

(In)Security and Policing in a Marginalized Mexico City Neighborhood: Perceptions, Experiences and Practices¹

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Reflecting a more general regional trend in the rise of urban crime and violence throughout Latin America (IBRD 2008; Koonings and Kruijt 2007a; Rotker 2002), since the mid 1990s, Mexico City witnessed a “metropolization of crime” (Castillo 2008: 181). Although official statistics indicate a tendential decline of reported crime rates since the late 1990s, victimization studies question these statements (Alvarado 2007), and according to a recent study on urban insecurity in Mexico, 87% of Mexico City residents feel unsafe in their city, ranking Mexico City at the top of all other large urban agglomerations in the country (ICESI 2008). As a result, according to local opinion polls, security issues have become the central concern for most of the Mexico City residents—and policy makers. Therefore, it seems undeniable that “[t]he single-most relevant issue on the urban agenda today is fear” (Castillo 2008: 181). However, this development is not only a reflection of a perceived increase in crime. This situation is also closely related to serious problems regarding the Mexico City police forces, which include the lack of adequate human resources and training; high turnover rates; a lack of vocational ethics; deficient and outdated equipment; police corruption; the absence of a clear normative framework of action; and the direct participation of police agents in organized (and unorganized) crime, violence and human rights violations (Pansters and Castillo Berthier 2007; Piccato 2007; Silva 2007; Azaola 2006; Davis 2006; Naval 2006; López-Montiel 2000; Martínez Murguía 1999). Though the local police institutions have increasingly attracted attention from NGO activists and academic scholars, who have accumulated substantial knowledge regarding the problems of the local public security apparatuses, detailed empirical analysis of the daily encounters between police and the

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residents of Mexico City, which can be expected to be the principal setting where the abovementioned problems unfold, are still the exception.

This paper wants to address this void. By drawing on the results of empirical fieldwork, this paper wants to address the question how the residents in Iztapalapa, one of the most marginalized boroughs of Mexico City, perceive the local police forces and imagine citizen-police relations. The paper will demonstrate that despite predominantly negative perceptions about and experiences with the local police forces, local residents do not abandon state institutions as security providers. In both material and symbolic terms, the state, its institutions and practices continued to be addressed and imagined by local residents as relevant security actors, capable of resolving local security problems. After a brief note on my methodological approach, I will first introduce the empirical setting of Iztapalapa. Then I turn to the question how local residents perceived local policing. The next section addresses the observable ambivalence of citizen-police relations in Iztapalapa. The concluding section summarizes the main findings of this paper.

A Note on Methodology

The following presentation is based on 37 interviews conducted between 2006 and 2008. Twelve of these interviews were conducted by Carlos Alberto Zamudio Angels to whom I am heavily indebted for his research assistance. All formal interviews conducted for this study can be qualified as expert interviews (Meuser and Nagel 2005). This type of interview, which is based on a semi-structured questionnaire form, tries to obtain information relevant to the subject under consideration through interviews with people which, due to their position, knowledge and experience within a particular social setting, can be assumed to possess special knowledge about practices and processes within this context and can therefore be described as “experts.” The data was then analyzed in two steps. First, as suggested by Clarke (2005), I tried to draw situational maps “that lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive, historical, symbolic, cultural, political, and other elements in the research situation of concern and provoke analysis among them” (Clarke 2005: xxxv). The central questions to be asked in order to draw a situational map are: “Who and what are in this situation? Who and what matters in this situation? What elements ‘make a difference’ in this situation?” (Clarke 2005: 87). These maps therefore helped me to gain a first impression about what, from the perspective of the involved actors, “matters” and “makes a difference,” what is a problem, and how and by whom it is addressed. The interview material was then analyzed according to the method of qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2008; 2000). Here I opted for a deductive

categorization effort, which analyzes the material according to previously developed, theoretically justified, and clearly defined categories deduced from the guiding theoretical research interest. The qualitative step of such an analysis consists in assigning these deductive categories to related text passages. In a final step, the findings can be quantified (counted)—I opted to include this quantifying step, as I think that the incidence of a particular narrative is an indicator for its dominance within a given social context—and are subject to final interpretation (Mayring 2000: 5). The categories that I developed for my analysis of the local residents' ideas and perceptions of the local (in)security situation and the practices of police agents and that I deduced from my theoretical research interest—understanding citizen-police relations—were: security, insecurity, rule of law, corruption, bribery, physical police abuse, police extortion, legal subjectivity, self-help, social cohesion, and state. Most of these interviews were tape recorded. In a few cases, interviewees refused to record their narrations. In such cases, I wrote down their accounts. As I cannot guarantee the accuracy of my notes, I tried not to use these interviews for lengthy citations. As many people explicitly asked me not to be cited with their names, I decided to make anonymous the names of all interviewees and use fictitious names throughout the paper. As there are few studies about the security problems in contemporary Mexico City that draw upon the experiences and narrations of the local citizens, I have decided to give substantial space to the voices of the local residents by quoting extensively from the interviews. With this in mind, we can now turn to the empirical setting of this paper.

Mapping the Context: Marginality and Insecurity in Iztapalapa

This section will serve as an introduction to the empirical setting. Iztapalapa is one of the 16 boroughs (*delegaciones*) of Mexico City. It is located in the southeastern part of the city, and it shares a common administrative border with the municipalities of Nezahualcoyotl and La Paz in the State of Mexico. According to official statistics (INEGI 2006), the borough has a population of 1,773,343, which is 20.8 % of the entire population living in Mexico City. Although I am skeptical about Mike Davis' (2007: 32) suggestion of defining Iztapalapa as a part of one of the world's largest slum structures, Iztapalapa is undeniably one of the poorest and most marginalized boroughs of the city. According to the official Marginality Atlas for the Federal District,² 479,543 people (27.1%) are living in conditions of very high

² The degree of marginality as displayed in the Atlas takes into account questions of education, income, patrimony of the household and quality of the dwelling. These are divided up into six indicators: *población de 15 años y más sin secundaria completa*; *población ocupada que recibe hasta dos salarios mínimos mensuales de ingreso por trabajo*; *viviendas particulares que no disponen de teléfono*; *viviendas particulares con piso sin recubrimiento*; *viviendas particulares sin agua entubada dentro de la vivienda*; y *promedio de ocupantes por*

marginality. Another 486,294 people (27.4%) are living in conditions of high marginality, and 477,681 local residents (26.9%) are living in conditions of medium marginality. In sum, 81.4% of the residents of Iztapalapa are placed in the categories “very high marginality,” “high marginality” and “medium marginality.” Although some 53% of the local population are categorized as “economically active,” 35% of the local workforce receive less than the official minimum salary.³ This implies that most of the local workforce are living “in a situation of poverty, marked by a high degree of marginality, that manifests itself in malnutrition, the dissolution of families, violence, illness, addictive problems and illiteracy” (Delegación Iztapalapa 2008: 3). This socio-economic marginality is embedded in serious deficiencies regarding the provision of public services. Although once again I do not share the view of one local NGO activist who spoke of the “absence of the state” in large parts of Iztapalapa, local residents interviewed for this paper in general complained about the low quality of the local public infrastructure, such as water supply, health services and schools. Furthermore, they lamented the low density of parks, green areas, trees and recreational areas, when compared to other parts of Mexico City, as well as the bad conditions of many streets, which were perceived as being polluted by traffic and often filled with rubbish and dirt.

In addition to this high degree of socio-economic and institutional marginality, another important problem for Iztapalapa is crime. When we take official crime statistics as a starting point, in absolute numbers, in 2006, Iztapalapa had the highest crime rates in Mexico City (SSPDF 2007). However, when we consider the crime rate per 100,000 inhabitants, the picture changes substantially. As Arturo Arango Durán and Cristina Lara Medina demonstrated, when we disaggregate these absolute numbers and take the local crime rate per 100,000 as the baseline for assessing the local security situation, Iztapalapa is ranked at place 12 of the 16 Mexico City boroughs (Arango Durán and Lara Medina 2005: 4). However, and without entering the debate on the “quality” of local crime statistics, this should not be interpreted as if there are no serious security problems in the borough. In 2006, a report from the local Ministry for Social Development (*Secretaría de Desarrollo Social del Distrito Federal*) identified 63 territorial units, located in 43 neighborhoods, as the principal generators and receptors of crime in Mexico City. Nineteen of these territorial units were identified in Iztapalapa, placing it at the top of this list (La Jornada 19.01.2006). In addition, all of the local residents interviewed for this study perceived crime and (in)security, besides or together with the problem of deficient water supply as the single most important problem

cuarto dormitorio para el cálculo del hacinamiento. I used the Atlas’ data throughout the section dealing with marginality.

³ The current minimum wage is 52.59 Mexican Pesos a day or 1,598.736 Pesos a month, which is roughly \$120.

affecting the quality of neighborhood life. It is against this background that I will now approach the question how the local residents in Iztapalapa perceive local policing.

Policing Iztapalapa

To address the question of citizen-police relations in Iztapalapa, I will first give a brief overview of the official policing structure in Iztapalapa: The borough is located in the 2nd Police Region, together with the boroughs of Tláhuac and Milpa Alta. It is divided up into ten police sectors (IZP-1 – IZP-10). Iztapalapa has 14 *Ministerio Público* (MP) agencies with 80 MP agents. According to information provided by the SSPDF, in 2006 2,871 Preventive Police officers (roughly 10 % of its agents) were assigned to Iztapalapa (SSPDF 2007). In addition, we should also take into account that the local administration is in charge of a local police force, the *Policía Delegacional*, composed of members of the *Policía Auxiliar*,⁴ which is responsible for policing 40 of the 186 administrative units (*unidades territoriales*) of the borough. Furthermore, Iztapalapa also participated in the implementation of more citizen-oriented policing schemes such as the *Policía de Barrio* program and Citizen Protection Units (*Unidades de Protección Ciudadana*). Furthermore, a huge number of special operations and security programs were implemented throughout the last couple of years in order to confront the local insecurity problems (Delegación Iztapalapa 2007; Gil Montes and Rosas Huerta 2005). In addition, due to the presence of drug trafficking, whose prosecution according to existing legislation is exclusively of national-level jurisdiction (*fuero federal*), a Mixed Drug Enforcement Unit (*Unidad Mixta de Atención al Narcomenudeo*) composed of agents of the federal and local law enforcement agencies, members of the public ministry as well as medics was established in Iztapalapa in 2005. However, and notwithstanding the comparatively good security infrastructure and the implementation of police reform measures and security programs, few residents interviewed for this study perceived that there has been an

⁴In Mexico City, as in Mexico as a whole, since 1917 the police forces are divided into Judicial Police forces and Preventive Police forces. Whereas the first are an exclusive investigative police force, acting on behalf of the Public Prosecutor (*ministerio público*), the latter are responsible for the maintenance of public security and order in its narrow sense, doing the usual police footwork, and have no legal right to investigate crimes. Within the Federal District, the Secretary of Public Security of the Federal District (SSPDF), has the authority over the Preventive Police forces, and the Attorney General of the Federal District, the *Procuraduría General Justicia del Distrito Federal* (PGJDF), which holds the authority over the Judicial Police forces. Beside the Preventive Police, which are composed out of 30.000 police officers, the SSPDF is also in charge of two police organizations “outside” the Preventive Police force. These two police forces, which together compose the Complementary Police (*Policía Complementaria*), are the *Policía Auxiliar* (Auxiliary Police, PA) and the Banking and Industrial Police (*Policía Bancaria e Industrial*, PBI), which together employ nearly 45,000 police officers. These police forces can be legally contracted by public and private clients in order to guard their personal and commercial belongings (including buildings). In addition, Article 45 of the *Reglamento Interior* of the SSPDF specifies that the PA can be contracted by the Mexico City boroughs for providing public security in public places within their respective territories.

improvement in the local security situation, and all of them perceived that this outcome is also closely related to the practices of the local police forces, which were in general described in extremely negative terms. This negative perception of the local policing was related to three factors: 1) negative everyday experiences with local police forces, 2) the presumed protection and collaboration between police agents and criminal actors, and 3) the negative impact of politics on local policing. On the following pages I will address each of these factors.

The Local Police Forces in Practice

As mentioned above, the general perception of the local police forces as they appeared in the interviews can be summarized in one word: negative. Besides general references to the lack of education, vocation, unresponsiveness and inefficiency, one word local residents frequently used when discussing the local police was “fear.” This sensation of fear was on the one hand related to the anxiety of the local police itself. It was assumed that many police officers were too anxious to enforce existing laws by openly confronting illicit activities. In consequence, they were said to evade patrolling certain, particularly “dangerous” areas. More frequent than references to police agents unwilling to act were cases in which the interviewees expressed their fear *of* the police. In particular, but not exclusively, younger people felt very threatened by the local police. It was frequently reported that police officers search and harass people due to their physical appearance. Here it was usually a particular style of clothes or possible accessories or symbols of a “deviant culture” which were said to attract the attention of local police officers, and older people expressed that worn out or dirty clothing would easily convert a person into a “suspect” for the local police. As one informant stated: “You have to dress up like decent people so that they [the police] don’t frisk you.” (Ramón, owner of a café, 38 years).

(1) Always vigilant [laughter]. Because of the way I dress, the police have stopped me here on the corner. “Where did you come from and where are you going? Search him!” I told them: “Just leave me alone, really. One day I’ll wear a suit and pick up some knives. Who is going to frisk me? No one!” They just focus on your appearance. If you are wearing a dirty t-shirt, maybe I’ve just been doing work in my house and I go out to the store and it’s like: “He’s suspicious.” (Mariano, merchant, about 40 years)

Such experiences are not only perceived as molestations or harassments, they are viewed as potentially dangerous, as they involve the possibility of the police abusing their coercive power and “legal” faculties for extorting money from the involved persons or their families, frequently by fabricating false evidence.

(2) The police cause a lot of problems. Often, because of the way you dress, because of your tattoos, they detain you and take your money. Some of my friends were even stopped and had things planted on them, like drugs. And they [the police] extorted money from their families. They threatened them with prison if they didn't pay. It is quite frequent that this type of situation is used for extortion. (Roberto, teacher, 36 years)

Due to experiences such as these, it was not uncommon to listen to statements such as the following from Ramón, the owner of a small coffee shop introduced above: “I am more afraid of the police patrol [than of criminals], because you know that they have the right to interrogate you, to pull you in the car, to do you harm. If someone wants to assault you, you can confront this dog, but you can't confront the police.” In general, local residents perceived the everyday encounter with the local police forces as a dangerous situation, based on unequal relations of power, which always entails the potential of ending up in some form of police abuse. What is noticeable in this respect is that—despite the perceived possibility that the police *can* do you physical harm—only one case of physical violence committed by police agents resulting from such a situation was mentioned in the interviews. In most of the accounts, the interest in making money was the dominant form of police abuse reported by the local residents. However, although police abuse seems to be primarily about money, there are also cases in which such practices are not exclusively money-related. For example, as the following interview passage demonstrates, the police were also described as using their powers to pressure victims of their own actions to keep them from making an official complaint:

(3) My brother-in-law was run over by a police car. They took him to the hospital and they took him out again, but not in an ambulance. They've taken him in a police car.... [W]e knew he wasn't doing well because he had an internal hemorrhage. But no, first he had to go to the police station because he had to sign a paper saying that he was not going to denounce the police out of indulgence. They told him: “We will take you to the best hospital, but first you have to sign.” (Michaela, housewife, 23 years)

Besides such narratives, it was a widely shared perception that the local police (Preventive and Judicial), in order to fulfill their everyday duties are always expecting money or the donation of food or drinks in return. Without these incentives, local residents did not expect that the police would provide any kind of service to them. As one local ex-merchant reported: “I had a market stall where I sold clothes and I was assaulted two times and the police expected money to facilitate [*agilizar*] matters” (Julia, teacher, 45 years). In particular, the *Ministerio Público*, the first institution people encounter when they want to make a legal complaint, was described as a highly bureaucratic, unresponsive, unfriendly, time (and

money) consuming institution, “a waste of time” (and money) which most people tried to avoid, seemingly at all cost. The following interview passage illustrates in nearly “ideal-typical” ways the narrations on this topic.

(4) A couple of drunks ran into us with their car. We were scared. It was like a car race. They kept hitting my brother’s car. They pulled up next to us at a stop sign, got out and started hitting my brother and breaking the windows. We got scared, and as there was a lot of traffic, after they beat up my brother they tried to flee. We found a patrol car and told them what happened and that’s where it began: “How much are you going to cooperate with?” My mother had money and because of what these guys did, my mother gave them money and said: “Go on!” They caught up with them and arrested them. Then there you are at the Public Ministry. It was about 10 at night when we got to the Public Ministry, from about 10 at night to 3 or 4 in the morning, waiting for them to receive us. Yeah, the two were put in the canner. But being there, why does one have to be there for so long? They interrogate you, there are several verifications. I have things to do, so that it should just be forgotten and I go home. Because they also ask you for your voting credential, but beforehand they ask you for a soft drink in order to take the detainees. Before going to the Public Ministry there is a person that asks you, to begin filling the report he asks you for your voting credential and your papers so that it will be faster. All this torture of waiting, and then they take more money from you. (Ramón, coffee shop owner, 38 years)

As a consequence of these perceptions about the personalized and corrupt behavior of the local public security agencies, the people in Iztapalapa were highly skeptical about the existence of a rule of law in Mexico and the impersonal and public basis of the local administration of justice. Local residents did not imagine themselves as empowered legal subjects and citizens when they interact with public authorities. Rather, their position vis-à-vis state representatives can be described as that of petitioners. The responsiveness of public institutions towards their concerns does not depend upon impartial impersonal legal-rational conduct but on particular negotiations, motivated by particular incentives such as money, social status or personal connections. Furthermore, insisting on one’s legal rights was frequently perceived as counterproductive for one’s own interests: “I know some people that are in a group dealing with security as well. They go and demand their rights and they end up getting pushed aside, as if they [the local authorities] prefer passive people rather than demanding people.” (Sergio, merchant, 47 years-old). Confronted with such a context, most interview partners relied on personal connections or “gifts” in order to “motivate” local authorities to deal with their security concerns. Besides these problems of inefficient, harassing, extortive and abusive police behavior, another negative contribution of the local police forces to the local (in)security situation was the perceived collaboration between illegal actors and local police forces.

The Police-Criminal Nexus

A recurrent narrative in the interviews with local residents was the protection local police offer to potential and actual “criminals,” which was identified as the main reason behind the perpetuation and even expansion of criminal activities, despite permanent police raids and the implementation of new security programs. In fact, many people perceived that the local police’s inefficiency, their ignorance of the local security problems and their lack of vocation were closely related to the fact that criminals “buy” protection from the police. In general, the police were expected to pass on confidential information about future police raids, to turn a blind eye to criminal activities, or to guarantee the safety of criminals and their customers.

(5) Yes, if the police really did their job there could be a solution. Sometimes they come on Fridays to carry out an operation, but by what the neighbors say is that the patrol cars come and advert the thieves [*rateros*]: “Don't come out, there is going to be an operation.” How come there are no market vendors the day of the operation? They don't even set up. How does that happen? Nobody is out. How do you explain that? (Teresa, public servant, 51 years)

Such perceptions about an existing local police-crime nexus and its benefits for the actors involved did not remain abstract and impersonal. Rather, they were frequently related to personal experiences. For example, Juan, a local merchant from the market in Santa Cruz de Meyehualco, famous for the redistribution of and commerce in stolen goods, gave the following statement.

(6) Everything that has been stolen in the city is sold in Santa Cruz de Meyehualco. At night, the trucks arrive and bring in the stolen goods. For example, you can see trailers from Liverpool or Palacio de Hierro. [...] You have to be there between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. At 5 a.m., everything begins, including police protection. They collaborate. [...] When you arrive as a merchant and you don't accept the police protection, they are going to rob you, and when you accept their protection, you are really protected and safe inside the borders of Iztapalapa. Beyond the borders of the borough, they can take everything you have away. You are quote unquote safe, because the people from the market and the police protect you. (Juan, merchant, about 40 years)

Patricia, another local merchant, who participated in the local commerce of stolen car parts, presented a closer view of how such forms of police protection occur and what costs they involve.

(7) I was there everyday. From nine in the morning until dark, with another schedule until eight. It went well, but I was working.

It was just doing business with car parts?

Yes, everything from the scrapyards, but some people sold stolen parts and others not. But they paid their rent to

the police so that they could work. Yes, the police came and raided them and sent them away, but not very often.

It was the police?

The police.

When you say rent you mean they came by every certain period of time?

Exactly.

For example, how much did you give?

No, I didn't give them anything. Well, there was one time when I worked there, and it was 50,000 pesos a month.

Who paid it?

Several people.

Collectively?

No, individually. But we worked hard and earned more than 50,000.

What would the police do with so much money?

Well, it wasn't just them. It was their upper ranks as well. It was all divided. [...] It is what I have experienced. I am sure that it's true because out of 100, one police officer will listen to you. Otherwise they are the ones who will detain you without reason or fear. But in the end, it also depends on how you act. If you are rebellious, such things are going to happen to you.

Why do you think corruption exists?

Because they don't have money either, or at least they want more, the upper ranks. How much are police officers paid? Very little. In addition to what they steal on the streets, [...] 50,000 pesos are good for them. (Patricia, merchant, 49 years-old)

Whereas for many interview partners such practices were not un-problematic, they were to a certain degree tolerated and justified, sometimes even welcomed, as they contributed to the economic well-being of their neighborhoods and families. Contrary to such perceptions, another criminal activity was in general perceived as highly problematic and threatening to the local communities: drug trafficking.

In fact, drug trafficking appeared in most of the interviews as the root cause for the insecurity of many areas in Iztapalapa. Although the presence of drugs and drug trafficking in Iztapalapa is not an entirely new phenomenon, it is thought to have worsened with the arrival of synthetic drugs since the 1990s and their dominance within the local drug economy. Indeed, there is a dominant narrative of a "golden age" when the neighborhood was beautiful and—even if not peaceful—substantially secure. With the arrival of synthetic drug trafficking this

“golden age” turned darker, the social dynamics in the neighborhood changed, and drug trafficking contributed to the growing insecurity and violence in the area. The transformation of the local drug market and its customers is not only identified as an important explanatory factor for the growing local insecurity situation, be it through the growing number of consumers who are perceived as being in permanent need and search of easy money to pay for their drugs, or who behave violently and aggressively when under the influence of drugs. On a more abstract level, the new quality (and quantity) of local drug trafficking, due to its coercive potential and the violence associated with local drug actors, which rendered existing informal mechanisms of social control and conflict resolution inoperative, has contributed to a growing sensation of fear, which affects the social dynamics in the respective neighborhoods. In particular, the presence of drug trafficking seems to provoke an acceptance and non-intervention from the local residents. Instead of confronting the new local drug economy—which appeared in most of the interviews as an unwelcome social phenomenon—through collective forms of informal social control or street-level security regimes (see below), all local residents reported that they would prefer to “ignore” or accept this phenomenon as a given fact—most of all because they fear violent revenge: “No, it’s not worth it [denouncing local drugtraffickers]. They will kill you or someone of your family afterwards. You see it, you hear it, but you remain quiet. (Miguel, taxi driver, 43 years).

(8) I tell you, there is a man here whom we all know, who doesn’t have any legs. He was a diabetic and they cut off his legs. He is in a wheelchair. So he lives from selling drugs to minors. Right in front of the school! Just like that! Everybody knows that this man makes his living by selling drugs. [...] But he always has a godfather [*padrino*]. What do you do as a citizen? There are some folks here just around the corner, but they are the type that rob trailers like from Gigante. Everybody knows them and, well, they are untouchable. I am talking too much. [...] Oh yeah, the man lives here and the school is here, in the cul-de-sac on Guerrero, right on the corner of Juan Álvarez and Guerrero. It’s a mafia. [...] And now us: “Hello! How are you?” We have to ally ourselves with the enemy in order to achieve peace. That’s all we can do. (Lirio, sweetshop owner, 55 years)

However, we should be aware that it is not only the aggressiveness of drug users and the possibility of violent revenge from the local drug dealers that scare their neighbors, but also the presumed protection and toleration of local drug business by the police and local state functionaries which convert the local drug business into a threat for the affected communities, a relationship which frequently was identified as the result and the basis of such *compadrazgos* and the existence of “untouchables.”

(9) Many of those police officers that work at night ask for a permanent bribe [*renta*] from the local drug dealers. The *renta* depends from place to place. From 200 up to 400 Pesos and then they can sell their drugs. So, the business of these policemen is to patrol those streets [where drug traffickers operate] not to provide security. (Julio, merchant, 42 years)

(10) I can tell you that all of this is being organized by the police themselves. I can assure it, because yes, I have seen it. I have seen where they sell drugs and where they [the police] stop for their bribe. [...] In this case, you will see the patrol cars at dawn making their rounds with their lights off. The people who buy and sell drugs get in and out as if nothing. So in this sense they are vigilant, and when they see that a superior police officer is coming then they speak to them: “You know, go away, don’t sell anything.” Yes, that’s to say that these people are well organized. So why am I going to go looking for problems with them. I don’t ask anything from them. Can you imagine the type of mess I would be getting myself in? If you denounce them? They just turn it around on you. That’s what happens. (Miguel, taxi driver, 43 years-old)

As in the case of Patricia, the car-part merchant introduced above, these interview passages indicate that local residents expect that such forms of police protection for local drug traffickers are based on the payment of a certain, frequently fixed, amount of money: “They [the police] are standing on the street corners. They charge you for protection and you have to pay, don’t you? When you want protection, when you [as a drug trafficker] want to survive in this jungle, you have to protect you.” (Lirio, local political activist, about 30 years). Therefore, the payment of the *renta*, as Carlos Alberto Zamudio Angles demonstrated, is a precondition that local drug traffickers can keep their business running without interference from local police officers. However, the latter not only turn a blind eye on the activities of their “partners.” According to the perceptions of local drug traffickers, they are also concerned with the maintenance of a certain degree of order in the related area. Only this orderly appearance would guarantee that neighbors refrain from making complaints to local authorities, which could imply that other public institutions or new police forces would be sent to solve these problems. Therefore, a certain degree of active participation of both parties (the police and the drug traffickers) is necessary in order to keep their mutually beneficial relations working and stable over a longer period (Zamudio Angles 2007: 193-194).

Politics and Policing

Another important factor that local residents identified as a principal source for the low quality of local policing is related to the impact of politics. In general, local residents perceived that the quality of policing in Iztapalapa differs significantly from the policing in better-off neighborhoods in Mexico City. They felt neglected by the Mexico City public security authorities, who were perceived as paying more attention to the protection of

wealthier neighborhoods, tourist spaces or important political actors.

(11) I have been walking around, strolling around the Roma neighbourhood. There are a lot of police but around my house there aren't any police. Or, well, they go by not so much so as to protect you, they're more there to screw people. They come and see who is behaving stupid and they detain them, because in reality they don't work as they should. That's how it is. I have walked around La Condesa and it is completely different there. (Carmen, 36 years, domestic servant)

Such perceptions were not only articulated by local residents, they were also expressed by members of the Mexico City police apparatus. For example, Rodrigo, an ex-high ranking member of the Preventive Police, referred to the exceptional political importance of maintaining the political support of the upper and middle classes for the local government, which, with its "popular" political discourse, threatens to alienate the local middle and upper classes. This interest would contribute to a socio-economic bias of local policing. He exemplified this by referencing the different quality of security provided by the local police for the residents of upper-class neighborhoods such as Polanco, and contrasted this to the quality of public security provision in Iztapalapa:

(12) Well, the state takes care of the people in Polanco. It's on the side of the businessmen and the politicians that live there as well. These are people who can conveniently access a high-ranking official of the SSPDF or of the government of the Federal District, people who have enough influence to make a phone call and say: "Hey, what's going on in Polanco?" Things that don't happen in places like Iztapalapa, definitely not. An assault in Iztapalapa is not something very important for the government, but yes, it is very likely that a mugging in Polanco would prove worrisome for the government. It's sad, but that's just how it is. A reality which obviously reflects the relationships of classes between the rich and the poor. The people who don't have money are the people who have no protection and the people with more money are the best protected. (Rodrigo, ex-high ranking member of the SSPDF, about 45 years)

The class relations Rodrigo identified as the underlying principles of such different reactions by public authorities to crime and insecurity problems also appeared in the testimonies from the people in Iztapalapa. Local residents expressed that because many people living in Iztapalapa are poor, public authorities do not feel obliged to care about their security concerns. This in turn was also identified as a principal source behind the frequently irrespective treatment of the local police as well as the unequal distribution of local policing resources.

(13) The borough chiefs [*jefes delegacionales*], they all provide security [for themselves]. They are all assured

against insecurity. We are the insecure ones, the neighborhoods, the common people [*gente del pueblo*]. Why? Why, because we are left unprotected. Why are we unprotected? Because that's how they have always treated us. (Miguel, taxi driver, 43 years).

In a similar direction, a local NGO member stated: "When you go to Iztapalapa, you'll see 10 police cars in front of the *delegación*, protecting the delegado, of course, and the barrios have no police patrol. [...] We have an obvious problem with the distribution of police patrols. But when we ask the local authorities about this, they'll answer you with elusive replies" (Martha, NGO activist, 40 years). Another manifestation concerning a political selectivity of local policing, where policing in general serves those actors who are perceived as "important" from the local authorities' point of view, was reported by local merchants. They stated that the local police, due to political pressure, would pay more attention to criminal acts when "bigger economic interests" are at stake. In such cases, the police was described as showing more frequent and efficient responses. As one interviewee stated: "Well, the police actions [*operativos*] always happen when a big company is robbed. When there is an assault on 'el negro,' the local store for stationery, they don't care about it. But when a MABE or Whirlpool store is assaulted, they [the police] come and search for the stolen things."

Besides such general perceptions that their marginal social status has a negative impact on the quality of public security provision, local residents also referred to the negative impact of political conflicts among different factions of the PRD on policing in Iztapalapa. It was stated that the distribution of security resources, in particular with respect to citizen participation programs, was in many cases determined by party politics and the relationship of forces between different PRD factions in the borough, as well as between different party factions in the borough and the Mexico City government. The latter, was said to use the access to public resources, including security related resources, in order to distribute them for building up or strengthening its own support base.

(14) [T]hese practices of the political parties... Yes, they exist everywhere. For example the PRD... The governor of the Federal District, Marcelo Ebrard, he has no support base here. At least he is not a person who during his political career has worked with the popular organizations, with the *colonias*, so he doesn't have many people that support him. But now that he is the head of the government of the Federal District he can use public resources, for his interests. (Rosario, 52 years)

In such a context, the responsiveness of public institutions was perceived as something that does not depend upon impartial impersonal legal-rational conduct, but on political contacts, preferences, calculations and negotiations, leading to the selective distribution of public

security provision and privileging people who have good relations to the governing party/the dominant local party faction.

(15) Well, this is a PRD neighborhood, which is a leftwing party. So, many local politicians here are members of the local parliament. There are many people working for them as well and because they are close to the PRD and because the government of the Federal District belongs to the PRD, there are obvious preferences. Here, they have always maintained these privileged relations, the tradition of having good connections to politicians or the police. [...] But the normal people of course don't have this kind of personal access. They always must relate to someone and thereby strengthen [*reforzar*] this person's political career. (Julio, merchant, 32 years)

As the preceding interview passage indicates, the access to those informal political networks that permit privileged access to public security resources is uneven and hierarchical. Not everyone possesses the political or social capital necessary for a direct and unmediated relationship with local politicians. Therefore, the participation of ordinary people in these relations and their possibilities of gaining access to these informal processes of the distribution of public security resources are in many cases mediated through local political brokers. In this regard, local residents frequently referred to the *jefe/jefa de manzana*, whose privileged access to local politicians and the *delegación* was perceived as facilitating the local resident's access to public resources including public security, but also, as indicated in the preceding interview passage, as strengthening the local broker's political capital:

(16) *What measures did you take in order to confront the security problems?*

Well...the surveillance... There was one woman, the *jefa de manzana*. [...] There is this person related to our block, who is in charge of all the problems. And later, this woman, [because of her], well they've sent more, well, they've put more security, they've assigned more patrol cars.

[...]

So would you say that this system of the jefes de manzana that works?

Yes, it's like a support system, because you go to her and she goes to the *delegación*. It is through her that many things have been accomplished here, in this part of the *colonia X.X*.

And does she do it without receiving any gifts or the like?

No, no, no. Nothing. On the contrary, it's good for her, because she has support. If one day you want to help her in some case, you go and you give her your vote, your signature. And she says [to the local authorities]: "You see, I have gotten together 100 signatures from different people whom I have helped and now they are helping me." That's how it works with her. (Carlos, janitor, 62 years)

It should be noted that local residents were well aware that the existence of these structures contributes to a selective and uneven distribution of security resources throughout Iztapalapa. However, these structures themselves were perceived as positive and efficient in guaranteeing access to public resources, at least as long as one can participate in these networks. Indeed, although against the background of most of the aforementioned observations, we should expect that local residents try to avoid or reduce contacts with the local police whenever possible, the following section will demonstrate that local residents, notwithstanding the preceding observations, actively sought the “services” of the local police.

The Ambivalence of Police-Citizen Relations

Although a broad variety of individual and collective, formal and informal security strategies “beyond the state,” ranging from, for example, the buying of a dog or a weapon, to the formation of neighborhood watch networks, can be observed in Iztapalapa (Denissen 2009; Müller 2009: chapter 8), this section will demonstrate that far from becoming marginalized as a security provider, local residents, in their search for security and protection continue to relate to the local police forces. The most common form of such activities can be described as the privatization of public security.

The preceding pages already demonstrated that the interviewed residents from Iztapalapa assume that illegal actors can “buy” the local police forces, for example for protection services. However, it seems that not only those people involved in illicit activities resort to bribing local police officers in order to instrumentalize them for their purposes. Such forms of appropriating and privatizing local police forces were also reported by and for common people, and they seem to have acquired a structural character. In fact, many local residents reported that they—individually or as organized collectivities of neighbors or merchants—would donate money, food or drinks to local police agents in order to “establish good relations” or “friendships” with them. These “good relations” are expected to create some kind of obligation for the involved police officers to offer more protection, to pay more attention and to demonstrate more responsiveness to their “donor’s” security needs in case of an emergency. For example, Rodrigo, a local shopkeeper and former member of a neighborhood committee, explained that he organized other shopkeepers in his area to collect money to be passed on to the local police officers to keep an eye on their commerce zone and have “a little bit more surveillance out here” (Rodrigo, local merchant).⁵

Another manifestation of such forms of private surveillance provided by public security

⁵ Such practices have already been identified by other studies. See Pansters and Castillo Berthier 2007; Anozie et al. 2004.

agents is the practice of contracting [alleged] policemen who when off duty offer protection services as local *vigilantes*, frequently to entire streets. In such arrangements, the neighbors collect a certain amount of money, or the vigilantes go from door to door in order to ask for their payment, which some neighbors perceived as “threatening.” In return for their payment, the vigilantes walk or drive around in the area, frequently blowing a whistle, in order to indicate that the area is “under surveillance.”

Besides such cases, the local residents also reported that police officers were “bought” in order to solve personal problems, such as family conflicts or problems with neighbors, by bribing local police officers in order to “resolve” their problems, to “intimidate” their “opponents” or to “punish” someone by using their coercive and/or legal faculties. The following interview passage gives us a good description of such a case. Here, a thirty-eight year old owner of a café, Ramón, describes how a controversy with his father turned into police involvement:

(17) I had a problem with my father. [...] My father simply fell. He was hurt. An old wound reopened with his fall and that is what most angered my father. “I am going to call the police!” “Call them! What are you going to accuse me of?” “You can’t beat up old people.” He wanted to see me in the prison cell, yes, he did it. He stopped there on Ermita. It took about an hour to stop a police car. I saw how he stopped it and began speaking to them. I saw that they stopped there at the tower, they parked backwards as it was dark. I saw my father get in and how they were discussing with him. It took about 10 or 15 minutes. They were talking to see how much they were going to get out of him. I think my father wanted to teach me a lesson. I know he gave them some money. The police came and what’s more I was put in the back of the police car with my father. (Ramón, owner of a café, 38 years)

Such forms of instrumentalizing public security agents as personal problem solvers were described as particularly threatening when the respective police officers intervened as “punishers” on the basis of relations of friendship or due to family ties:

(18) A neighbor, the wife of a member of the Judicial Police, had a verbal fight with another neighbor who had recently gone through an operation. The children of the two were playing in the street and started fighting with each other. Well, the neighbor who had recently received surgical treatment complained to the wife of the police officer, who informed her husband. So later the husband complained to the recently operated on neighbor and my brother found out about it and tried to defend the neighbor. He told the cop not to shout at her because she wasn’t even in the condition to leave the house. Well, a couple of days later the policeman beat up my brother to such an extent that he had to go to the hospital. Because we filed a complaint, a couple of days later some police officers went after my brother and they detained him without further ado and took him to prison. It was like a

kidnapping... Like everyone, I think that this man, well, he's more powerful, he abuses the power of his public office (Martha, housewife, 50 years)

Briefly, these examples offer us the dominant perceptions about how the microcosm of police instrumentalization in Iztapalapa works according to the local residents. They also demonstrate that the same features of the local police force which were initially perceived by most of the interview partners as threatening and dangerous, are the principal reason why people (in many cases the same interview partners) relate to them. In particular, the "legal" faculties of the local police were perceived as an important resource for (informally and illegally) resolving a variety of personal problems and conflicts. It was this privileged of the police as a *public* institution to such resources, derived from the coercive powers of the state, which converted this institution into the single most attractive actor within the local "protection business."

However, it is important to stress, that such forms of instrumentalizing public security for private purposes, in order to solve personal problems or conflicts, are not necessarily examples of informal practices or corruption. Although these informal practices seem to be predominant in such arrangements, there are also possibilities of instrumentalizing the police through formal ways. As Antonia, a high-ranking member of the PGJDF stated, the excessive workload of her institution is in part also related to the fact that many people, in particular from marginalized boroughs such as Iztapalapa, try to convert personal problems, into legal problems, frequently on the basis of false accusations, in order to provoke the intervention of the Judicial Police in the hopes that the "suspect" gets arrested. According to her perception, there is an observable trend that in order to solve personal problems, "people are increasingly referring to the strongest manifestation [*la manifestación más dura*] of the state, which is the Penal Law." This development, according to her, was due to the profound *belief* in the efficiency of the Penal Law, an efficiency which does not so much stem from the impersonal character of the law as a medium of the regulation of social relations, but from the possibility of using the law an instrument.

Besides such forms of the private appropriation or the instrumentalization of public security and the administration of justice, all of which undermine the public character of these institutions, local residents also described many instances where they explicitly sought the help of the police as a *public* security provider. This was most of all reported in such circumstances where the existing informal structures of social control, the resulting mechanisms of conflict resolution, and street-level disciplinary regimes, stemming from dense

levels of social cohesion at the neighborhood level, were unable to maintain “order” in the respective neighborhood, as the following interview passage demonstrates:

(19) There is a sort of set of norms within the neighbourhoods and this exists because otherwise there would be no daily coexistence [*convivencia*]. It has to do with certain unspoken codes. It is very typical that there are people in the *barrio* who have more power. Sometimes there are fights and if there are fights then everyone knows what the limits are. It is understood that I can't do this or that. Each person controls their blows. But of course, if certain limits are passed, if it is not one on one but several against one then it is very likely that someone powerful from the families will intervene. [...] The people more or less try to solve their problems in this manner. Because of the chaos in the public institutions, especially public security, nobody trusts them. Second, in general, justice is not so just. So the people always try to avoid these processes which are long and tiring, and where you are going to lose time and you are going to lose money. Generally you are... well, even if you win you lose, right? So you avoid that people even wind up in these places. But yes, when there are deaths, fucked up situations where the limits are passed, the authorities are sought out to try and solve these problems. (Roberto, teacher, 36 years-old)

This passage indicates that there seem to be clear limits beyond which the local “consensus of the community” (Thompson 1980: 69), characterized by specifically local notions of solidarity and morality that organize the social dynamics at the neighborhood level, is not capable of resolving conflictive situations. Such limits are in particular related to more serious violent crimes such as physical assaults, violations or homicides. Faced with such acts of violence, even local communities which were described by their residents as being characterized by extremely dense social relationships and a high degree of social cohesion and informal control regimes resort to the institutions of the administration of justice in order to resolve these situations. An interesting example, highlighting the limits of such informal forms of security related conflict resolution, can be found in the case of the territory governed by the leftwing political group *Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente UNOPI* (Independent Popular Front Francisco Villa UNOPI, FPFVI). Although this is an “autonomous,” self-governed space—whose governance includes the question of security provision—inside Iztapalapa, which a member of the local administration of justice called a “lost territory (*espacio perdido*) for the state,” there are cases in which the administration of justice by the FPFVI faces problems which cannot be resolved without the participation of the police.

The territory under the authority of the FPFVI was taken over by the organization fifteen years ago. It now comprises about eight hectares of land on which some 4,000 people live. The *colonia* provides housing and free infrastructure for its residents, including free living,

water and electricity,⁶ their own school and even a community radio. Of particular relevance for my purpose is that the FPFVI also has its own security structure. An essential part of this security structure is the presence of guards at the two main entrances of the *colonia*, which check and question everyone wanting to enter. Each member of the FPFVI is obliged to do a guard service once a month. In this respect, the people are organized in twenty-eight brigades, and each brigade is responsible for one day of guard service. The daily shifts, always provided by at least five members of the respective brigade are divided into three turns. The first turn is from 6 A.M. to 2 P.M., the second shift from 2 P.M. to 10 P.M. and the night shift is from 10 P.M. to 6 A.M.. Besides the guard system, there is also an alarm whistle which can be used by all members in order to inform and mobilize them in the case of an emergency—including any questions of insecurity. The following longer account from an interview with a member of the FPFVI not only gives us an impression of how justice is administered in the *colonia*. It additionally confronts us with a perception of where this kind of administration of justice “beyond the state” encounters its limits:

(20) *Are there cases when you decide to contact the authorities?*

Yes there are. When, for example, someone from the outside comes in and robs, he tries to rob a tank or break into a house, so they get in, but the people stop them. So what do we do? One day they caught somebody and they took away his clothes and hung a sign on him that said: “I am a thief,” and they took him on a walk all over the neighborhood so that people could see that he was a thief. In some cases some of the guys will give him a few slaps in the face and throw him out, because the problem isn’t very big. At one point there was another type of internal problem. For example, one of the *compañeros* raped a 4 year-old girl, here inside. So the mother denounced him. The people were outraged by this. They beat him up, but we decided to hand him over to the police because in the end we can have our own rules, we can have a different vision [of justice], but there are some cases where we can’t go beyond what exists, so the law that exists is the only one. The other option was to leave him at the hands of the people and this would have generated a quite different situation. So what happened was that the police were called. Those in the patrol cars know that they can’t come in here. They come and they wait at the door and they knock... like this: “I am here to hand over a notice,” or to ask what is happening. So they inform us and we receive them here. For instance, this rapist was handed over to the police. We’ve called them, we’ve said that we have this guy, that we will wait for them at the door, we handed the person over and they took him away. So there are questions like this. I don’t know, for example some youth are fighting in the doorway, they pull out a weapon and shoot at each other. In that case we don’t expose ourselves either. What we do is keep the door closed and we do call [the police] and say: “This and this is happening. Come over here and solve it.” So yes, there are times when we resort to the authorities and ask them, for example as in the case of the rapist. (Rosario, member of the FPFVI, 52 years)

⁶ This is most of all due to the fact that public infrastructure such as water and electricity is informally appropriated by the FPFVI. I was unable to find out if this is somehow negotiated with the local public authorities or simply accepted by them as a matter of fact.

Both of the preceding interview passages demonstrate in a paradigmatic way that the informal security arrangements at the neighborhood level, at one point or another, are dependent on state resources in order to solve security problems or conflicts whose resolution is perceived as being beyond the capacities of these arrangements, most of all in relation to violent crime, violations but also homicides. In such cases, and notwithstanding the negative perceptions about the local police mentioned above, the active engagement of the police as a public institution was presented as a frequently successful and important security strategy. In such cases, the police intervention not only resolves the immediate security problem, it also permits that the conflictive situation does not “explode,” thereby protecting the integrity of social relations at the neighborhood level. However, even in less dramatic cases of crime and insecurity, many interviewees stated that they indeed, and frequently not withstanding negative personal experiences with the police, would seek the help from the police.

(21) I tell you something, which might sound strange, but the people here try to avoid the police as a mediating actor [*agente mediador*], for a variety of reasons, people always try to avoid contact with them. It may sound strange, and I don't know how to say it, but personally I've never had a negative experience with the police, well beyond the typical bribing and corruptions, which they are famous for, but violent encounters, no, never. I've heard about it, but personally, no. But I tell you, the people here prefer to resolve their problems without the police, because police involvement implies a loss of time, money and sometimes even prison, no? [...]

And how would you describe the relationship between the neighbors and the police as an actor from the outside?

With the police? There are no relations. Nobody wants to have them here. In reality, the only possible contact, the only possible relation we can have with them is when they arrest us [laughter]. For what do they serve at all?

[...]

Some final questions. To whom would you contact to when you are robbed in the street?

When they assault me in the street? I have read that you call the police. No, let's be serious. In reality, it depends how serious it is. When I think when it is something heavy, I go to the police. When it is something not so serious, I think that I'll have to live with it. (Rodrigo, about 40 years)

(22) *Who do you contact when you when you are assaulted on the street?*

To the police. I would call a police patrol to tell them that they've just assaulted me.

But you've just stated that you have been robbed a few times and that you didn't make a complaint. What would be the reason to call the police?

Well, I didn't call the police because it happened at the market [of Santa Cruz de Meyehualco] and I thought that when I would call the police, this would create some problems, that they would assault me once again if I would call the police. But normally, I call the police. (Angel Gutierrez, Soccer Player, 57 years)

In fact, many interview partners who initially stated that they themselves, as well as most of the local residents would not seek the assistance of the police and described it as a predominantly extortive, corrupt, violent and inefficient institution, frequently, in the course of the interview, or when they were explicitly asked to whom they would turn to after suffering a crime, without hesitation mentioned the police as an actor they would address in order to seek help. This observation indicates a further dimension of the ambivalent nature of citizen-police relation in Iztapalapa, which can be summarized in the fact that in both material and symbolic terms, the local state and its security institutions were continually referred to by local residents, in many cases on the basis of particular (normative) expectations regarding their protective and conflict-resolution capacities, a fact which stands in open contrast to the predominantly negative ideas about the local police that was present throughout the interviews.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated that the residents of the marginalized Mexico City borough of Iztapalapa have a negative image of local policing. They described the local police forces as selective, unresponsive, corrupt, inefficient, and frequently even as a potential threat or “protection racket.” However, and despite the predominantly negative, and in many cases frustrating, perceptions of the local police, local residents did not abandon public security institutions. Rather they integrated them in formal and informal ways into their personal repertoire of security strategies. This integration covered a wide spectrum of citizen-police relations, ranging from the private appropriation of police forces for the protection of (illegal and legal) business to the affirmative appeal to the police as a public institution and authority in such cases where existing informal mechanisms of conflict resolution and security provision were imagined as being unable to deal with a specific problem—in most cases a problem associated with serious forms of violence.

This finding deserves our attention, as it demonstrates that many concepts used to describe the security problems and the unrule of law in contemporary (urban) Latin America, such as Guillermo O'Donnell's famous “brown areas” (O'Donnell 1999: 133-158), the concept of “failed states” (Grayson 2009; Sain 2004) or the notion of “governance voids” that are expected to open up “where legal authorities and the representatives of law and order are

absent, and, consequently a local vacuum of ‘regular’ law and order” emerges (Kruijt and Koonings 2007b: 17), tend to ignore the complexity of the existing relationships that link the state and its coercive powers to other local actors. Although such concepts undeniably capture important features of the local unruly of law, the findings of the present paper indicate that both the idea of an absence or weakness of the state (which is implicitly based on a functionalist conception of the latter) and a dichotomized perspective on state-society relations risk ignoring the ambivalence and complexity of the relationships local residents maintained with the local public security apparatuses. What we could observe in the interviews with residents from Iztapalapa was not the picture of an absence of the state or its weakness, but rather the mutual integration of public and private actors into complex, and in many cases contradictory and highly ambivalent, sets of social relations. Therefore, the observations presented above support the conclusion of Desmond Arias’ study on public security provision in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro.

The problem is not just state failure or a breakdown of the rule of law but rather the forms of engagement that exist among different state actors and forms of local power holders and the way these connections led to the deployment of state power in such a way that it undermines the rule of law and establishes a separate, localized order. [...] These localized orders are part and parcel of Latin America’s political regimes even if they are not publicly acknowledged as such. (Arias 2006: 203, see also Van Cott 2006)

Against this background, I want to close this paper by stressing the importance of more empirical studies with an ethnographic focus that address the questions of the unruly of law and the un-public nature of policing in Latin America “from below” and that move beyond the “excessive formalism” (O’Donnell 2006: 287) that characterizes much of the research on these topics. In fact, many of the recent studies on insecurity in contemporary Latin America are based on an (over)idealized picture of statehood, rule of law and the police which ignores precisely the deep historical embeddedness and centrality of such “localized orders” and the structural hybridity of Latin American state-society relations that these localized orders express by permanently blurring the boundaries between formality and informality, legality and illegality.

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