate CDs, falsified products or even contraband (cigarettes coming from Paraguay, continuing in lighters coming from who knows where, even the electronics that arrive from Chinese containers unloaded at the port of Santos), sources of income for those in charge of the points of sale in the peripheries, mobilizing local networks of sociability and more a mixed-up waterfall of intermediaries where these products circulate in the today expanding markets of popular consumption, or even the updated and very profitable business of slot machines which have taken the place of the traditional numbers-animal “jogo do bicho” [the “animal game”: a popular game of chance in Brazil that uses animals as the basis for bets. Since its both prohibited and tolerated, the game is one of the primary forms of criminality in the country] reference for games which, thereby, also operate between light and shadow, between obscure intermediaries, the purchase of police protection and the generous payments for those who house and run this modern version of the game of chance common today in any impromptu shop in a neighborhood of the periphery.⁴

Common practices, in their traditional or very modern versions, which cross the grimy boundaries between survival expedients and illicit practices (Ruggiero, 2000). They can be tied to (or not, and not necessarily) - small local criminality or to networks mobilized by much heavier schemes, as in the case of cargo theft. Or then, articulated besides, as in drug retailing, at the poor points of today’s expansive and profitable illegal circuits of a globalized economy (cf. Naim, 2006). They are practices and social networks that cross and compose the life of a neighborhood of the periphery. And create so many other zones of friction that, also they, need to be well managed to avoid complications with the local population and above all, to avoid undesirable incidents with the police.

Here, the other plane on which the regulation of local business is conducted: the management of various illegalities and criminal practices that run through the urban world, that cross the borders, certainly of the local perimeter, but are intertwined in the poor extremities of drug retailing and make up a small “point of sale,” the sensitive aspect of their operations precisely in their connections with local circumstances, between the rules of neighborhood sociability, the always unstable agreements with police, and also the not-always peaceful relations with mobsters of criminal organizations: agreement about proceedings, hours, places and circumstances for the illicit transactions or, in what follows, convenience agreements to prevent undesirable disputes between groups that act in contiguous territories. Also, difficult arbitrations when the dissensions involve mobsters and the situation is at the brink of deadly solutions.

What is at play are the micro-regulations of the drug business, its small face, we could say, that connects the facts and circumstances, artifacts and social networks that make up local life. All of this depends on business going smoothly. But it is from this that above all the match-ups depend in a risky game of life and death. Either everything works very well, or it can work up to the moment when

a spin of fortune's wheel and the uncertainties of the life are thrown into the air, whether from disagreements with the police who are always there in a perverse game of protection and extortion, whether due to territorial disputes with rival groups, whether by the disaffection of some and others that end up activating deadly solutions. The youth knows this, he and all the others, the residents also.

Stories of a small dealer within the municipality of São Paulo. Tiny stories, as Foucault (2003) says, these “existences destined to pass without leaving a trace,” but which are interesting precisely because, contrary to the stereotypes that construct phantasmagorical figures of the Dealer and of Organized Crime, they are carriers of a varied thread of relations and connections with the social world. Because of this they are formidable guides to conduct us through this uncertain prospecting of the present urban world.

These are stories that are made in the enfoldings of the social world, at those points of junction and conjunction of the urban narratives in the uncertain frontiers between the informal, the illegal and the illicit. In them pulse the lines of force which cross the contemporary scenario, and which seem interlaced and are composed of the various practical actions of daily life, practices and social networks mobilized in this constant movement from one side to the other, activating resources, possibilities and mechanisms, Foucault's *dispositifs*, on each side. It is that which is interesting to put in focus. And it was for this that we began with the very prosaic illegal kludges in order to follow, later, the actions mobilized around a circumspect basic basket and a popular June Festival. And it is this which provides a reference for tracing the movements of a minor local drug dealer and, through him, by these routes, delineate the profiles of a city that still remains to be known.

Everything is quite far from the images widely spread in the media today – and accepted as fact and truth – of a world captured and dominated by the so-called “Organized Crime.” Images that trivialize the criminalization of poverty and feed the security obsession that combines open and shameless repression (the grammar of war, fighting the “enemy”) and the management of the supposed risks of the poverty⁵ by means of managerial mechanisms that go back to the sayings “populations at risk” (an expression of current coin, and not by accident), the strictness, the bio-power that Foucault (2004) spoke of; wants to say: management of populations, management of lives, and in these times in which the exception has become the rule, the administration of their urgencies in order to make “individuals governable” under the aegis of the triumphant rationality of the market.

Perhaps here it becomes clearer why we chose this sinuous route of “minuscule stories” in order to place the city in perspective and, within another required perspective, a point that is imperative for us, shifting the ground by starting from a description of the order of things, so as to pose as questions the problems on the agenda. Displacing the point of the criticism. Or better, adjusting the critical point that today seems to have undone itself to the extent that it has emptied the political imagination that can't figure out the world that isn't in the terms posted in the immediate present. If these micro-scenes have some interest it

is because they put in focus a social world that doesn't fit the stereotypes that have been activated in response to Foucault's "*dispositifs* of social exception" including the shadowy figures of the Organized Crime, a supposed "parallel power" or a native Brazilian version of the "evil empire" against which only a strategy of war (and extermination) remains; or from a more edifying perspective of the fiction of populations encapsulated in what are said to be "communities" (actually, a term that would be worth studying at another moment), subjugated or terrorized, at the very least, threatened, but destined to be forgiven by the saving intervention of social programs.

In the name of urgency and emergency, the political space is undermined, as much by the erosion of the field of criticism and the exercise of critical intelligence (cf. Calhoun, 2004) under the calculations of a city all of which is thought-out and reckoned under the logic of management of risks, social risks, scheduling social programs and today also celebrating projects for giving new value to urban spaces, lower-class or central,⁶ indications that make us think new forms of control are already in operation that, as Garland (1999 e 2001) says, combine punitive logic with governmentality of the populations and situations subject to what comes to be defined as the risk of crime and violence.

With this, it is an entire social world that remains out of sight. But it is here that the complications are sheltered, precisely in these urban meshes made up of Foucault's "enfoldings" of the formal and informal, the legal and the illegal. It is in them, in these enfoldings that there is a need for restraint. As shown by Michel Misse (2006b), the key to understanding the violence associated with the illicit markets, in particular the drug trade, is precisely there, in the "dangerous liaisons," relations of power articulated in the heavy game of buying protection and police extortion, the so called protection market, which is also illegal, which feeds off of politics (and practices) of criminalization, parasites of the illicit markets and detonates continuous episodes of violence that, very frequently, assumes extreme and devastating forms.

Notwithstanding mechanisms activated around the exceptional, in its two faces, repression and management of poverty already compose the order of things. It is even possible to say that the tensions of the world that make up the friction between "governable individuals" (Foucault, 2004) and those who escape from managerial mechanisms, which is to say: between managerial governability and the "bare life" (Agamben, 2002). It is this that pulses, in filigrees, in the practical actions of daily life. It is in these points of friction that men and women negotiate their lives and the sense of life. It is the razor's edge. The fact is that the individuals and their families travel these tenuous frontiers of legal and illegal,⁷ know very well to how to handle the codes of both sides and above all also know how to deal with the rules being constructed for "survival in adversity." This has nothing to do with the survival strategies that are treated in studies about poverty.⁸ It is an expression that circulates in the "bandit world." But the residents of the peripheries of the city know very well what this means: knowing how to travel among various worlds, restraining themselves when is required, advancing

when it is possible, making good use of the right word at the right moment, and keeping quiet when necessary.

This isn't to be considered simply surviving and staying alive. It is above all about by-passing – it is a form of the art of “getting around”⁹ the two very concrete threats in their lives at every moment. On the one side, the risk of violent death, above all among the youngest, making the narration of their lives and is also a kind of accounting of the dead, people close-by, childhood friends, neighbors on the street, classmates from school. On the other, the risk of not falling into the condition of “poorer-than-thou,” becoming dependent on the charity of one or others, target-public for the social programs considered to be insertion and which, in the words of Francisco de Oliveira (2003), are no more than the administration of the exception.

That is to say between a shoot-out death and the captive poverty of the mechanisms that govern their world there is not the emptiness suggested by these current notions of social exclusion. There is an entire social world interlaced in these blurred terrains in the fuzzy frontiers between legal and illegal, licit and illicit, and where the “tiny stories” travel that comprise urban life. It is there that the game takes place when life is “bare life:” which is to say, life under the constant threat of murder and the forms of life, which is to say: the possibilities and potentials of life. Implied in Agamben's (2002) suggestion is what still needs to be properly understood if we want to think of politics that correspond to these times in which the exception has become the rule.

Notes

- 1 The redefinition of the relations between the formal and the informal in contemporary capitalism is, more particularly, the place redefined from the informal, under the logic of a process of accumulation that requires, mobilizes and activates its broader reproduction that is today at the center of a debate that already amounts to an important reference literature. For questions discussed here, besides the already cited Ruggiero (2000), see Sassen (1989) and Portes & Castells (1989).
- 2 For a discussion about the senses of this practical intelligence in contexts in which the rules are uncertain and changing, and the realities are indeterminate and ambiguous, see Detienne & Vernant (1974).
- 3 We are working here with the notion of “artifact,” as suggested by Bruno Latour (2000), as a point of departure for the description of practices, relations and mediations activated in their routine.
- 4 The press has noticed the important place of the business of slot machines in which money laundering operations headed by transnational networks, which, as might be supposed, the modest owners of the small places in the peripheries neither suspect nor could imagine. Cf. *Carta Capital*, 24.3.2007, n.441, “Conexão Parque Lage,” [“Lake Park Connection”] reporting by Walter Fanganiello Maierovich.
- 5 At the moment these lines are being written, we are witnessing live and active in ways like these, the reader will forgive us the euphemism, “mechanisms for the exceptional,” are being once more put into practice in the occupation of the favela

“Complexo do Alemão,” or “German Complex,” in Rio de Janeiro, the city chosen, it thus seems, as today’s laboratory for gauging the native version of a mixture of what is called the “Colombia Model” and the “Haiti Model.”

Cf. *Carta Capital*, 13.6.2007, “Within the rules: the army in the streets,” reporting by Mauricio Dias.

- 6 In this, it seems, we are also synchronized with neo-liberal modernity in times of exception, as considered by Vincenzo Ruggiero (2007) who describes what is occurring in the city of London.
- 7 In what follows, we return to questions developed in Telles (2007).
- 8 The uses and senses of this expression, “survive in adversity,” is a question worked on and developed in Hirata (2006).
- 9 About this “art of getting around,” see Fresia (2004): In her study about the unusual routes of young refugees on the frontiers of Senegal and Mauritania, the author raises questions that have highly interesting parallels with what we are proposing here.

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ABSTRACT – The intent of this article is to approach the drug trade from the perspective of its capillary network in the social world and in urban weaves, using one of its trafficking points in São Paulo’s periphery as an “observation station.” This is a descriptive (and analytic) perspective that allows us to consider criminal practices in relation to what could be defined as the management of illegality, which is present in concrete, every-day life administrative practices. This is, indeed, the focus of the discussion: evidence of a growing and expansive mesh of illegalities (both old and new ones), their circuits and social networks, which are woven into urban practices and warped in the redefined relations among the illegal, the informal and the illicit. Based on the results of recent research, the article aims to put an “experimental ethnography” into practice, in an attempt to flesh out the mediations and connections through which the movements of the boundaries between the legal and the illegal have been taking place. These connections and mediations must be well understood for they contain the key to identifying and understanding the porosity existent between the legal and the illegal, and the blurry boundaries among work, survival expedients and illicit practices. In them, one may identify and comprehend the capillary network of the drug trade in the social world, which is interwoven in the junctions and conjunctions of the urban weave.

KEYWORDS: Urban Practices, Relations among the Informal, the Illegal and the Illicit, Drug Trade, Urban Illegalities.

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