

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Although you mustn’t pretend to be ‘one of them’, it is equally important that you don’t stick out like a sore thumb in the criminal’s natural environment”

Ned Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others*.

Traqueto is an interesting notion difficult to translate. For the past two decades, it has been the most familiar name used by Colombians to refer to a particular sort of drug entrepreneurs. Next to the *jibaro* (street dealer), the *mula* (air smuggler) or the *patrón* (boss), Colombians have reserved that onomatopoeic name for some self-made, ambitious Colombian migrant-traffickers. Their sudden emergence in the Colombian society of the early 1970s is described by Arango (1988) with some romanticism:

“Since the early beginnings of cocaine export to the American market, an individual emerged who was to play a key role in drug trafficking: the *traqueto*. In need of having some representative in the United States, the first Colombian narco-traffickers sent people to move from place to place, in search of new markets. Maybe in this way the name derives from the verb *traquetear*, ‘to move’ or ‘to shake up’ in one of its meanings.¹ (...) The *traqueto* is a courageous, imaginative and skilful individual who in order to leave a difficult economic situation, fearlessly takes the risk to travel to the United States with the responsibility of organising and controlling the mechanisms to receive the drug, to stash it in a safe place (*encaletarla*), to sell it to the wholesale distributors and to cash the money. In other words, he is a marketing and distribution head for the drug entrepreneur based in Colombia. From there, his strategic role in the chain between production and consumption. (...) After some time in the United States, the *traqueto* returns to Medellín with his own liquid capital and new manners and consumerist practices...” (Arango 1988: 24-25, my translation).

Many of these *traquetos* later became large cocaine exporters in Colombia; others were killed, went to prison or simply lost their fortunes. Still others managed to turn into legitimate entrepreneurs. Some of them truly represented, and still do, strong social models amongst many young Colombians across various social classes and countries. As it is often the case with other illegal entrepreneurs or social bandits, people tend to project on them the most contradicting values, feelings and expectations one can imagine. They are national heroes against American laws and truly emissaries of the American Dream; successful immigrants and ill-reputed parasites, arrogant and generous, sexist men and gentle, violent and funny, loyal with

1 Salazar et al. (1992: 46) suggest a second possible origin as *traquetear* also means ‘to rattle’ or ‘to bang’, in clear reference to the noise of their automatic weapons (DZ).

bosses and ready to betray everyone, good organisers and better improvisers, dangerous criminals and social benefactors, fair employers and, of course, faithful Catholics.

Nowadays, the *traqueto* label has gone beyond the sole notion of 'envoy' to be extended to any (male) Colombian cocaine exporter, importer and distributor operating in Colombia and overseas, Europe included. While the term *traquetos* used by themselves and their subordinates usually has a positive connotation, it can be negatively loaded if applied by, for example, other Colombian immigrants not involved in the business.

This book is about Colombian *traquetos* in the Netherlands and the people working for them. More specifically, it raises questions about their social, labour and organisational relations amongst themselves, with Colombia and with other social groups. It explores their legal and illegal arrangements, their relationship with other Colombian immigrants and some of their cultural repertoires.

1.1 THE PROBLEM AND THE ARGUMENT

Criminal organisations, secret drug networks, Latin American *mafia* and, of course, Colombian cocaine 'cartels'. These are the names and concepts widely used to describe both the Colombian cocaine industry and its many participants, from entrepreneurs to employees. The use of these notions is not fortuitous, but the direct result of considering Colombian cocaine exporters as members of highly structured groups, as concealed from mainstream society, as powerful political brokers or as running monopolist enterprises. These assumptions are particularly traceable in most accounts on the renowned cocaine organisations of Medellín and Cali.

The idea of a cartel, even if metaphorically invoked, suggests that drug producers and exporters are organised in economic-bureaucratic structures that secretly conspire to control prices and output in a monopolist fashion. The cartel model further emphasises a highly structured co-ordination, central operational control, strict labour division and sophisticated organisational skills. Almost uncontested during the 1980s and the 1990s, the notion of cartel has shown a remarkable resistance as new areas or groups have taken over the cocaine business in Colombia. For example, it has been repeatedly argued that the dismantling of the Cali cartel has only meant the rise of the ubiquitous Northern Cauca Valley cartel. Others prefer to talk about the emergence of new '*cartelitos*' (small cartels).

However, as the notion of *traqueto* suggests, cocaine cartels seem to go beyond regional or national borders to form transnational criminal organisations (Williams 1995). In fact, from their very origins they have worked internationally, integrating complex operations through various countries following the routes of international trade. First in the US and later in Europe, Colombian cocaine organisations have tried to secure some of the huge profits around cocaine import and wholesale distribution in consumer markets. Of course, and for reasons that I will explain in this book, they have been more successful in particular regions or markets than in others.

In the Netherlands, most observers, enforcement agencies and official reports have

flirted with this idea of transnational Colombian cartels (Van Duyne et al 1990; Fijnaut et al. 1996; Prisma Team 2000). They are portrayed as hierarchically organised in secret, extremely violent 'cells' or overseas 'branches', which would 'belong' to a particular group in Colombia.

A strong 'ethnic' component is finally added to the picture: these criminal organisations are presumed to follow the routes of migration and heavily rely on overseas expatriate communities to operate (Bovenkerk 2001). Colombian cartels would predominantly use relatives, friends and vulnerable immigrants abroad as partners or employees, while host countries regard cocaine trade as an ethnic phenomenon and entire Colombian communities are faced with a spoiled reputation.

A first and more general aim of this study is to examine the nature of Colombian cocaine enterprises. To what extent are the different conceptual frameworks and methods used to approach Colombian drug traffickers adequate in revealing their social practices and relations? Are they organised along ethnic or kinship lines? Do they run their businesses as legal entrepreneurs? What sort of interdependencies do they establish amongst themselves and with larger social structures? In this way, the present book seeks to contribute to current discussions on contemporary forms of organised crime undertaken by anthropologists, economists and criminologists.

My itinerary starts in Colombia, a country often depicted as controlled by all-powerful drug organisations whose activities are said to be beneficial to many people, from peasants to bankers. In order to understand *traqueto's* social practices, I need to begin by asking whether that has indeed been the case.

Chapter II will trace the historical origins of the cocaine business in Colombia and will examine the competitive advantages of that country for the development of a leading position. The economic dimension of the business will be briefly discussed, in order to present export volumes, prices and transaction costs. Since most Colombian involvement in the Netherlands is directly linked to business developments at source, I will further show how the groups producing and exporting cocaine are organised. By examining their social origins, regional differences and internal relationships, I will argue that those groups are smaller and more flexible and independent than the notion of cartel suggests. Finally, I will focus on their collusion with broader social and political structures, describing the sources and limits for social legitimation. I will compare Colombian cocaine organisations with Italian or Italo-American *mafia*-style groups and argue that they present major social and political differences.

Colombia, which produces and exports 75% of all cocaine consumed worldwide, has readily been identified as the source (and scope) of all the problems around the international cocaine trade. In this way, the role of 'receiving' regions such as the US or Europe has often been either played down or reduced to develop defensive strategies from external threats.² However, particular areas in consumer countries

2 The recent *Plan Colombia* is just another example of such a pure defensive strategy on supply sources. As stated by W. Ledwith, Chief of International Operations of the DEA: "We in DEA believe that the international trafficking organisations based in Colombia who smuggle their illegal drugs into our country pose a formidable challenge to the national security of the United States." (DEA Congressional Testimony before the Senate, 25-2-2000).

seem to function as main players in the global cocaine market chain. After Spain, the Netherlands has played, for example, the main role in the import and wholesale distribution of South American cocaine into Europe for the last decade.

A further aim of the present book is then to examine such a role, again to make sense of the *traqueto*'s activities in Europe. What does the European cocaine market look like in terms of demand and supply, and what is the Netherlands specific position in it? And more importantly, how do Colombian drug traffickers perceive such a position?

Chapter III will first argue that when cocaine was legal and produced in Europe (1860-1930), the Netherlands played a prominent role as coca importer and cocaine producer. In order to understand such a role today, I will then present some general indicators regarding current cocaine demand in Europe: prevalence trends, estimated volumes consumed, prices and purities. In the same fashion, the dynamics of European cocaine supply will be tackled. I will briefly explain what sort of groups are engaged in cocaine import and distribution within the European space. An attempt will be made to 'read' available cocaine seizure data. Further to this, I will trace the major cocaine lines and provide a cartography of cocaine trafficking into Europe. Why is the Netherlands so attractive for cocaine exporters and importers? The final section of chapter III will present the *traqueto*'s points of views and perceptions of the Dutch business environment. They will discuss about the economic activity, logistic infrastructure, potential contacts and partners, and enforcement risks.

Colombian drug organisations have also been defined as transnational crime syndicates that use overseas immigrant networks to organise their business. By providing loyalty, contacts and infrastructure in export-import operations, Colombian immigrants in the US or Europe also secure some of the lion's share of profits made at import, wholesale and retail levels. In this way, whether they come from one end or the other, the *traquetos* could be seen as connecting cocaine exporters with distant immigrant diasporas.

However, and in order to explore such assumptions, one should first examine the Colombian immigrant groups in question: it might well be the case that they are not in a position to get involved with or help cocaine exporters. So the question arises: who are these Colombian immigrants living in the Netherlands? Although they are the largest and increasingly growing Latin American group, Colombians in the Netherlands remain an invisible and under-researched community.

Chapter IV will thus provide data on their migrant patterns, their demographic and social profiles, and their economic modes of incorporation. It will also describe the major obstacles they perceive or experience, and how they set the limits for ethnic solidarity and organisation. I will argue that the lack of (legal) Colombian entrepreneurs and enterprises on the one hand, and the weak patterns of ethnic solidarity on the other, inhibit defining this group as a middlemen minority or an ethnic enclave.

Even if the immigrant group lacks the social and economic characteristics to fully participate in the illegal business, some involvement still seems to be the case. Indeed, I found many *traquetos* and a heterogeneous group of migrants engaged in various levels of the local cocaine business. Therefore, a central question of this book tackles

this involvement: what has been the specific role of Colombian nationals in transport, import, wholesale distribution and retail selling of cocaine in/into the Netherlands during the past 10 years? What sort of (legal and illegal) arrangements do *traquetos* make to conduct their operations? What are their social backgrounds and their chances of success and failure?

While chapter V presents my findings regarding their participation in cocaine smuggling and import, chapter VI will focus on wholesale distribution and retail selling. In each case, I will show their social backgrounds and their legal and illegal business arrangements, identifying the conditions that restrict or enlarge their opportunities as cocaine entrepreneurs and employees. I shall discuss their chances for success and failure, their relationship with local Colombian immigrants and their overall place in the Dutch cocaine market.

Amongst Colombian immigrants, two quantitative important groups have also been either criminalised or socially censured: prostitutes and illegal immigrants. Both vulnerable groups have often been easily associated with the cocaine business, at least as potential participants. The areas with *Latino* prostitution are said to integrate the whole spectrum: Colombian cocaine dealers, prostitutes, pimps and illegal immigrants. However, how the *traquetos* actually relate with them?

Chapter VII will thus describe the main characteristics of Colombian prostitutes and illegal immigrants. It will further analyse the relation of these specific groups in the cocaine business, examining their chances of getting involved in it, and their reasons for distancing themselves from cocaine dealers.

Colombian cocaine enterprises active in the Netherlands have also been portrayed as branches, cells or agents of Colombian cartels, as closed family businesses, or as flexible though homogeneous criminal networks. Yet, what is wrong with these approaches? If, as I will argue, a more dynamic picture of cocaine enterprises and *traqueto* performances can be given by studying their internal economic relations through ethnographic research, the obvious question is just what are the labour and business relations that Colombian *traquetos* establish amongst themselves?

Chapter VIII will be devoted to an analysis of these relations. A heterogeneous number of business and labour modalities will be identified, mainly providing critical evidence against the aforementioned models. I will argue that Colombian cocaine enterprises found in Europe resemble post-Fordist, 'just-in-time' enterprises. While arrangements are even more flexible due to the illegal nature of the business, flexibility is also essential for the interaction between legal and illegal entrepreneurs and enterprises.

Finally, when referring to the internal and external dynamics of cocaine trafficking groups, most observers have also pointed out the key role of violence, secrecy and trust for the shaping of social and business relations. Colombian *traquetos* are presented as being extremely violent, living in a secret world, and only relying on trusted equals. However, these resources have often been taken for granted. What is therefore the role of violence, secrecy and trust for Colombian *traquetos*? How are these resources used or manipulated?

Chapter IX will demonstrate how these social devices are both essential tools and serious obstacles in the daily performances of Colombian cocaine entrepreneurs in the

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