

Bosses, Brokers and Helpers

Labour and business relations amongst Colombian cocaine traffickers

Introduction

This article is devoted to analyse the business and labour relations between Colombian cocaine traffickers (*traquetos*) in the Netherlands. In so doing, I follow earlier attempts to identify different types of drug enterprises (Van Duyn et al. 1990; Dorn et al. 1992; Korf & Verbraeck 1993) and labour modalities within the drug economy (Ruggiero 1995; Hobbs 2001).

Colombian drug organisations active in Europe have either been described as representatives or 'cells' of all-powerful Colombian cartels, or as flexible criminal networks. The first view presents drug cartels, departments and

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1 In my opinion, ethnographic studies on so-called 'organised crime' with a focus on business and labour relations can be illuminating for several reasons. They can reveal some of the reasons behind internal interaction, changing arrangements, conflicting interests and risk transfer inside the illegal business. They can further contribute to explain the meaning of violence, secrecy and trust for the actors involved. Moreover, they can expose both similarities and interconnections with broader social and economic arrangements – with other labour markets, with other legal and illegal businesses or entrepreneurs, and so forth. Finally, this approach can reveal the link between structural processes that produce 'social extremes' (e.g. through criminalisation, immigration, market constraints, etc.), and the social practices that 'real human beings' shape, change and recreate every day (see Bourgois 1995: 17-18).

branches with hyper-rational, professional businessmen. The other view offers a chaotic web of underground, international criminals. I will start this article by briefly reviewing the central claims of both approaches. Then, three cases in which interesting aspects on business and labour relations are revealed will be presented. From these and other cases encountered during fieldwork, I will further examine more systematically the business and labour modalities involved. I will finally end by criticizing the two above mentioned approaches as they miss the point when they claim to portray the activities of Colombian traffickers.

Transnational Cartels vs. Criminal Networks

Although it is more or less agreed today that Colombian cocaine organisations have undergone a process of fragmentation and restructuring,² still most works mentioning Colombian groups or individuals involved in cocaine import and distribution in Europe tend to describe them as *branches*, *cells*, *representatives* or *agents* of the *X* Colombian *cartel(s)*. These descriptions are usually fed by a combination of economic and bureaucratic definitions of organised crime: Colombians are in business and they belong to certain organisations. Whether the emphasis rests in high organised and stable structures (Florez & Boyce 1990), strict labour division, professionalism or vertical integration (Lee III 1991), the model in mind is that of a transnational corporation. Even when the notion of *cartel* is avoided, Colombian traffickers abroad are usually portrayed as conforming large organisational structures. Others simply discuss the issue in terms of the activities of 'Colombian cartels' (Savona 1999; OGD 1997) or 'Colombian families' (OGD 1996: 67) in the Netherlands. Some versions of this picture also include an 'alien conspiracy' dimension. For example, Van Doorn (1993) claims that

2 The notion of cocaine cartel was always a matter of controversy. Many scholars rejected or criticised the concept (Thoumi 1995; del Olmo 1996; Camacho Guizado 1994; Betancourt & García 1994; Kopp 1995; Krauthausen & Sarmiento 1991; Krauthausen 1998; Naylor 1997; Tovar Pinzón 1994 and Uprimny 1994). Others have worked with it but with explicit reservations (Labrousse 1993; Lee III 1991; Clawson & Lee III 1996; Santino & La Fiura 1993; Bovenkerk 1995 and Van Duyne 1995).

Close family ties at the top and a cell-structure characterize the cartels (...). Arrival and further distribution in Western Europe, is in the hands of high-placed Colombian cartel members who take up residence, either permanently or temporarily. (...) There is a very realistic possibility that the cartels will try to expand their influence in Europe over the next few years by setting up import corporations of their own (Van Doorn 1993: 101).

The notion of cocaine cartels or multinationals (implying large 'boards' of cocaine producers and exporters that are able to control levels of production and prices) has been a very successful one over the past twenty years. Anti-drug warriors have pushed it to legitimate their fight against an all-powerful enemy. Mainstream media and popular fiction has found in it all the glamour and sensation required to sell cocaine news, and even drug traffickers themselves have manipulated the idea to gain status and recognition (Bovenkerk et al. 2003).

A second popular paradigm to conceptualise Colombian cocaine traffickers spins around the notion of social network (Boissevain 1974). In the hands of crime analysts, this approach focuses on the social dynamics of 'criminal networks', trying to identify actors, connections, and the nature and intensity of criminal ties (Coles 2001). This view has slowly but steadily gained acceptance inside law enforcement agencies over the past five years, especially after they 'discovered' that the dismantling of drug 'cartels' failed to stop or even threaten international drug trafficking. In the Netherlands, most sympathisers of this view are police investigators, policymakers, crime managers or consultants, and ministerial researchers (Van Doorn 1993; Jackson et al. 1996; Klerks 1996; Kleemans et al. 1998, 2002; Kleemans & Kruissink 1999).

Their picture, sketched from police and judicial files involving Colombian cocaine traffickers, reveals flexible international co-operation, diversification to other illegal markets at distribution level, and, of course, different operational capabilities regarding contacts in Colombia and the Netherlands. This 'criminal network' approach has the merit of recognising flexible relations at the core of any drug transaction. Instead of thinking in terms of 'organisations', it focuses on the relations between drug traffickers.

Both paradigms should be, however, seriously challenged as we come closer to real Colombian drug entrepreneurs and employees.

3 During fieldwork (1996-2000) I managed to interact with a core group of 43 Colombian drug entrepreneurs and employees active in the Netherlands, including

Sand through the fingers

RIVERITO'S FOUR OPERATIONS

At the time I visited him, Riverito was in his thirties and serving 4 years in *De Weg*, one of the buildings with several Colombian inmates in the Bijlmer prison of Amsterdam. From a middle-class family from Cali, he studied economics at the *Univalle*, where he graduated in 1992. Afterwards he got a reasonably good job with a leading building company in Cali, but he found it routine and boring. During his studies, he worked as a waiter in a famous hotel in the Cali centre, a place where top local cocaine entrepreneurs gathered for business and pleasure. It was in that hotel that Riverito got to know these people and the world of major cocaine producers and exporters. He was at first a simple waiter who knew their tastes and anticipated their wishes. He was later invited to more private events:

I was the private waiter of Pacho Herrera [a former major drug entrepreneur from Cali]. Once he gave me a 1,000 euro tip at the end of a party, I had to share it with some other people.

However, beside this link and the fact that he sometimes easily got hold of some cocaine to retail amongst friends, he did not become involved with those cocaine entrepreneurs. However, his closeness to them had a tremendous impact:

Brother, you don't imagine how it is until you come close to them. So much money! They impress the people around them, because they are not so different than you or me. They are not old rich bastards, no; they speak the same language as normal people do. Some are gentle and jointly liable. And you wonder: why not me?

In 1995 he decided to go to the Netherlands. He had a sister living there, so he left, though that was not the main reason behind his decision. He argued

importers, distributors, retailers, couriers, helpers and other employees. I regularly visited salsa bars, Latin American restaurants, migrant organisations, prostitution areas, churches, social and cultural events, telephone cells, private parties and prisons, especially in Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam. For methodological issues regarding access to informants, validity, reliability and about the advantages of ethnographic material for researching drug trafficking, see Zaitch (2002: 7).

during our first meeting that he came to the Netherlands for adventure, that he had nothing else in Colombia and wanted to solve his alcohol abuse by changing environment, but he had not come to deal cocaine. After many encounters, he became more open and forgot his earlier claims: 'I came here to *work* you see, it was the only thing to do. I had no prospects there.'

It is reasonable to believe that a number of factors pushed him to decide to move to the Netherlands and participate in the cocaine business: dissatisfaction and frustration with his job, earlier contacts with powerful local cocaine entrepreneurs, a spiralling down that ended in a broken marriage and, finally, the fact that he had a sister in the Netherlands. In the case of Riverito, personal economic problems did not seem to be high on the agenda. Indeed he was interested in making big money quickly, not so much as a path for social improvement, but rather as a disruption, as a possible turning point for a new start. The way in which he became involved in the cocaine business illustrates this. He was not sent by any people nor did he belong to any group or organisation. Riverito went to the Netherlands alone, established contact with local importers and distributors, and eventually used his former contacts within the *Caleño* cocaine circles.

Encaletador

Once in Amsterdam, he shared a room in an attic with other Colombians. Some were already involved in the cocaine business. With these people, he first worked as *encaletador*, the person responsible for keeping and watching over the cocaine loads before they are eventually divided and delivered to wholesalers. He was just an employee, next to other two, of a Colombian cocaine importer. After a couple of operations, in which he demonstrated his competence and gained trust, he was offered a more risky and profitable task: the unloading of several kilograms from a ship in Zeebrugge for which he was offered 30,000 euro, an amount he was meant to share with another Colombian who was supposed to go with him.

Unloading in Zeebrugge

Riverito's operation at Zeebrugge was a successful one, but the 15,000 euro promised turned out to be just 10,000 euro. Interestingly enough, although he claimed the rest for a while, he just accepted the actual payment that seemed a good deal to him.

I wasn't going to create problems, I wasn't in a position to ask for the rest. You see, after all they paid me well. I bought a house in Cali with that money, for my ex-wife and my son.

The unloading operation at Zeebrugge reveals interesting aspects regarding the labour relations involved. Contrary to the idea that a single, well organised group was controlling all the import tasks – for example, with a boss who divided the tasks and paid salaries or percentages to 'his own' people – the operation involved at least two small independent units.

On the one hand, the Colombian importer and owner of the cocaine load bought to the exporter at 20,000 euro per kilo and sold at a wholesale price of 24,000 euro per kilo, obtaining gross earnings of 200,000 euro. He worked alone with two informal helpers, both receiving some thousands from him after the operation. While he received information about the *cruce* (sending), he was not responsible for it since he bought from the exporter at the point of arrival. He unloaded the shipment, transported, stashed and divided the merchandise, and delivered it – in this case, three packages – to wholesale distributors. However, he did not do all this by himself. For the most dangerous task, the unloading, he was willing to pay 10% of his profits (20,000 euro) to someone else to do it, in the same way, a legal company subcontracts special services for a project. The contractor was in this case Riverito.

Riverito and his companion, on the other hand, were a separate economic unit from the importer. They were not his partners, since they were neither owners nor responsible for the merchandise. They could neither be considered employees like the other helpers, since the contracting relationship ended as soon as the operation had been completed. Riverito and his partner also remained autonomous with regard to the planning and execution of the operation. Naturally, the division was less strict than in legal subcontracting, since Riverito was not in a position to guarantee a refund if the unloading operation failed. In practical terms, the importer worked very close to Riverito, kept an eye on him, provided him with ideas, information and even with a vehicle, though Riverito and his friend had to arrange many technical aspects of the unloading by themselves.

In this way, they were contracted out, as an external labour force, to take over the high risks involved in the unloading. They just offered the importer a highly priced service for this particular operation. In contrast with what happens in legal business, this subcontracting relation had almost no chance of being repeated in future operations: Riverito wanted more, and new personal circumstances allowed him to try on his own.

From unloader to importer to wholesaler

After the Zeebrugge operation, a year after arrival to the Netherlands, his older brother William also came over. Unlike Riverito, he had problems in Colombia with marihuana and cocaine use. They had a good relationship and he wanted to help him, so he convinced him to come to the Netherlands. Together, they started to look for possible opportunities to transporting cocaine from Cali. They had no capital to invest, but they knew many people. Their intention this time was to keep things in their own hands:

You see, I work no more with those *paisanos* [Colombians]. Everything fine with them, but I just tried with other people in Colombia. I knew this man from before. He promised to send something, so we waited. We waited, and waited, and nothing happened. He kept giving stupid excuses, I think he liked to talk and tell things he really could not do. Pure bullshit!

Riverito got what Colombians call a *línea muerta* (dead line), a cocaine line or operation that simply does not exist or is destined to fail. For this operation, Riverito was going to buy in Colombia and sell in the Netherlands, dividing the profits with his brother. They phoned many people in Colombia, but nothing worked out. People who promised things just disappeared. They survived with small jobs as load keepers and internal couriers. In the meantime, their sister had returned to Colombia: she had had absolutely nothing to do with the cocaine circuit.

Finally, in the beginning of 1997, a new operation appeared. It was small, but rather easy and with a good profit margin. They could make a mark up of 4,000 euro selling a kilo that Riverito had got from another Colombian. Riverito thus suddenly became a wholesale distributor. He bought the cocaine, and his brother William and a *paisa* called Charly entered the deal as his helpers. Charly was a *paisa* that had just arrived and used to tell repeatedly that he had been bodyguard of Pablo Escobar. Charly told Riverito that a friend of him had a buyer for the cocaine kilo. This 'friend', thought to be Colombian by Riverito, turned out to be an Aruban who presumably gave Charly some money to ensure the deal. They followed him to meet the buyers, but things went wrong. Riverito:

Man, there was no buyer, there was only a gang of Antilleans who put two guns to our heads and stole the thing. It is a miracle we are alive. I know another *caleno* who was almost killed in the same situation but still walks around with a bullet in his neck.

The man from Aruba did not disappear, but pretended to also have been fooled. As a regular police informant, he could avoid punishment by feeding the police with a ‘Colombian criminal organisation’ story while he could get away with a loot worth 24,000 euro. After a failed attempt to recover the package from the Aruban – allegedly using violence – the police raided Riverito’s flat in Amsterdam-Zuid. He and his fellows were subsequently detained. In his last operation, Riverito was the boss.

Riverito’s four operations, all taking place with the space of two years, reveal two interesting things. Firstly, that far from a stable and large organisation, a mutating interconnection of small units seems to be the case. Secondly, that this connection changed with respect to people, positions, linkage nature and tasks along the four successful or failed operations in which Riverito was involved.

MIGUEL’S MANY BOSSES

Although Miguel primarily addressed himself as an ‘intellectual mainly interested in philosophy and criminology’,⁴ he was rather open about his involvement in the business for more than a decade.

He almost made it as a criminal lawyer, but for no clear reason he claimed he was impeded to complete his last year at the University.

I felt frustrated and I burned all the books. At that time, I was working in a small secondary school in Cartago as vice-principal and philosophy teacher. I knew some people in Cali, but I did not enter this for the money, I suppose. I think it was out of bitterness.

He was first invited to work as a courier for a small organisation in Bogotá, transporting between 3 kg and 7 kg. He made successful trips to the Netherlands, to Paris, again to the Netherlands, and later to a couple of Central American countries. He was caught in a subsequent trip to Portugal, where he spent 3 years in prison.

4 During our encounters in the prison of Veenhuizen, he commented upon Hegel, Kant, Russell, Bentham and Foucault. He also referred to social utopists such as Owen, Fourier, Saint Simon and Comte, and to authors such as Huxley and Orwell. Quoting Kundera, he finally thanked me for the unique opportunity to share thoughts about these thinkers, implying that he was an exception in that ‘criminal subculture’. Upon this intimacy he also based his willingness to tell me his story.

It was terrible there, the law of the jungle, surrounded by 'garbage' that did not deserve anything. I survived because we have a name, I mean they think it is better not to mess with Colombians.

Back in Colombia, he tried to resume his law studies, but he was again obstructed. Frustration was even more painful since his brother was a criminal judge with many contacts. He started to work in a cocaine kitchen near Cali, a job he regarded as very dangerous:

The chemicals are very inflammable, we had to wear rubber shoes cause the slightest spark could provoke an explosion. Everything is very precarious, once a certain amount is cooked the kitchen is dismantled and you are moved to a new one. It is risky, but you get monthly paid.

After that period, and due to the fall of his *patrón* (boss), Miguel returned to Bogotá to resume his job as drug courier, but this time for another organisation. He already had experience, and was no longer regarded as a simple courier. In 1993, he was sent to Frankfurt as a 'baby sitter' (professional courier and controller). Although he was not caught, the cocaine was seized, some Italian importers were detained and the cocaine remained unpaid for. Shortly after this operation, Miguel attempted to smuggle a few kilos through the Schiphol Airport, where he was caught. My first interpretation was that he had been punished for the failure and 'demoted' from 'baby sitter' to *mula* (unskilled courier), but things were more simple than that: a new operation for a single courier appeared and he happened to get the job. With a false passport and more than 3 kg cocaine, he was sent via Venezuela and Curaçao to Amsterdam, from where he would have travelled south to deliver the merchandise in Geneva, Switzerland. Miguel explains:

You see, I worked for many groups and I never saw anything like a 'cartel'. I don't feel part of a 'cartel'. Every group is more or less independent. Some people know each other, yes, and sometimes a couple of *patrones* could meet and work together. There are also informal rules and codes, but nothing like the *mafia*, people don't really respect them. I believe that the only rule is to survive and get rich.

When asked about his plans after prison, Miguel suggested that he first had to settle things with his most recent boss from Bogotá. After that, he would go

back to Cali to 'see who is there'. He was, however, very sceptical about finding his old employers after so long.

Whatever effort may be made to connect Miguel with a particular group or 'cartel' in Colombia is destined to fail: he moved rather easily from one employer to another, combining or shifting drug smuggling with other roles as 'cook' (chemist), as bodyguard and as 'baby sitter'.

JOEL'S LONELINESS

Joel is a Colombian cocaine wholesaler active in Amsterdam, a truly 'discreet professional' (Zaitch 2002). He lives and works in Amsterdam, buying from importers from Cali, his hometown, and selling especially to Turkish, Italian and German groups.

He came alone to the Netherlands in 1996, leaving his wife and two teenage sons in Colombia. For some years, he distributed cocaine in Chicago with varying fortunes, until an operation was busted and he had to 'disappear'. His brother, who had worked with him in the US, was already in the Netherlands and convinced him to come. He introduced him to some local as well as foreign buyers. Combined with good contacts at import and export level, he soon managed to be in business.

My family lives in Colombia and they tell others that I am on a 'business trip'. I really would like to see my sons. Here, you see, every day is the same. I miss going to play football with them, just a nice picnic. I think I will soon retire, so I go back.

He tries to minimise risk by delegating cocaine collection and delivery, and cash transfers or transportation. He only negotiates the terms of the deals, handles the money and stashes the cocaine. He usually buys and sells *escama de pescado* (fish scale) or *concha de nácar* (nacre shell), top quality cocaine known for its pink shining glints.

Joel has an excellent reputation not only around business partners but also amongst close friends and subordinates, especially for being just and jointly liable. Tano, one of his former employees, argues:

He is incapable of killing a fly, and he keeps his word. (...) He lends money, invites dinners, and always asks if everything is OK. Once he helped a friend with 19,000 euro and he never saw it back. He even helps unknown people. Last week, for example, he gave accommodation to a Bolivian woman, just because

she was illegal and had nowhere to go. (...) I don't think these are interested favours, he might have his reasons to help, but he is just like that.

He is usually the boss of his own illegal enterprise. He is clearly what Dorn et al. (1998) refer as a *number 1*, 'cut out' from some delicate operational matters such as cocaine transportation and money transfers, but 'hands on' in others such as stashing cocaine. In some cases, he makes Paisita, another Colombian, his partner – sharing a percentage of the profits – but only when they sell to a couple of Paisita's clients. Joel is always the investor and he always runs the financial risk of the operations. Interestingly enough, his brother, who invited him to come to the Netherlands and gave him most of the business contacts, works independently from him, holding a different line. However, they used to work together in Chicago. Tano reveals:

Once he went to collect some money, I think a lot of money, and they told him that his brother had already received it. When Joel found him it was already too late, his brother had spent it all in Colombia. I believe they settled the score, but there is always some tension.

Joel only buys cocaine from other Colombians, but not always in the same way and from the same people. He enters the game per operation. He would receive a message from exporter A from Cali, asking if he wants to play. Although Joel knows his nickname and a telephone number to contact him, he never met him personally. According to the price and the quantity involved, he would say yes or no. In practice, he always agrees to buy at least part of the cocaine load. Exporter A would arrange the shipment with importer B, mainly through Rotterdam. Joel would also accept sharing the financial risks with importer B, who is also from Cali. In the event that the shipment is lost or seized, he would pay for half of it and he would invite the exporter to verify that no rip-off has taken place.

The autonomy of the 3 partners in this *línea* (line) or *flecha* (arrow) is obvious not only from the meticulous share of financial risk, but also from the fact that they seldom repeat the same scheme. Importer B and Joel also receive cocaine from exporter C, who closed a deal with exporter A to use his contacts in the Netherlands. Despite the fact that Joel only buys from importer B – he tried with a second one but he was not satisfied – importer B also sells to other Colombian and non-Colombian distributors.

Joel sells the cocaine to different groups including other local Colombians, some Turks and Italians in Amsterdam, and a couple of groups in Germany

and Belgium. However, he never deals with more than two or three clients. On one occasion, Joel was visibly irritated. He explained me that

Another group of *Caleños*, they sold the thing one point cheaper [a point, referred to the kilo price, is 500 euro] but we had agreed to sell for 48. Therefore, they sold it and I didn't. I will speak with them. (...)

While he excludes the use of force, he suggests that these informal agreements are common between two or three groups or distributors handling from the same bulk and selling to the same groups. However, even in these circumstances, he admits the difficulties involved in enforcing these price accords. Other agreements with the importer are often tacit and imply a grey zone of misunderstandings, discussions and conflicts. For example, if the cocaine is not sold immediately, the importer can become rather impatient about the payment.

I met six different Colombians working for or with Joel: Simona, Paisita, his brother, Tico, Chino and Tano. Except for Paisita, who is only on some occasions involved as business partner, none of the others engage in any stable 'criminal' relation with him. They would not be offered a job either before or after a certain operation. Even then, Joel would decide what and when to delegate. I then realised that one of the secrets of Joel's success is that he works alone. He basically hires people to move the cocaine inside Amsterdam, to receive it and deliver it, and to transfer the money. Some people such as Tano would rotate through all of these tasks. Paisita and Tico are able to provide the 'violent' image that Joel lacks. Finally, Simona would generally cook and clean for him, and, of course, provide her house to stash the merchandise.

The money transfers to Colombia are arranged in a rather simple way. Sometimes he goes to the office by himself, but most of the time, he sends somebody else. He is aware of video-cameras and financial legislation, so he used to distribute uneven amounts of about 2,500 to 3,500 euro amongst six different people, who deposit the money in some four or five well-known money transfer offices. For this work, Joel also recruits peripheral people – for example, friends of Simona – who would get between 100 and 150 euro for the job. In this way, he manages to send, diverted to different accounts in Colombia, an amount of around 90,000 euro each time. He avoids sending people to the same office very often, and he occasionally sends cash with trusted travellers. Far from being part of a group – i.e. Joel's organisation – these people are just friends or acquaintances who do not necessarily know each other very well.

Tano describes how he delivered the cocaine for Joel:

I put the stuff in a big suitcase and I just went alone to meet the buyers. Paisita met me there and we delivered it. Joel paid me 100 euro for each kilo transported.

Finally, Joel mentioned some ‘projects’ – one in Japan and another one in France, both apparently failed – in which neither the people referred above were involved, nor was his precise role in these projects clear to me.

Working with/for a *traqueto*

From these three stories, it is evident that Colombian traffickers engage in various sorts of business and labour relations. The following is an attempt to enumerate the most common types of linkages I found during my fieldwork. Since these types are in reality both mixed (for instance partnerships amongst relatives) and mutating (i.e. traffickers change from one method to another), this should only serve to grasp the diversity of business forms as well as to identify the most important elements of Colombian cocaine enterprises.

BUSINESS TYPES

Individual enterprises

Self-employment, a paramount feature of immigrant economies (Portes 1995), was extremely rare amongst Colombian cocaine traffickers. Colombian smugglers were always employees of somebody else. The few cases were restricted to people mostly involved in wholesale distribution. Joel, for example, acted in most of his operations as an individual entrepreneur helped by ad hoc recruits. Lupo, another distributor, incorporated in a more erratic fashion sporadic cocaine dealing with a larger number of informal or illegal activities in which he engaged alone. Finally, Pollo managed to conduct one single import operation moving on his own.

Partnerships

This was the most common sort of business by far, especially at the level of import and distribution. Most partnerships were between two people. When a third partner was present, it tended to be a non-Colombian associate who provided local resources, infrastructure or further marketing contacts. While some lasted for few operations, most partnerships were temporary coalitions of two persons with a number of helpers, employees and subcontracted

personnel. Some informants like Riverito and other ‘opportunistic irregulars’ (Dorn et al. 1992) combined or switched from partnerships to wage labour. Some partners were family related, especially brothers and brothers in law.

Thinking in terms of the typology of trafficking ‘firms’ proposed by Dorn et al. (1992: xiii), it can be argued that none of these Colombian partnerships were ‘trading charities’ (ideologically committed to drugs) or ‘mutual societies’ (drug exchange amongst users). Colombian *traquetos* belonged to the other five categories in a very flexible fashion.

Despite the fact that ‘sideliners’ (legal businesses that trade drugs as a ‘sideline’) are a common phenomenon in Colombia, no traces of Colombian ‘sideliners’ in the Netherlands were found. This is due to the lack of legal Colombian entrepreneurship in the Netherlands, which if related to cocaine traffic was already an instrument designed to conceal the illegal business. Naturally, Colombians found partners in local ‘sideliners’, especially people with import or retail businesses suffering financial problems. If prostitution is considered to be a legal activity, a small number of Colombian prostitutes and ex-prostitutes also ‘sidelined’ into cocaine by meeting or being related with a drug entrepreneur.

Almost the same can be said about their engagement as ‘criminal diversifiers’ (existing criminal enterprise that ‘diversifies’ to include cocaine). Those Colombians who engaged in burglary or shoplifting only entered the cocaine business as temporary unskilled workers, but never as entrepreneurs. In fact, for some Colombians who diversified to other criminal activities and markets in the Netherlands – Mocho, for example, also imported cannabis – cocaine was the first step and still the most profitable activity. As argued previously, many of these *traquetos* had no criminal record in Colombia. However, many of them engaged in partnerships with local entrepreneurs involved in all sorts of illegal activities.

Though the ‘opportunistic irregular’ (involved erratically in the irregular economy) and the ‘retail specialist’ (with a boss employing people to distribute drugs to users) are two categories referring to retail levels in which Colombians were absent, these types were somewhat familiar amongst Colombian entrepreneurs. On the one hand, people like Lupo distributed cocaine along many other small *rebusques* (street informal jobs) he engaged in. Since some *traquetos* only managed two or three operations per year, their involvement was more ‘irregular’ than often thought. They reacted to short-term developments, acting as ‘jump-up merchants’ (Hobbs 1988) when a nice business opportunity suddenly emerged. In this way, they also engaged in temporary partnerships and recruited people for the project. On the other hand, even improvising, the

'groups' assembled had a boss and employees or helpers performing specific tasks.

Finally, Colombian groups or partnerships, especially those involved in cocaine import, were susceptible to dealing with 'state-sponsored traders' (who collaborated with enforcement agencies as informants, infiltrates or undercover policemen). While I could not find one single Colombian willing to become a *sapo* (police informant), many complained of making foolish mistakes by dealing with the 'wrong' people.

Joint ventures

Many partnerships were not only temporary for one or two operations, but involved people already active in other projects with other people. These joint ventures were usually between people holding different sorts of capital resources, all required to put the operation together. One had, for example, the money to invest and a front-store business, while the other provided the supplier in Colombia and the people needed for the operation. Some of these coalitions were 'virtual'. Potential partners spent a great deal of time thinking and talking about projects which never materialised in the end.

Percentage commission

People did not divide profits in an even way. If partners were – or appeared to be – roughly of the same status, negotiations often took place. Even if they knew each other, part of the negotiation was aimed at showing – and often exaggerating – personal credentials: how reliable and profitable each party was. Negotiations also involved discussions about three issues: financial risk, personal risk and material/human resources employed in. The first and third factors were the key ones, while personal risk was difficult to assess, often equally shared or completely passed on to helpers and labourers. When Paisita managed to share profits with Joel, he would only get 30% for providing the customer, putting some money and arranging the deal. As the main investor, Joel kept the other 70%.

A different picture resulted if partners were very different in size and power: the offer would be accepted with little or no discussion. The smaller party would then receive a percentage commission either in cash from the general profits or in kind from the total amount of cocaine moved. This arrangement was typical in export-import operations involving 'envoys' (import agents sent by Colombian exporters) such as Jairo. Although he organised the import for a certain group in Cali – i.e. working *for* them in that particular operation – he

became involved as a partner since he provided essential infrastructure, marketing opportunities and assumed high personal risks.

This system should be distinguished from the 'sales on commission' method, widely used amongst small wholesale distributors. As I will explain below, this last contracting arrangement applies less to entrepreneurial partnerships than to flexible labour force.

Family business

None of the cocaine enterprises found were structured along family lines in the style of the 'crime families' described by Ianni (1972) or of 'family businesses' discussed by the vast literature on middleman minorities and ethnic economies. Local family firms (Hobbs 2001) were rare for obvious reasons: many Colombian *traquetos* were neither 'locals' nor had relatives in the Netherlands. Of course, kinship relations often provided the basis for partnerships, labour recruitment, solidarity and the necessary enforceable trust. Joel or Riverito sometimes worked with their respective brothers, and some couples like Pacho and Blanca or Wilder and Rosaura co-operated in export-import operations. However, most of them had relatives who did not participate in the business, and most commonly dealt with and employed non-relatives. Moreover, the whole idea of 'family labour' was absent. Solano explained:

Here in The Hague I met many family members involved: blood brothers and relatives in law. But also close friends, that can be almost the same. (...) I see here many Arabs and they look like a big family, they are closed and they help each other. But Colombians are more individualistic, I don't know why... (...) Yes, family is important, but money makes them blind.

Jairo, who was sent by the Grajales family from Cali, was not related to them. The Grajales 'family business' was in fact a conglomerate of legal and illegal businesses run by different members of a large family, and not a unified structure. Joel and his brother also ran separated businesses. In some cases, the relative primarily provided the know-how, human and financial capital, or infrastructure. This is the case of 'mixed couples' or Colombian couples in which the woman had the Dutch nationality and local contacts. Tano emphatically denied that family ties were important amongst *traquetos* in the Netherlands: 'Look, you can not do this for many years, so some people try to keep their relatives out of this.'

Paisita also insisted on 'Colombian' over family ties:

We work with other *calichanos* [Colombianos]. They won't do silly things, you know for sure because everybody has a family in Colombia...

The centrality of intermediaries and brokers

This system of small, changing and temporary coalitions is certainly invigorated by the essential intervention of a specific type of entrepreneur: the broker. Boissevain (1974: 148) explains that social brokers place people in touch with each other either directly or indirectly for profit.

The usual role of brokers in the cocaine business – also referred as 'go-between', 'intermediaries', 'criminal brokers', and so forth – is to connect potential partners, potential buyers and sellers, and potential employees and employers. In this way, cocaine brokers combine, in a very informal way, some of the tasks usually performed by chambers of commerce, employment agencies, social clubs or financial newspapers in legal business. Nevertheless, they also reproduce other sorts of social brokerage – amongst friends, relatives, colleagues, co-nationals, and so forth – present in any other monetary or non-monetary transaction.

Brokers tended to belong to the very social networks being connected. Although not necessarily cocaine entrepreneurs or employees themselves, they were also not external powerful actors such as local politicians, *mafiosi* or migrant community leaders. During the 1980s, Bettien Martens, for example, managed many contacts between Colombian exporters and European importers (Bovenkerk 1995). Although her only capital was her network, she went beyond brokerage to work for specific groups as an 'envoy', a money launderer, and so on.

Brokers amongst Colombian *traquetos* included people occupying intersections of very different networks: illegal immigrants, musicians, frequent travellers, local dealers, local entrepreneurs, prostitutes, undercover police officers, and so on. Tico, for example, introduced Tano and Chino to Joel, who later helped them in many ways. Silvio, a musician himself, argued that some salsa musicians in Amsterdam acted as brokers by exchanging their broad network of potential cocaine users for regular free cocaine supply for the closest circle. In The Hague, some *Latino* DJ's also knew how to exploit their contacts with established *traquetos* and 'second generation' Colombians. I found further cases of brokerage amongst telephone operators, restaurant and bar tenders, coffee-shop owners, doormen in salsa discotheques and non-Colombian inmates. They all facilitated new contacts and transactions, and they all did so for profit.

As explained by Boissevain (1974: 158), the broker's *tariff* (profit) rarely consists directly of money. Cocaine brokers obtained material and immaterial benefits. The most common were: credit with *traquetos*; reputation and status; expectation to enter the business in the future; future possible favours or services; more clients; cocaine for consumption; moral leadership; and indeed cash. Credit and reputation were very important since they were key credentials for business success.

Many Colombians refused to perform as brokers when asked by non-Colombian drug dealers to connect them with the 'big guys'. They did not see any clear benefit in it. When Cabeza, a Colombian migrant, was learning Dutch, two Moroccans approached him at the language school. They wanted to get in touch with Colombian cocaine suppliers, and wondered if he could help them. Cabeza:

I thought why not, so I found a Colombian and I did the *cruce* [favour]. The Moroccans were real *desprolijos* [lit. sloppy, amateurs], and after two failed meetings I said: you know what? I cancel the thing and I step out.

However, manipulating *traquetos* with hopes and promises – recommending unreliable people, lying about their skills, making them wait, and so on – was for many the only way of getting close to a business with such large profits. More than career makers, cocaine brokers in the Netherlands tended to rely on short-term thinking. The temporary status of cocaine enterprises – in terms of organisation and staff – was then reinforced by a continuous circulation and replacement of brokers as the older ones ran out of credit.

In an attempt to explain diversification of markets and activities amongst Colombian drug entrepreneurs, M. Koutouzis from the former OGD in Paris argued that cocaine import was being subsumed into a huge broker operation:

It isn't a product (cocaine), but the very network what is really at stake, the real merchandise. The present and future tendency is to buy and sell lines, routes and networks. Internationalised criminal organisations will be able to provide any illegal product (Koutouzis, April 1997).

Interestingly enough, even considered at local level, this process is reminiscent of homologous trends towards horizontal integration, and flexible accumulation and consumption in late capitalism.

LABOUR RELATIONS

Most of the people contacted during my study were either working or selling a service to some *traqueto*. Both import and distribution activities can be organised as an enterprise or as a job, and cocaine entrepreneurs enjoy the crucial assistance of all sorts of helpers and employees. I will now try to characterise this specific labour market, showing the most common contractual arrangements found and the logic behind them. When analysing drug economies, too much emphasis on professionalism has obscured the fact that the 'crime industry also needs a large number of unskilled criminal employees' (Ruggiero 1993: 137) who at the same time pose a major threat to their employers.

Traquetos try to solve this problem by segmenting units, subcontracting, using friends and relatives, avoiding fixed employees, relying on brokers, passing minimal information, providing personal incentives, replacing, intimidating or lowering the number of employees. In sum, becoming flexible and relatively 'unorganised'. After reviewing the specific labour market around Colombian *traquetos*, it is clear to me that these 'solutions' are part of a wider picture that goes beyond illegal markets. While illegality tends to intensify them, they touch core developments of current capital and labour markets under 'disorganised capitalism' (Lash & Urry 1987), 'flexible specialisation' (Harvey 1989) or 'post-Fordist' economies (Amin 1994).

Skilled subcontractors

Colombian cocaine entrepreneurs relied heavily on subcontracting specific tasks to a variety of individuals and enterprises that provided infrastructure, knowledge or skills for a particular operational aspect. These contractors were usually paid either in cash or kind per individual project. In this way, relatively small economic units were able to operate by integrating flexible layers of contractors and subcontractors.

The subcontract of other illegal enterprises was rare in the Netherlands but very common in Colombia. Cocaine exporters used to contract the services of organisations – some with two or three people – specialised for example in the recruitment and loading of small couriers, in large scale transportation – for example, Mexican groups – or in the exercise of violence – private armies, *sicarios* (hired gunmen), and so on.

Other subcontracted businesses had a much better reputation. Whether they were single corrupted employees inside a firm (import-export, freight or transport companies, chauffeurs, bank employees and managers, and so on) or entire small businesses (retail and distribution shops, restaurant owners, and

so on), all had in common that they were paid to provide essential infrastructure services, beyond mere know-how or labour force. Almost every single operation that came to my knowledge subcontracted, at certain stage, services from legal companies. These so-called 'facilitators' are essential for the cocaine business to function.

Much subcontracting took place at an individual level, blurring at times the divide between wage labour and entrepreneurship. These people performed more simple tasks, all involving some particular skill and some material resource not provided by the employer. I have explained, for example, how Riverito was contracted to unload cocaine, for which he had to arrange many things for himself. Some infrastructure services were subcontracted in a more continuous fashion: Simona was regularly paid by Joel to stash cocaine in her flat. Some individuals regarded the contract as an extra-income, while mainly keeping more stable sorts of income from jobs or social benefits. Manolo, a Spanish migrant, sporadically drove an acquainted *traqueto* in his car, but lived from retirement benefits after 30 years of industrial work.

Professionals

Professional skilled workers also tended to be externally hired or recruited. Again, small and temporary enterprises did not allow for stable 'departments' with specialised personnel. Some of these services came from legitimate professionals, who were often paid salaries or fees well above the average. A pool of local or Colombian lawyers specialised in cocaine cases had a remarkable stability in their jobs compared to their clients. Travel and real estate agents were paid excellent prices and commissions. In contrast with Colombia and with local legal and illegal entrepreneurs, I could not find local accountants hired to launder money. This professional service was directly provided by the institutions or the employees involved. In some cases, people with know-how in import-export bureaucracy and in information technologies (IT) were also involved, for example, for organising large import operations. Professional truck drivers were also hired or paid off to transport cocaine in their trucks.

Traquetos also hired a number of people with particular skills acquired by virtue of their full-time involvement in some illegal activity. They included professional smugglers of all sorts, routine burglars (for operations that involved breaking into warehouses, containers or flats) or individual *sicarios* (though rare in the Netherlands). The trend for these 'professional criminals' was to diversify skills and become polyvalent multi-skilled workers. They were good candidates for replacing 'bosses' or becoming their closest employees.

Managerial bodies

The heavy use of subcontractors and 'external' professionals discouraged stable managerial bodies. In many cases, the *patrón* him/herself directly controlled the performance of unskilled workers. When people were sent to the Netherlands to organise the import (envoys), they eclectically mixed functions of managers and entrepreneurs. More specific 'organisers' – sent, for example, to supervise a delivery, assess risk, make a collection or 'fix' a problem – were often focused on one particular operational aspect, closely followed orders from the 'boss', and were more concerned about external relations and arrangements than with internal labour organisation. These people, although highly trusted by the cocaine entrepreneur, did not behave so much as white-collar 'company men' or 'vice-presidents' but often identified with many subordinates in their expectations of 'taking over', 'changing *patrón*' or 'quitting the job' altogether. Hierarchies were understood more in terms of authority and leadership than as compartmentalised, vertical bodies of delegation and control. 'Superiors' and chiefs were often respected for past events or deeds, rather than for present positions and current developments. Moreover, some people suggested the existence of more horizontal relations – in the style of *project crimes* or *crimes in association* (McIntosh 1975) – which involved mutuality beyond the business or labour relation. Miguel:

It is not just pure business and cold contracts. Within the group you discuss your personal life, your problems with others or with women, you have fun together.

He even alternated between performing as a supervisor (*baby sitter*) and a worker (*mula*). There were also cases in which 'outsiders' like overseas partners, who for example recruited and dealt with employees, took managerial functions. Sometimes I noticed that tasks and arrangements were simply abandoned to the initiative of those hired to execute them, and that 'bosses' did not have the will or the power to supervise people while the task was being carried out.

Finally, some cocaine entrepreneurs suggested that 'managers' are important but also dangerous, since they know many things that could easily be used against them. Mary McIntosh (1975) made the point in her classic work *The Organization of Crime*:

In fact it is not easy to distinguish control over subordinates from control over rivals. A subordinate may at any point cut loose and become a rival; a rival may become a boss, or a subordinate (McIntosh 1975: 54).

The use of relatives is only a partial solution: pressures to also be 'in charge' are greater amongst close relations, who incidentally may not always have the organisational skills required to manage people.

Unskilled part-time employees

Unskilled irregulars, people who would perform multiple tasks with different levels of complexity, formed a final and extremely important group of employees. These employees showed high degrees of job dissatisfaction and had no prospect of promotion. For some, the job meant an extra-income next to other legal or illegal occupations. For others, it was a 'last remedy' solution to tackle economic hardship, desperate conjunctures, or no other perspectives. For others still, it was the dream of becoming a *traqueto* some day.

The group included people performing as 'body packers' or small air couriers, local chauffeurs, divers, other unloaders, load keepers, informal bodyguards, internal couriers, cash remitters and smugglers, flat hosts, helpers and peddlers.

They had no job security. As a protection *buffer* to the business, they were placed in the 'front line', and easily replaced when targeted by drug enforcement agencies. Continual replacement not only restricted the flux of sensible information – weakening their bargain position – but also kept labour costs lower than in cases when stronger loyalties were constructed. I found many people 'waiting' to be called by a *traqueto*. Others had done some job for the boss, and were put 'on hold' until the next operation, a process that could take months.

Many of them rotated through different tasks in one or several operations. They had a name for those unskilled helpers doing 'a little bit of everything': *toderos*. They enjoyed the lowest occupational prestige.

These workers were recruited from several networks, but preferably not from established criminal labour markets: relatives of cocaine entrepreneurs, potential, illegal or established migrants, or local drug dealers. In this way, they tended to belong to external labour markets (Tilly & Tilly 1995: 287), evidenced by the lack of career advancement and in many cases criminal records.

While only some of these employees received a salary on a regular or irregular basis, the large majority were given some sort of flexible personal payment for each task performed. Load keepers, for example, were paid by the

day. International unskilled couriers were unevenly paid a fixed amount or per kilo transported according to their experience and the financial resources of the exporter. This meant sums of between 1,000 and 10,000 euro per trip. Internal couriers and cash remitters or smugglers were paid a percentage of the amounts handled. Finally, helpers of wholesale distributors were given a couple of kilos of cocaine and the instruction that they could keep any difference above a certain price. Many of these 'salespersons on commission' belonged, in my view, to this type of unskilled, interchangeable labour force.

Flexible bosses, brokers and helpers

It is clear, on the one hand, that despite the fact that most economic roles and relations amongst Colombian traffickers can indeed be compared with those of other legal markets, the 'cartel' perspective tends to institutionalise and 'freeze' arrangements and businesses in a holistic way. Moreover, the exclusive stress on professional skilled managers and entrepreneurs simply ignores the reality of the mass of unskilled Colombian employees, often regarded as members and not as victims of the groups they supposedly belong to. The material presented above shows that economic units in the cocaine business are smaller, more flexible and ad-hoc than what notions such as cartels, branches or cells suggest. Far from finding any empirical ground in reality, they have been, and still are, powerful metaphoric tools developed and used by criminal justice agencies to define and 'fight' illicit drug trafficking.

On the other hand, several risks and pitfalls are involved in the use of the 'criminal network' approach for understanding drug economies and actors. Firstly, while some crime managers sacrifice relevant social questions about relations, they place all their emphasis on charting networks to present them as aesthetic devices in research appendixes or as tools in computer programs. Despite its promising aims, the network approach has often been reduced to a (potential) law enforcement instrument: how to hit on vulnerable spots in a criminal network and how to 'remove' a significant actor. Secondly, a tendency exists to view networks-as-things-in-themselves, and to refer to criminal networks as mere synonyms of criminal groups or organisations (coalitions, for network analysts). In these cases, the bureaucratic approach to organised crime is not challenged: flexibility is incorporated into the 'criminal organisation' paradigm as just another attribute of the structure. Thirdly, no attention is paid to the meaning that relations have for those involved in the 'network'. During my fieldwork, I met many people who even knowing that they were engaged

in illegal activities, did not consider themselves to be criminals: people primarily engaged in legal or informal activities, people who saw themselves as workers, as adventurers or as acting under pressure, and finally those who blamed others for being the 'true criminals'. Illegality is a key factor, but should not be taken for granted when explaining *traqueto's* social behaviour. People engage in the drug economy attracted by potential large (illegal) profits, but they also do it 'despite' the fact that cocaine is illegal. For example, many informants wanted to step out from illegality as soon as possible, supported drug legalisation, or engaged in legitimate activities that provided greater symbolic rewards.

Further, a problem with this approach is the exclusive focus on a-priori isolated 'criminal' networks. In fact, networks as such can never be defined as 'criminal' (Bruinsma & Bernasco, 2002: 139). Networks are formed by actors (criminal and non-criminal) and the multi-dimensional social relations between these actors (a.o. ethnic, class, gendered, friendship, business, political, work, religious, familial, and also criminal). Most criminal network analysts only consider the non-criminal aspects of social relations as a context, as a facilitating environment, as a mere risk factor.⁵ But they are at the core of drug trafficking. I clearly showed above how the 'networks' in which Colombian cocaine traffickers engage involve criminal and non-criminal actors and relations.

What is basically flexible around drug traffickers is the way in which money is made (flexible accumulation), the interaction between different types of legal and illegal economic units (businesses, enterprises, single entrepreneurs, brokers, facilitators and financiers) and the way in which many sorts of employees work and divide tasks, risks and responsibilities (flexible specialisation). Behind flexible networks – whether they are 'criminal' or not – there are flexible bosses, brokers and helpers.

Conclusions

Cocaine enterprises are neither transnational corporations 'at the top' nor criminal networks 'at the bottom'. Colombian cocaine firms are informal, small, mutating and decentralised. Some are individual enterprises; others adopt the form of temporary partnerships between two or three people. These

5 See for example Kleemans et al. (1998, 2002) and Klerks (1996).

coalitions are often formed solely for a single project, with some of the people involved also engaging in legal activities or in other coalitions. Brokers (people with contacts) play a central role in bringing about these coalitions and transactions.

Labour relations are also characterised by a high degree of flexibility. Far from restricting their involvement to one role, most people either change or systematically switch tasks and employers. Many tasks are sub-contracted to transfer financial risk and allow for (quasi) vertical integration while keeping the business small. Subcontractors range from skilled professionals or legal enterprises selling their specialised services, to multi-skilled cocaine entrepreneurs who buy off particular risky operational tasks. Nevertheless, the most dangerous ones are performed by an unskilled, replaceable workforce. These people are hired, again, either for specific operations or for doing 'a little bit of everything' (*toderos*), and they are paid with some sort of flexi-wage. They have poor skills, no promotion perspectives, and they face death or imprisonment with no security for them or their families. They are irregulars, some alternating with other legal, informal or illegal activities. Many of them had no criminal record, and learnt the job by doing it.

Against the popular belief, these enterprises do not develop stable managerial bodies. Bosses often work 'hand in hand' with their helpers, some of which also have their 'own' businesses or eventually replace them if they are caught. Despite a clear division between capital and labour, between bosses and subordinates with different power and status, labour division is not rigid and compartmentalised in vertical lines, but shows a more horizontal fragmented structure. Some people erratically switched roles between what Mike Davis has called 'lumpen capitalists' and 'outlaw proletarians' (Davis 1990: 310), especially subordinates, brokers and subcontractors. Finally, flexible payments included 'on commission' and 'bonus' systems, gifts or other incentives if things went as planned. Personal failure and conflicts, or even business delays or seizures, meant usually payment cuts or no payment at all.

The way in which Colombian *traquetos* organise themselves to traffic cocaine, from export to wholesale distribution, perhaps represents one of the finest examples of the post-Fordist firm (Lea 1997). The illegal nature of the cocaine business introduces even more dynamism to all trends and features known in post-Fordist capital accumulation. No taxes, large profits, no labour regulations and unions, no training costs, not even a company building: the ultimate utopia of those advocates of market and business flexibility. Undeniably, the lack of stable employees, the massive use of sub-contracting or the reliance on brokers are *also* risk minimising strategies to neutralise repression

efforts. While this 'wild' flexibility may threaten individual entrepreneurs – increasing transaction costs, expelling first-time losers from the game, and so on – it provides the overall cocaine business with a superb incentive and a competitive advantage. Although illegality shapes internal business and labour relations, these relations can also be traced in other highly competitive legal markets, which struggle to survive under post-Fordist conditions. These commonalities also make possible the symbiotic overlap between legal and illegal businesses and labour markets.

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