Flow

The organization of upper level drug dealing

After Dark

Organizations and the Night Time Economy

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The UN strategy on drugs over the past decade has been a failure, a European Commission report claimed in March 2009 at an international conference (Commission, 2009). The authors declared that the study had found no evidence that the global drug problem declined during the period from 1998 to 2007. The global number of users of cocaine and heroin expanded and cannabis use has become part of adolescent development in many Western countries. Illicit drug markets generate more than one hundred billion Euros in sales. Although the “war on drugs” costs billions of Euros it has not been possible to reduce the production and distribution of drugs. These facts show that the drug trade is highly effective and is organized in a way that can neither be controlled nor eradicated.

Drug dealing is a consensual crime, in which “the victim” is a willing participant in the offence (Hunt, 1990). It can be considered as a highly profitable economic enterprise (Hobbs, 1995, 1998). Nevertheless the realm is widely unexplored and neglected by standard textbooks. With fewer than a dozen relevant studies that deal with upper level drug distribution (Desroches, 2007), empirical data is rare. The highly covert and elusive nature of upper level drug trafficking (Desroches, 2007) and the “hypocrisy of legal imperatives, and ignorance masquerading as moral outrage” (Hobbs, 1995: 8) might be a reason for the lack of empirical material.

In the study of upper level drug dealing sociological (Adler, 1985; Hobbs, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2001; Pearson & Hobbs, 2003; Sales & Murphy, 2007) and criminological (Lampe, 2007; McCarthy & Hagan, 2001; Natarajan, 2006; Natarajan & Belanger, 1998) analyses prevail. Thick and rich ethnographic descriptions that provide a gripping insight in the organization of upper level drug distribution like for example “Wheeling and Dealing” from Patricia Adler (1985) are rare. Analytical frameworks tend to focus on deviant behaviour. A theoretical concept explaining organizational dynamics of upper level drug dealing is lacking. This is not least due to the hassle in thinking flux, movement, change and transformation. A concept that enables an understanding of organization as something that organizes flow is missing. This paper tries to fill this gap by addressing three essential issues in understanding the drug trade. First, it offers examples of changes in the drug trade after state interventions. Second, it addresses the inner dynamics of the drug distribution exploring basic principles of the business. Third, it demonstrates how nomadic practices organize the flow of information, money and drugs within these assemblages.
I will do this by referring to ideas of Deleuze and Guattari (2004). They developed a set of conceptual tools that treat stability and order as the exception and understand organization as a “becoming”. I argue that upper level drug can be understood as a war machine in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). The war machine is very different from our conventional understanding of a machine. It is characterized by movement and change. Nomadic principles and practices facilitate its ongoing transformation. The war machine entails a rhizomatic nature of change. The processes of organizing are “precarious, tentative and heterogeneous network-strengthening features of actor-alliances” (Chia, 1999: 211). In this sense “change and organization are imbricated in each other” (Linstead & Thanem, 2007: 1483) and are an active and creative reply to experience. I will use these concepts to explore the deep structure of forces which account for the nature, existence and ongoing transformation (Morgan, 1997) of the drug business.

This paper is built on preliminary results of an ongoing study about upper level drug dealing in the context of understanding creative organizational form. Over a period of 10 months I was involved in field work with a network of cannabis dealers who had been distributing hundreds of kilos all over Europe. To support the conceptualization I additionally will refer to a wide range of studies conducted on drug dealing.

**Methodology**

As part of the my PhD thesis about long term unemployment I was given permission by the Austrian Ministry of Justice to carry out ethnographic field work, talks with staff and interviews in a prison. During my field work I discovered that one of the interviewees – I will call him David – had been involved in upper level drug dealing. David was a member of a drug dealing network which sold 50 kilos of cannabis every few months. When I realized the scope of their activities I decided to explore their organizing practices in drugs distribution. During the following months it seemed to be impossible to gain David’s trust. I tried to prove my trustworthiness by showing him my workplace and inviting him for lunch but all my efforts to establish a relationship of trust seemed to fail. I repeatedly thought about abandoning the research project. Once David disappeared for 6 weeks and I feared that I would not see him again. In this time I learned my first lesson about the drug business: Secrecy is powerful. By fluke I met him again at the train station. He was desperate, having
missed his connection to a flight at Munich Airport. My offer to give him a lift and thereby enable him to catch his flight broke the ice. After he came back he called me up and we started to meet regularly. Eventually he introduced me to his former business partners and friends and agreed to work with me in this ethnographic research project. Over a period of ten months I used qualitative interviews, stories and group methods with five former members of the network to research upper level drug dealing. David’s and his associates’ concerns about the project shifted. After some time his main concerns were not about my trustworthiness anymore, but the potential public attention to the project that might increase knowledge about drug dealing networks. Public ignorance is crucial for the success of secret alliances, because it insulates them from offences and repression. The fact that a journal publication is on average read by 9.7 people set their concerns at least partly at rest.

I gathered descriptions of the life-world of the interviewees and tried to reconstruct organizing practices of the drug trade for several months. Stories provided valuable insight in the emotional and symbolic lives of the organizational members and their organizing practices. Examining which events in the organization’s history generate stories and which ones fail (Gabriel & Griffiths, 2004), and investigating how the narratives are constructed around these events, gave me access to their deeper organizational realities. I used group methods as instruments to contrast and check previous stories and to experience the dynamics between the perspectives. The empirical material is solely from people who were directly involved in drug distribution. In order to triangulate the data accounts of drug squads and surveillance units will be integrated in proximate research steps.

The business

I will start with a short description of their business. David was a purchaser of large amounts of cannabis resin which he obtained from a group of Englishmen. Later on I will explain in detail the role of the Englishmen. At the moment it is enough to say that they had a relationship with a wholesaler in the Netherlands. The wholesaler sold the drugs to the Englishman and organized the smuggling of the drugs. In the first months of his business activities David only had only connection with the Englishmen who picked up the money in advance and came back with the drugs within a few days. After several months of successful business David started to collect the drugs directly from the smuggler and the Englishmen
restricted themselves to collecting the money and carrying out the business in the Netherlands. The rhizomatic arrangement of people smuggled and distributed hundreds of kilos of cannabis products all over Europe.

The constructions imposed on the war machine

Throughout this paper the concept of the war machine (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) will serve as a framework in exploring the organizing forces of the drug trade. Unlike traditional concepts, the war machine stresses change and transformation. Before turning to the specifics of the war machine I will give a short overview on traditional concepts. Drug distribution is typically associated with organized crime. With the end of the Second World War and the beginnings of the narrative of “alien conspiracy”, organized crime was depicted as a nationwide, centralized criminal organization (Paoli, 2002). Although this idea was ideologically polluted and lacking in accuracy and empirical evidence (Smith, 1976), it had a major influence on the discourse on crime. Paoli (2002) shows that the concept of “organized crime” inconsistently incorporates notions of the provision of illegal goods and services, and of a criminal organization understood as a large-scale collectivity. Later on analogies between criminal organizations and multinational corporations became fashionable and the concept of the “illegal enterprise” was established. Especially in Europe organized crime was frequently identified with Italian mafia organizations (Paoli, 2002). Notions of durability, hierarchy and the involvement in a multiplicity of criminal activities characterize the concept. I think it is more than a coincidence that at the same time the functionalist interpretation (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) of the system approach was the dominant theoretical framework (Reed, 2006). The Weberian concept of bureaucracy – characterized by centralization, hierarchy, authority, discipline, rules, career, division of labour and tenure (Clegg & Hardy, 1997) – was imposed on the idea of “organized crime”. The conception of organization as a rationally constructed artifice that overcomes the seemingly intractable emotion and prejudice by rational knowledge and technique (Clegg & Hardy, 1997) was too tantalizing for those shaping the idea of “organized crime”. However empirical evidence indicates that in the case of upper level drug distribution decay, change and creation are the order, not the exception. These organizations are not hierarchical constructs, but social networks that generate trust and reciprocity among criminals (Kenney,
People involved make and remake groups. Rather than in terms of states and properties of clearly delimited entities, these networks consist of interlocking and extending relations through a widely defined domain (Adler, 1985; Desroches, 2005; Hobbs, 1998). The distribution of drugs largely takes part through “disorganized” (Reuter, 1983) social networks that are not “flat-nets”, but social assemblages (Law & Callon, 1988). The trail of associations between heterogeneous elements and a peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling (Latour, 2005) organizes the flow of information, money and drugs. The war machine is constituted by a multitude of such assemblages.

The war machine and the State

The interrelations and interactions of the war machine with the State apparatus are particularly interesting. According to Deleuze and Guattari (2004) the war machine is characterized by its exteriority to the state. It has another nature and another origin than the state. It is irreducible to the State apparatus and outside its sovereignty and prior to its laws (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004).

Although the State uses all its sovereignty, power and public support, it cannot destroy the war machine. It changes the exteriority of the war machine, but not its inner dynamics. I will show how the relation of State apparatus and war machine can be understood with an example of public intervention carried out by the US in the 1970s. I have taken this example, because not least due to their economic power their agenda influences the “war on drugs” worldwide.

In the 1970s the government of the United States made several bureaucratic changes and created various agencies designed to further challenge the drug problem. They ran the campaign “Operation Intercept” which increased the border patrols and surveillance of individuals entering the country from Mexico. The operation was designed to apprehend people smuggling marihuana and cocaine on their bodies and in their vehicles (Adler, 1985). The State tried to defeat the war machine by striating the space over which it reigned. The war machine reacted by creating smooth space. By sharply curtailing individual and small-scale smuggling operations professional drug traffickers took advantage of a market with minor supply. They used airplanes to transport their products and established networks that soon distributed significantly more drugs than before. When the agencies started to realize
that their efforts to cut drug distribution lead to a professionalization of the business and eventually to a major supply they started a herbal defoliation program. The naïve idea was that by destroying the crops where most of the marihuana came from supply could be stopped. The war machine with its immanent riots, guerrillas, warfare and revolutions again created smooth space, sending U.S. smugglers deeper into the heartland of South America (Adler, 1985). The U.S. policy of repression enhanced the war machine by escalating Colombian marijuana production and integrating another major drug in the supply chain. The rise of cocaine began. The intervention of the State apparatus led to a series of changes of the exteriority of the war machine. Dramatic increase in the level of enforcement activities did not affect the availability of drugs (Reuter & Kleiman, 1986). Quite the contrary was the case. The war machine gained in vitality and pervasion through its own principles. In the following abstract I will focus on these principles and their dynamics.

The inner dynamics of the war machine

Drug trafficking is an illegal activity and hence operates without the protection of the law. Risks of persecution and detection lead to a creative unfolding of the organizing activities (Sales & Murphy, 2007). Engaging in the drug business means overcoming public, social and personal obstacles. Empirical research indicates that upper level drug trafficking consists of criminal networks (Desroches, 2007; Kenney, 2007; Lampe, 2007).

The drug trade is characterized by a fluid social system of social networks. These networks represent informal and loosely coupled associations. The networks involved in the drug business are independent, autonomous, decentralized, informal, coalitional, and situational (Hobbs, 1998). Different groups occasionally pool resources to carry out certain activities, but predominantly maintain their own sources of supply, financing and clientele. Through common objectives, shared experiences and communication intra-group and inter-group networks connect with other nodes.

All these networks constitute the war machine. The war machine is opposed to the apparatus of the State. “He brings a furor to bear against sovereignty, a celerity against gravity, secrecy against the public, a power (puissance) against sovereignty, a machine against the apparatus.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 388)
The network of upper level cannabis dealers I have been researching was characterized by shifts and oscillations. David earned the money to enter the business by planting marihuana and selling it to friends. Sophisticated cultivation techniques allowed considerable profit margins. He shifted from using to selling and reinvested his money by purchasing a considerable amount of cannabis resin provided by the Englishmen. This was a network that consisted of free willed “entrepreneurs” (Murphy, Waldorf, & Reinarman, 1990). These entrepreneurs were not intermediaries, but mediators (Latour, 2005) transforming, translating, distorting and modifying meaning and action. The organization of the business was characterized by a series of variances, phase-outs and re-entries of actors. Different nodes of the network were connected and loosened and the organization was in continuous movement.

In January 2009 I arranged a focus group under the title “cannabis products and their effects”. I interviewed David and two of his former business partners, Peter and Jim, in David’s flat. I became aware of the variety of cannabis products traded. From cannabis sativa and cannabis indica a multitude of products are generated reaching from the flower, to resin and oil. The most interesting thing was not just that there are hundreds of variations, but that these people had access to many of these derivates. The hashish the Englishmen provided was just one out of an array of supplies. Peter used to travel to Chefchaouen, a city in the mountains of Morocco, in order to get high quality resin. He explained that he bought cannabis products which had not been altered or cut with harmful substances from a local friend there. Jim told me that when he was doing business from time to time a friend provided him by indoor marihuana he was growing in his house. He assured me that within 15 square meters a skilled grower can produce an output of 10 kilos a year with a street value of 100.000 Euros.

The assemblage of dealers and users was open and changing, and had no underlying structure or hierarchy. It used a variety of supply channels. As Hunt (1990) notes, people at almost all levels of drug use distribute drugs. Obtaining drugs and sharing them with other users seems to be regular practice. Some users report that they carry out hundreds, even thousands, of drug transactions each year (Hunt, 1990). Compared to the number of transactions, the number of arrests is extremely small. Reuter and Kleiman (1986) divided the number of users by a very rough estimate of the number of customers with whom a
A retailer would be willing to transact. They estimated that in the US in 1986 there were 500,000 marijuana dealers, 180,000 cocaine dealers, and 45,000 heroine dealers. These numbers do not include importers, wholesalers, and their employees (Reuter & Kleiman, 1986). The network was characterized by an “ontology of becoming” rather than an “ontology of being” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) and had similarities with the rhizome network described by Deleuze and Guattari. As in the case of Ecstasy dealers (Sales & Murphy, 2007), interpersonal relations shaped the organizing practices applied. The concept of subculture, with its normative values, beliefs and practices is inadequate (Moore, 2004) for describing this assemblage. Exploring the activities of drug using groups Moore (2004) states: “They are too diverse, too fluid, and too heterogeneous in the origins of their members and in the ideologies that they construct and reconstruct (Moore, 2004: 187).” When one of the providers got in legal difficulties in his home country, his brothers replaced him. Over several years the network was broken and shattered at different stages of the distribution process, but it started up again and found new ways to organize the flow. The rhizomatic arrangement moved, expanded, and developed a territory. Organizing practices created smooth spaces that were difficult to regulate and occupy with public intervention. In this sense actions are a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many sets of agencies (Latour, 2005) characterized by uncertainty and controversy. Building up contacts, organizing the cash flow, packaging, smuggling, handing over and distributing the drugs are part of a silence structured by organizing practices. For a single transaction it is often necessary to have several meetings about operational details (Sarmiento & Krauthausen, 1991). In one of the group discussions I asked David and Peter how they maintained the flow of information. It turned out that one of their leisure activities was crucial for their communication. They interchanged information using chats while playing online poker. Using the smooth space of poker chats guaranteed the ongoing interchange of information.

**Nomadic principals**

In my research and literature review I found three principals that seem to characterize the drug business. These are secrecy, friendship and non-conflict. The war on drugs is a war against an opponent who tries to slip away unseen. To elude attention, observation or
comprehension, bits of information are kept hidden or controlled (Wexler, 1987). Therefore members of the drug business are deeply concerned with the protection of their activities, and control information about the valued elements. Drug dealers I interviewed have a set of pragmatic and evolving measures that create a dynamic of secrecy. Secrecy is used as a tool for group formation and shaping group structures. It creates loyalty and intimacy as well as exclusion and denial. Stories about successful and failed business activities and operation on a need-to-know basis seem to play a decisive role in the creation and sustainment of secrecy. They manage and master their environment by using the principle of secrecy as a main source of power. They protect themselves from detection by keeping operational matters about drug providers, smugglers, turnover and conditions secret and use codes to close deals or pass on information. The encryption keeps spaces smooth and makes them difficult to regulate and occupy by others. Secrecy is used as a concept that makes specific rules superfluous. As such it is not static but dynamic and contains basic assumptions about attitudes and behaviours of the drug dealing network. Depending on the context, interpretations of the principle of secrecy lead to actions taken by the members. As Simmel put it, if human interaction is “conditioned by the capacity to speak, it is shaped by the capacity to be silent...” (Simmel & Wolff, 1950: 345) The propositions worked out by Simmel for describing conditions and transformations relevant for secret societies (Hazelrigg, 1969) are also true for drug dealing networks. Secrecy is an important principle of drug dealing networks and silence is one of the practices. As drug dealing is an illegal activity a variety of measures are taken to protect the business from detection. But the scope of secrecy is far beyond just making the business invisible from the police. In drug dealing networks secrets are actively created and celebrated. Sharing knowledge strategically is a reservoir of power and the condition for efficient governance (Foucault, 1988). Through secrecy the participants of the social network are directly and indirectly linked. It is the ultimate form of regulating flow and distributing information (Simmel & Wolff, 1950). The perceptions of threat by non-members and political oppression have structuring effects on organizing processes. Nevertheless there are some major differences concerning rules of formation and constitution of structures. Simmel argues that a secret society is formed out of the intentional, reflective efforts of individuals to construct a hierarchical organization. Simmel’s secret society does not grow up, but is built (Simmel & Wolff, 1950). The literature on upper level drug dealing (Adler, 1985; Hobbs, 1998; Kenney, 2007) and my research project suggest
that drug trafficking networks do not follow the will of one person, but develop their own dynamics and evolve over time.

In the following section I will focus on the principle of friendship, a nomadic strategy especially useful in understanding the drug business. Munro lists in his book “Information Warfare in business” principles of nomadic strategy derived from Lawrence’s description of the Arab revolt. “Our rebels were not materials, like soldiers, but friends of ours, trusting our leadership. We were not in command nationally, but by invitation; and our men were volunteers, individuals, local men, relatives, so that a death was a personal sorrow to many in the army.” (Lawrence, 1935: 168) David was a member of a network of upper level cannabis dealers which consisted almost exclusively of friends he had known for years. It turned out that several of them were poker fanatics. They met each other several times a months to play cards. David was betrayed, but he did not name one of his business partners to the police. Although he lost contact with some of the members of the network, others supported him during his time in prison and continued with a trusting relationship. Informal group relations are of decisive importance in illegitimate businesses.

A startling insight arising from the interviews was that in spite of my repeated questions about violence not a single act of violence could be reported. Like in the guerrilla theory of Che Guevara (Munro, 2005) violence is constructed as wasteful and provocative of severe reprisals. Violence seems to be used as a last resort (Sarmiento & Krauthausen, 1991). It exerts its principal power in the discourse. The threat of violence is used as a weapon to collect debts or push forward deals. According to the interviewees in my research violent acts never took place. Surprisingly this also seems to be true for the business with hard drugs. As Zaitch (2005), the number of cocaine-related homicides in the Netherlands is extremely small.

The principles of secrecy, friendship and non-conflict explain some major dynamics in the drug business. Like the participants of the rural Kentucky marijuana industry (Hafley & Tewksbury, 1995) David and other members of the network do not perceive themselves as members of an organized crime network, but as under siege from the outside world. Laws are depicted as arbitral and transitory. The kinship networks determine the trustworthiness of potential new organization members. Secrecy, friendship and non-conflict seem to be exceedingly important for the understanding of drug dealing networks.
Nomadic practices

After explaining three important principals of upper level drug dealing I want to go on to explore three fundamental practices. To this end I will focus on one group acting in the drug trafficking assemblage. The group consisted of five Englishmen who were decisive in providing huge amounts of drugs. The Englishmen had contact to a wholesaler in the Netherlands and to a German organizing the transport of the drugs. They negotiated prices and organized the cash flow. They were nomads, travelling around the world building up and maintaining contacts. Like the nomad who reaches the water point only in order to leave it behind, the Englishmen visit places just to be gone again. Their strategy was thinking in speed and movement (Munro, 2005) and became their way of life.

“A path is always between two points, but the in-bet-ween has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 380)

These nomads are not all the same as migrants. They go from one point to another “only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him (them) are relays along a trajectory.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 380) The relays consist of a multiplicity of information and relations that enable maintenance of the business. One elemental organizing practice of the drug-business is to create an arena of outstanding debts. Deals were never finished – one party always held money or drugs back from the other. The rule was that one third was prepaid when ordering – the rest after distributing the drugs. This practice guaranteed that the relationship never ended, that tensions always continued in welding the assemblage together. Another characteristic of the nomad trajectory is that even though it may follow trails or customary routes, it does not fulfil the function of the sedentary road. It does not “parcel out a closed space to people, assigning each person a share and regulating the communication between shares.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 380)

David knew that the Englishmen were travelling all over Europe relaying their business activities, but he never got to know other business partners. The nomads bought the drugs in the Netherlands, organized the transport, and flew to Austria just to take the drugs from the smuggler and give them to David. The Englishmen travelled thousands of miles a year, just to maintain the non-communicating nature of the space.
The nomadic trajectory distributes people in an “open space that is indefinite and noncommunicating” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 380) Only non-communicating, indefinite spaces can guarantee the persistence of the assemblage in their struggle.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) make a distinction between sedentary space and nomad space. “(S)edentary space is striated, by walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures, while nomad space is smooth, marked only by “traits” that are effaced and displaced with the trajectory.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 380)

Walls and enclosures have a dialectical role. They provide safety for the sedentary and menace to the nomad. The Englishmen knew that the more they moved, the more they effaced and displaced their tracks and the safer they were. Multiple identities and falsified passports guaranteed that not even their closest friends could trace their tracks. They created a smooth space of secrecy.

Summary and Conclusion

Traditional approaches of conceptualizing upper level drug dealing have failed in grasping the dynamics and ever changing process that characterize the drug business. Notions of order, stability and permanence inhibit the understanding of flows of information, money and drugs. The war machine facilitates thinking organization as flux and in motion. It enables a conceptualization of decaying, change and creation by (1) explaining relations of the war machine and the State, (2) integrating principles of secrecy, friendship and non-conflict, and (3) embedding nomadic practices. This study offers a way of understanding upper level drug dealing as a heterogeneous articulation of organizing processes which are creatively subverting and escape constraints of control and order.


