Traquetos: Colombians involved in the cocaine business in the Netherlands
Zaitch, D.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter X
Conclusions

This book has addressed several questions concerning the involvement of Colombians in the international cocaine trade, particularly focusing upon their participation in the Netherlands as cocaine smugglers, importers, distributors and retailers.

A point of departure for this study was not only the existing gap in empirical knowledge, but also the belief that some of the prevalent methodological and theoretical tools used to approach the issue were either insufficient or misleading to understand the complexity of that involvement. Surrounding images of Colombian 'cartels', mafiosi and transnational criminal organisations were enough incentive to enter the field with critical questions about the nature of social relations amongst Colombian traquetos.

In contrast to economic-bureaucratic models that portray traquetos and their employees as 'belonging' to sophisticated transnational cartels, the present study shows that they mainly engage in short-lived business operations that involve legal and illegal arrangements in which actors and transactions are linked in flexible and changing forms. Against criminological approaches that try to delimit Colombian 'criminal' organisations or networks, my material shows that cocaine ventures involve a wide set of enterprises and people, including bona fide companies, law-abiding relatives or friends, and an army of helpers and service providers that are as essential to the business as they are 'disconnected' from it. Finally, the idea of a Colombian ethnic mafia is also contested throughout this volume: traquetos neither perform mainly as power brokers nor are their relations with overseas co-nationals always smooth, favoured or even sought after.

Chapter II analysed the role of Colombia as the main cocaine producer and exporter in the world, while chapter III dealt with the European cocaine market and the position of the Netherlands within it. In both cases, I tried to highlight historical developments, the business social structure and the ways in which this illegal market is embedded in broader social, economic and political conditions. In chapter IV, I presented the main socio-economic characteristics of Colombian immigrants living in the Netherlands, in an attempt to assess their objective conditions for engagement in the cocaine business. Chapters V and VI showed the ways in which different sorts of Colombians are involved in cocaine smuggling, import, distribution and retail selling in the Netherlands. Chapter VII addressed the question of how two specific important groups of Colombians such as prostitutes and illegal immigrants are linked with the cocaine business. Further to this, chapter VIII examined the specific internal relations between Colombian cocaine entrepreneurs and their employees. In chapter IX, I finally analysed the role of violence, secrecy and trust in the cocaine business.

While some findings in this book are somewhat in line with earlier research results in the field of drug economies, others imply a challenge to official studies purely based on data gathered from criminal justice agencies. Social scientists, and certainly criminologists, have often avoided contact with the very population studied. This fact is partially understandable: these very agencies are often the main (financial) motor behind most research on the subject; researchers are compelled by time or professional duties, or they simply declare that it is too dangerous or difficult to get close to drug dealers in their natural settings.

This research, on the contrary, avoided police and judicial sources as much as possible and relied on long-term interaction (from peripheral participation, observation and open interviewing) with Colombians inside and around the cocaine business in the Netherlands and in Colombia. A first important conclusion of this research is that ethnographic research on drug dealers - and on other forms of contemporary organised crime - is both possible and desirable for the advancement of the field.
Firstly, it is possible. If criminal justice agencies are to become involved in financing ethnographic research, they should grant the researcher enough time, intellectual freedom and operational independence. Other basic requirements are an open mind to hear and reflect on distinct and contradictory voices, and a willingness to build personal relations beyond the mere interviewer-interviewed interaction. Furthermore, researchers should protect their informants and themselves, maintain clear ethical boundaries, and follow rigorous methodological decisions based on openness.

Secondly, it is desirable. Ethnographic research on drug dealers can address often neglected issues behind 'criminal organisations or networks'. It can reveal the socio-cultural context and background of the people involved, and their views about their own activities and the surrounding environment, including their opinions on enforcement agencies, other entrepreneurs and the society as a whole. Moreover, this sort of research has the potential of reflecting internal conflicts and differences between those involved in the cocaine business. It can eventually raise new critical questions about their motives, their risk perceptions, and the rationality behind illegal entrepreneurship.

In these concluding pages, I will try to sum up my main empirical findings and their theoretical implications.

Colombia and the cocaine complex

Cocaine production and export consolidated 20 years ago in Colombia and somehow mirrored other short-cycle export booms around one particular product. Although stimulated in the beginnings by American demand and traffickers, some Colombian groups managed to gain an early control on cocaine production, export and wholesale distribution in the United States, establishing the refineries in Colombia.

A combination of political, geographic and economic conditions and developments favoured and secured its comparative advantage with regard to other countries: weak state presence; strong local powers and relative autonomic regions; political culture based on 'clientelism' and patronage, with corruption as an outcome; state unaccountability and a long-standing violent institutional de-legitimation; suitable internal geographic features (rivers, coasts, jungle, natural isolation, and so on); long tradition in export contraband, with know-how on marketing routes, foreign contacts and smuggling techniques; expectations of high short-term profits promoted by older booms, around which Colombian capitalism developed; active black foreign exchange market; crises in regional economies; large Colombian migration in the United States willing to enter the illegal business at any price and, finally, early control on wholesale distribution by Colombians themselves.

The Colombian cocaine industry has often been depicted as omnipresent for the country's economy. However, from the material presented in chapter II, it should now be concluded that the size of the illegal industry, although large in relative and absolute terms, has been exaggerated with respect to production volumes and Colombian cocaine income.

Concerning the business social structure, cocaine entrepreneurs and enterprises are far from homogeneous. They firstly vary very much regarding social origins - urban and rural, lower and upper class, and multi-ethnic. This heterogeneity can be explained by a number of reasons: the rather 'open' nature of the cocaine business, the fact that it is not restricted to one particular set of political actors or social conflicts between specific groups, the prospects for quick upward mobility for all (both included and excluded from legal activities) and the relative wide range of social acceptance, toleration and legitimacy attached to this activity, at least until the mid-1990s.
They secondly differ regarding regions. The distinct social dynamics, political environments and cultural markers of Colombian regions have shaped six cocaine 'centres' or focuses, each one with its own importance and momentum. The existence of these focuses, however, does not mean that they are the only places where cocaine enterprises are active, or that each focus functions as a unified and homogeneous group.

A third difference is a generational one. After the death, imprisonment or retirement of older and better-known bosses, a younger generation of *traquetos* has taken over. Many of them have no criminal background, and they have invigorated the illegal business by further flexibility, internationalisation, re-localisation, and risk management.

Fourthly, cocaine enterprises in themselves are heterogeneous and the mutating product of fragile agreements between people and flexible articulation between legal and illegal enterprises. Some exporters have achieved a remarkable vertical integration, but normally cocaine production and transportation are separate economic units, subcontracted by exporters. Powerful organisations using many resources and performing many tasks, can in fact be subcontracting most of them - transport, military and security resources, professional expertise, money laundering services, labour force, and so forth - whereas they do not have a strict and rigid labour division. Typically, a division can be made between bosses, assistants, professionals and unskilled, flexible mass labourers. Tasks, methods and enterprises change according to the dynamics imposed by illegality, which allows independent and sporadic entrepreneurs to survive alongside the larger ones.

The concept of 'cartel' is totally inappropriate to refer to cocaine enterprises, even to those moving in a relative oligopolist market sector. They are more often decentralised, amorphous and fragmented networks - basically dyadic ones - articulated by precarious and variable transactions. They move from co-operation, by developing systems to integrate smaller investors to the illegal business and to co-ordinate military actions, to savage competition, by killing, stealing or denouncing competitors or their own people.

The further atomisation of export groups after repression efforts intensified in Colombia during the second half of the 1990s (reintroduction of extradition, forfeiture legislation, capture of large exporters, and so on) provides a clear example of how illegality disables 'large', stable and bureaucratic structures, and actually push enterprises to remain sporadic and mutating.

Far more noticeable than the economic impact, the social and political impact of cocaine entrepreneurs in Colombia has been enormous. They have indeed used social and political resources to protect their activities, and they have tried to gain social recognition by a number of reconversion strategies. Since some have transformed accumulated money into social power - founding politicians or expanding local loyalties and support - many authors have used the notion of *mafia* to portray these drug entrepreneurs. However, if compared, for example, with the Italian case, quick analogies should be avoided. *Traquetos* are not *mafiosi* since they do not perform as power brokers. Italian *mafiosi* and Colombian drug organisations differ very much regarding historical origins, organisational models, and in their relations with the state and the civil society.

The activities of illegal drug entrepreneurs in Colombia have had very negative effects in social and political terms. The existence of the illegal business has definitely contributed to further state de-legitimation by growing corruption, use of violence and in very few cases task competition. It has spread feelings of impunity, while reinforcing models of individual success 'at any cost'. It has turned foreign policies and international relations with Colombia into a matter of 'narco-diplomacy'. Long-suffered internal armed conflicts have been worsened by the cocaine business collusion with guerrilla and paramilitary activity. In particular, the link between traffickers and paramilitary groups has deteriorated the human rights situation in Colombia. Furthermore, although the cocaine business has often been too
simply associated with all sorts of violence in Colombia, it has undeniably amplified many violent social conflicts.

The European and Dutch cocaine market

Further in the marketing chain, cocaine is exported to Europe to be distributed and retailed. What are thus the main characteristics of the European cocaine market and what is the role of the Netherlands in it?

The material presented in chapter III shows that, in contrast with Colombia, cocaine has a long tradition in Europe. Cocaine production and use underwent a four-phase development since it was first isolated in 1859. Until the early 1900s, it was regarded as a ‘wonder drug’, broadly used by physicians for various purposes. All sorts of coca infusions, syrups and elixirs reached the general public during the 1880s. Germany and the Netherlands were the main cocaine producers, importing coca crops from Peru and Java.

A second phase runs from the turn of the century until 1930, a period in which cocaine lost its positive image and became illegal. Growing scepticism about its medical uses and its expansion as a recreational drug amongst intellectuals, bohemians, artists, jet-setters, soldiers, as well as all sorts of outlaws, pushed a crusade that included a mix of medical, moral and social arguments. The counter-reaction was joined by physicians, stronger medical bodies, more controlled pharmacists and social reformers in the frame of ‘moral Welfarism’ and post-liberal States. Social fears were reflected in the popular press and in political debates about urban dangerous classes, decadent life-styles and violent crime.

The third phase ranges from 1930 to 1970, in which cocaine literally disappeared from the European scene. The first illegal users rapidly replaced expensive cocaine by legally available and far cheaper amphetamines. A final period since the 1970s is marked by a renaissance of cocaine as an illegal drug. In fact, Europe followed trends in the United States with a gap of some years (only after smuggling by sea became possible). However, the European market never reached the magnitude of the American cocaine epidemic: a different cultural and social environment set a limit, and by the late 1980s cocaine had already been stigmatised. Better prices, an increasing demand and new transport methods, rather than a saturation of the American market, explain expansion to Europe.

Different sorts of users consume cocaine in Europe. Many regular opiate users have been using heroin and cocaine together (‘speedball’) from the 1970s on. Cocaine powder is sniffed in a rather invisible and recreational way by all sorts of people: professionals, artists, wealthy middle-classes, and so forth. The socially integrated, occasional ‘sniffer’ is a young male adult aged 25-40 years with above average educational and/or occupational status. Lifetime prevalence amongst underage students is rather low (1%-2%) compared with the United States. Modest to sizeable local markets in crack-cocaine developed since the early 1990s in major European cities. However, crack use has remained very limited.

Cocaine demand in Europe is above world average, with a monthly prevalence of around the 0,2% - 0,4% mark and an average of 90 to 100 tons consumed every year within the EU. There has been a general tendency towards the stabilisation of cocaine demand in Western Europe since 1995, especially due to replacement for other substances. However, next to local recent signs of use increase, the user population has become more heterogeneous than ever before, with more problematic users. Cocaine has also reached new markets in Eastern Europe. Over the past 20 years, wholesale and retail prices have dropped 50% while purity levels have substantially improved.

This demand, and the large illegal profits to be made along the marketing chain, has certainly attracted many people and groups to participate in the cocaine business. Cocaine is
supplied in Europe by various flexible groups that compete, co-operate and include several national and ethnic groups. They are mostly independent groups that manage to establish links with South American exporters. Import and wholesale distribution experienced a process of professionalisation during the 1990s. The most successful groups are those able to handle large quantities of cash and cocaine, and to combine local and international resources. This necessarily implies rather small and dynamic groups or partnerships able to quickly react to market changes and neutralise repression efforts.

In Spain, most cocaine is imported by Galician groups traditionally dedicated to contraband and fishing, usually working close to or with Colombians. In Italy, a close Colombian-Italian co-operation has also been the case. Despite cases of local protection by mafia-type organisations (for example the Neapolitan Camorra), cocaine entrepreneurs either operate under private, personal initiative, or are totally unconnected to those groups. Cocaine import in Britain is mainly organised by Britons and Nigerians, while Germany and France show a more international composition of cocaine entrepreneurs mostly engaged in wholesale operations. Colombian exporters have increasingly targeted Eastern Europe during the 1990s, both selling to local groups as well as trying to import from these areas. The evidence of various Colombian-local mixed groups at import level in several European countries illustrates the strong Colombian bargaining position as main exporters.

Former colonial ties between Europe and places like South America, the Caribbean or Nigeria (in cultural, economic or demographic terms) have played a role, especially during the 1980s, regarding cocaine routing and people's involvement (for example in transport, import or retail selling in metropolitan centres). However, during the 1990s, routes became more diversified and business composition more international with the increase of large-scale operations, the growing repression and stigmatisation of particular groups, and the market integration with other legal and illegal activities.

More cocaine intercepted in Europe for the past decade has mainly been related to the expansion of the cocaine supply into the continent. However, it also reflects improved interception rates (from 5%-10% to 30%), because over-supply and huge profits allow large exporters to easily sacrifice more cocaine. Despite claims that prior intelligence (for example through infiltration) is essential for police performance, most large cocaine seizures are still made in selective or routine controls, following anonymous tips, of by chance. Countries receiving cocaine by sea (mainly Spain and the Netherlands) show the highest seizure levels, with multi-ton operations quite noticeable in the statistics. Europe is by far the region with less cocaine interception (10% of the global) regarding its own consumption (25% of the global). Cocaine smuggled by air has been growing in absolute terms, this method still being the only option for thousands of small exporters and importers.

Cocaine routes into Europe form a cross, with four import centres at the extremes. Spain, the Netherlands, Italy and Eastern Europe (from the Baltic Sea to the Balkan route) are these four centres, increasingly interconnected by political changes, economic integration and migration diasporas. The cocaine loads are often transshipped once or twice and are the object of several stopovers. Once in Europe, the cocaine moves rather freely by land in bi-directional lines.

For the last decade the Netherlands has played, after Spain, the main role in the import and wholesale distribution of Colombian cocaine into the Europe. From the point of view of cocaine traffickers, the Netherlands brings together good local conditions and resources for cocaine import and wholesale distribution. Colombian traquetos explicitly mentioned three aspects that make the Netherlands attractive: its economic activity, its international human resources and its penal climate.

First and foremost, all considerations about the enormous economic activity in the Netherlands reflect the extent to which the cocaine business is certainly embedded in the legal
Conclusions

The absence of local mafia-type organisations engaged in cocaine import facilitates the involvement of all sort of illegal entrepreneurs and employees, including Colombians. Many traquetos also expressed their inability to buy protection from Dutch Customs and police officers, feeling in this respect truly disadvantaged compared with local groups.

All people interviewed finally had some remark to make about the drug enforcement strategies and controls. Both entrepreneurs and employees tried to avoid detection concealing their actions in various ways. Despite Dutch repression at import level effectively being on the European average - certainly above countries receiving cocaine loads by land - Colombian traquetos regarded the Netherlands as a mild, tolerant country with respect to law enforcement. While some people - especially illegal residents - feared routine and unexpected police controls, most informants were not intimidated by drug enforcement strategies. Shorter sentences or better prison conditions are often acknowledged post factum by vulnerable inmates. More capitalised and successful traquetos - those engaged in decision-making in Colombia or the Netherlands - are able to transfer strategic risks to others. Their concerns are mainly focused on potential interception (only sometimes, since they are also ready to sacrifice cocaine and smugglers to feed the police), on employees (to guarantee their silence) and on competitors or partners (to avoid deceit and physical damage).

In this sense, these three positive conditions for importing cocaine through the Netherlands have nevertheless a different impact on the views and decisions of various Colombian traffickers and their employees. For those at the decision-making level, the interesting position of the Netherlands has little to do with the ‘repression factor’ and is mainly based on its economic infrastructure and facilitating human resources.

A Colombian enclave in the Netherlands?

Colombian cocaine exporters could hypothetically find that infrastructure and human resources amongst the Colombian immigrants living in the Netherlands. Overseas ethnic enclaves or middlemen minorities can provide good import and distribution channels for the drugs exported by co-nationals. This has been, for example, the case of Colombian networks in the United States for the last twenty years: they have enjoyed a privileged access to traquetos while they have also met some objective conditions for engaging in the illegal business.

However, are these conditions also present amongst Colombian immigrants living in the Netherlands? From what has been exposed in chapter IV, I argue that Colombians in the
Netherlands lack essential characteristics to possibly consider them either an ethnic enclave or a middleman minority.

Firstly, there is no Colombian enclave economy. The lack of Colombian capital (in terms of businesses, enterprises, and so on) is very evident, while Colombian labour is mainly oriented to the Dutch market (local enterprises or clients). The few legal or informal businesses, though they can employ other Colombians, are weak, short-lived, dispersed, and not specialised in one branch. Neither are they clustered and interconnected. Most of them are ethnic in the sense that they sell a 'Colombian' product or service, but they are not framed in any ethnic economy that would involve ethnic capital, labour and business expertise. Most Colombian businesses are established with Dutch capital and credits, and very often involve mixed couples with Dutch participation.

Secondly, the group can neither be conceptualised as a middle(wo)man minority. These immigrants lack essential social characteristics typical from these groups. Ethnic solidarity is weak, the tendency for outmarriage is enormous, and their offspring tends to 'assimilate' through mainstream schooling and socialisation. They do not have organisations at suprafamilial level, neither voluntary, charitable or self-help associations that can, for example, exercise internal social control. In economic terms, they are also far from forming any sort of commercial or entrepreneurial intermediation between dominant and subordinated local groups. As I explained, they do not practice any local legal trade activity but rather concentrate in ('gendered') labour specialisation as housewives, housecleaners and prostitutes. Typical middlemen family owned and operated small enterprises are, again, absent amongst Colombian migrants in the Netherlands.

At the most, it can be argued that Colombian entrepreneurship in the Netherlands manifests itself through the - partial - colonisation of particular occupational niches. The clearest examples are prostitution and other informal jobs mainly performed by women, such as housecleaning. Although this labour force does not involve any web of independently owned firms, it neither develops into a classical wage 'ethnic' proletariat. They tend to remain as a flexible, often self-employed, work force ready to exploit various activities. These activities can also be, as I found out during my fieldwork, illegal activities in the cocaine business.

The evidence that Colombians in the Netherlands do not form any ethnic enclave or middleman minority is certainly relevant for this study. Historically speaking, immigrant groups that have succeeded in organising and controlling particular illegal businesses are groups that developed minimum levels of entrepreneurial life, or at least some sort of ethnic economy. For example, in the US, all groups found to be historically involved in 'ethnic organised crime' are in fact the same groups also described as successful trading minorities or ethnic entrepreneurs: Jewish, overseas Chinese, Lebanese, Cubans, and so on. Even large proletarian migrant enclaves like Irish, Italians and more recently Mexicans in the US, or Turkish in Germany, can also turn into 'trade' if a number of conditions are also present, one of them being the development of a web of own ethnic shops. Illegal businesses, and especially international drug trade, do not flourish in a vacuum, but within broader political and mainstream economic structures with which they are fully interdependent.

Traquetos and other Colombians involved in the cocaine business

Despite their weakness, I found Colombians engaged in all four levels of the cocaine business in the Netherlands: transport, import, wholesale distribution and retail selling. However, my findings bring bad news for those who frame this participation in the realm of ethnic mafias or transnational 'cartels'.

Traquetos
Conclusions

It is a small and changing heterogeneous group, with a variety of geographical, social and ethnic origins, which for the last 15 years has nevertheless drawn disproportionate police and media attention, has kept a name and reputation in the cocaine business, and has deeply affected, at least in symbolic terms, social relations amongst Colombian immigrants.

Many of them do not even live in the Netherlands or only stay temporarily. The tasks, risks and skills required differ a great deal, and chances to fail or succeed are very distinct with regard to the level of involvement, legal status, degree of organisation, and overlap with legal structures and arrangements.

Various Colombians are involved in cocaine transport to the Netherlands. Whatever the method, these couriers are never independent but employed by exporters and importers to 'crown' shipments through different routes. They do not tend to live in the Netherlands and share such a risky job with less conspicuous couriers recruited from many other countries.

Some circumstances favoured, especially until the mid-1990s, the opportunities for Colombians to become involved in cocaine smuggling. Firstly, exporters need close and trustworthy people who can be controlled. Secondly, drug smuggling is, in some cases, either a career step for 'job promotion' or a task performed by people with a previous or parallel involvement in the business. Thirdly, Colombia has a large 'reserve army' of people willing to take the risk, pushed not only by negative personal circumstances (deprivation, calamities, and so forth) but also by more positive expectations of quick social mobility at any cost. However, other circumstances have hindered their participation. Colombians have become increasingly targeted by anti-drug enforcers as potential suspects, this resulting in a social and national diversification of drug couriers. The development of large-scale transportation and the proliferation of routes and transshipment countries have also increased the diversity of smugglers.

According to the quantities and the methods of smuggling involved, I identified four different groups of smugglers: *mulas* (small air couriers), *boleros* (ball swallowing couriers or 'body packers'), *niñeras* ('baby sitters' and professional couriers) and *tripulantes* (ship crew members). This study reveals that cocaine smugglers are the double victims of *traquetos* and law enforcers. The cost for their highly risky service is almost negligible if compared with the potential profits of their employers, turning smugglers into an expendable and replaceable labour force.

Colombian nationals have also been actively involved in organising cocaine import into the Netherlands. Far from controlling this level, a number of independent Colombian importers both compete and co-operate principally with native Dutch and Surinamese importers, and to a lesser extent with many other nationalities. Colombian participation is very modest for small quantities - smuggled by air - but strikingly high for large freights shipped from Colombia by sea.

Colombian importers experience conditions that both promote and limit their opportunities for involvement in import. On the one hand, and regardless their degree of proximity to exporters, they are attracted by two circumstances: a privileged contact with supply in Colombia (financial advantage) and a rather peaceful and open local business environment with no single group able or willing to restrict competition. On the other, their participation is clearly hindered and limited by the lack of own infrastructure and human resources in the Netherlands and the access to legal arrangements (corruption, import and transport firms, and so on).

Cocaine import is organised by four sorts of *traquetos*: 'envoys', 'line owners', 'mixed couples' and 'adventurers'. They are again heterogeneous with respect to social background and prestige, vulnerability, infrastructure and connections with exporters, non-Colombian importers and other Colombian immigrants. Only a small minority are envoys sent from
Colombia by export organisations. They only stay temporarily, have weak contacts with local Colombian immigrants, and enjoy the highest social prestige amongst *traquetos*.

Line owners' are more independent from exporters. They stay in the Netherlands on a more permanent basis, but always intend to go back to Colombia. Even when their suppliers are friends or relatives, they operate independent as entrepreneurs taking financial risks. These *traquetos* have difficulties in mobilising human and material local resources. Some are approached by exporters and are tested before being accepted as partners. Others work with more than one supplier, who at the same time could be working with two or more independent importers. Others still are poorly connected and have to strive to build and maintain supply resources.

Yet a third type of importer is the 'mixed couple', Colombians with a local partner. Friends and relatives of the Colombian are usually involved as exporters or smugglers, while the local partner provides the necessary infrastructure, financial and marketing resources. Some are frequent travellers, but they tend to be more established and integrated in the Netherlands.

Finally, a number of 'adventurers', usually newcoming young men from middle classes and with no criminal record, also engage in the import of smaller quantities of cocaine. These *traquetos* come and go, are locally known within the street Latino circuits, are erratic and vulnerable to repression, and in fact have a close relationship, in social and business terms, with local Colombian wholesale distributors.

In general, it can be concluded that Colombian importers are more vulnerable than Dutch ones since they have trouble in either using or constructing import-export firms or arrangements. The unloading of cocaine shipments is considered to be particularly problematic by Colombian importers. Around these illegal entrepreneurs, a number of Colombians are employed or subcontracted to perform important tasks: unloading, internal transport, load keeping, security and logistic help as hosts, chauffeurs, translators and telephone operators.

Colombians have also been involved in wholesale distribution in the Netherlands. However, their position at this level is even weaker and more erratic than in import, showing a clear disadvantage regarding other local operators. In contrast with the American case, local Colombian networks lack the essential characteristics required for a successful engagement in commercial distribution: no infrastructure, no protection, and weak marketing channels. They profit nevertheless from indifference or toleration from co-nationals not involved, from police difficulties in infiltrating or gathering information about this group, and from the reputation they have in the business. In this study, I claim that the few number of Colombians involved in cocaine distribution in the Netherlands exclusively derive their position from a privileged access to other Colombian importers and distributors, from which they are supplied.

They all sell kilo quantities to various groups, either local intermediaries or European wholesalers. They form rather small units of two or three people, all independent from each other, and have also a couple of helpers who either work for them or receive some cocaine to trade it through alternative channels. I found three types of Colombian distributors: 'conspicuous traders', 'discreet professionals' and 'flexible amateurs', all showing different degrees of social visibility, skills, commitment, and links with legal arrangements. Discretion and low profiles were regarded by everybody as the key factor for success. As was the case with Colombian importers, their profits are not invested in the Netherlands but are moved away through 'smurfed' remittances and cash transportation. Some money is spent in conspicuous consumption of services and perishable goods.

They also rely on various Colombian helpers even less skilled than those linked to direct import tasks. Some of these helpers can also be seen as 'poor' *traquetos* who have to
struggle to get the cocaine entrepreneur's favour, live in permanent financial problems, and often combine drug dealing with other rebusques or illegal activities.

Finally, the participation of Colombians in retail selling is almost insignificant within the multi-ethnic range of cocaine retailers active in the Netherlands. Colombians are completely absent from street dealing in major cities. Neither do they retail drugs around the Latino prostitution areas or streets. Further, they do not perform as house dealers. The few cases found are restricted to the recreational Latino circuit, and to a lesser extent the bars and coffee shops frequented by Colombians. These 'salsa dealers' are usually men and tend to be very erratic suppliers rather than professional retailers. They depend on a traquito favour and on a particular demand from close people in special settings: salsa discotoques, concerts and schools, Brazilian bars, and some other private parties or events.

In some of these places, it is not rare to find cocaine consumed by dealers, customers or musicians, cautiously traded in toilets or even openly offered in public. It can be argued that cocaine is easier to find in places not run or owned by Latin Americans, with a live salsa band playing, and with an ethnically mixed clientele.

Cocaine, prostitution and illegal immigrants

Amongst Colombian immigrants, two groups are the usual suspects for maintaining connections with the cocaine circuit: prostitutes and illegal immigrants. The question is thus to what extent this relation is real and what are the reasons behind involvement or social distance.

A significant group of Colombian women work as prostitutes in the Netherlands in different cities and under various conditions. A first wave preceded the influx of cocaine from Colombia by some years; the second one, mainly illegal prostitutes, follows a chain pattern and retains a high degree of mobility. In general terms, they are more independent and entrepreneurial than other foreign prostitutes. Most of their pimps, sex entrepreneurs and clients are not Colombian, but instead Dutch, Turkish and Moroccan.

Traffic in Colombian women is mainly limited to forms of intermediation or to the initial work phase, taking the shape of a cut-throat, rather consensual informal contract that represents a large initial debt for the woman. Many traffickers are mixed couples of a Colombian ex-prostitute and a Dutch sex entrepreneur.

They are extremely vulnerable, suffering chronic physical and financial problems. In particular, illegal prostitutes are very exposed to regular police controls, and they are isolated from institutional and social services. They are further discriminated against by other Colombian migrants, mainly other women who feel unfairly stigmatised.

However, they tend to develop a social network formed amongst others by Colombians. Firstly, the women support relatives and unemployed close friends. Secondly, many Colombians make a living selling them several goods and services: food, telephone calls, cleaning, transportation, baby-sitting, clothes, jewellery, and even witchcraft. Some of them also have contacts with drug dealers, in this way performing important bridge functions between the drug and the prostitution circuits.

Many of them do socialise with traquetos. They often come from the same areas in Colombia, but they are not blood related and they tend to belong to a lower social stratum. They meet far from the 'street', especially in bars, restaurants, discotoques, churches, telephone centres and common flats. They regard each other's activities as different and separate. Cocaine dealers tend to consider the women as vulnerable, pitiable or unreliable. Prostitutes, on the other hand, have strong reservations against 'criminals' and drug addicts, and consider drugs a risky business. They do not seek each other as members of a common,
abstract 'criminal circuit', but mainly as the result of a material and symbolic exchange. While Colombian prostitutes do not usually consume illegal drugs, they seek *traquetos* for money, protection, social status and fun. For drug dealers, prostitutes also represent a source of fun and status, sex often being absent or only marginal part of the exchange. They also reinforce their male identities.

I argue in this book that prostitutes are only marginally involved in the cocaine business. They can eventually act as package receivers, cash transporters and remitters, messengers, retail helpers or migrant facilitators, but they do not engage in central roles of import and wholesale distribution. These weak business linkages can be explained by a number of reasons. Both activities require or imply different skills, risks, moral careers, legal status and criminal policies. These differences are recognised by both groups, which despite the intensive social interaction try to keep their businesses separate. The fact that Colombians do not engage in street drug retail, and that often Colombian prostitutes do not consume cocaine drugs are two further reasons for market delimitation. Most importantly, the rather independent status of Colombian prostitutes also helps to keep a distance from possible illegal traffickers and market operators. While traffic in women and in cocaine is usually run by different people and their relation remains problematic, it is also true that women with lots of debts have more chances of accepting risky jobs in the drug traffic. Finally, the lack of local *mafias* that control and articulate prostitution and drugs also discourages further market integration.

Illegal Colombian immigrants also constitute a relatively important group amongst migrants. Though officially recorded as illegal foreigners, many Colombians involved and caught in drug trafficking, such as *mulas* or 'envoys', neither live in the Netherlands nor can be considered immigrants.

Excluded from the formal labour market as well as from institutional services and - non-existent - migrant organisations, illegal Colombian immigrants nevertheless combine good social capital and skills with some personal social networks of friends and relatives. They are neither 'integrated' nor they tend to 'marginalise'. Instead, they engage in many activities in the informal economy - especially housecleaning, but also prostitution - and develop 'stationary' careers, while some of them manage to get involved in different criminal activities of a predatory or entrepreneurial nature.

They face differential chances of being detained or deported. Most have no contact with the police. The less touched are those living in smaller municipalities or towns, those cleaning or baby-sitting in private houses, those dependent on legal relatives or friends and those employed in 'non-ethnic' small businesses. Protected prostitutes and discreet professional *traquetos* also demonstrate good skills for concealment. A clear focus on fighting 'visible' illegal prostitution and drug dealing increase the chances of deportation for those illegal immigrants hanging around the street prostitution circuit. Finally, those involved in profitable activities tend to successfully return to the country despite deportation.

Alongside this process of selectivity, illegal Colombian immigrants develop opportunities to engage in some informal and illegal activities and not in others. Cleaning, baby-sitting and prostitution are good examples of such specialisation. Regarding illegal activities, most of the thieves are not pickpockets or drug related thieves, but burglars and organised shoplifters. They abstain from drug retail selling - as 'drug runners' or 'drug pushers' - and from problematic consumption as 'drug-tourists'. Illegal Colombian immigrants tend to engage as a flexible and unskilled labour force around the import and wholesale distribution of cocaine. In some cases, they can become real *traquetos*.

I have identified three types of illegal immigrants involved in the cocaine business: the *pre-involved*, the *recruited* and the *peripheral*. 'Illegality' assumes a different meaning for each group, they tend to occupy different positions and they perform distinct tasks. They also
face varying degrees of risk of being captured and succeeding as illegal workers and entrepreneurs. Several reasons can be identified for the involvement of recruited and peripheral illegal immigrants. In line with many other immigrants, from prostitutes to cleaners to merchants, these reasons involve the possibility of procuring money for whatever material or symbolic purpose. However, their chances of entering seem to be both connected with their opportunities in other legal or informal activities, as well as with finding a proper contact with traquetos beyond superficial and unreliable offers.

I finally conclude that, compared, for example, with better and longer established immigrants, illegal Colombian newcomers have fewer opportunities in the drug business than in other informal activities and that they have fewer opportunities to establish a solid and reliable link with cocaine dealers when they are not a relative or a close friend.

Indeed, illegal immigrants and traquetos have reasons to reject each other. The cocaine business can only offer a very limited amount of jobs to a small fraction of the 3,000 or more illegal Colombian immigrants estimated as living in the Netherlands. Another limitation refers to gender. While many illegal immigrants are women, many roles at lower rank, 'first line' or street level are often fulfilled by men. Many people reject involvement actively and explicitly. While some do not see the cocaine trade as morally wrong, they oppose the personal risks involved and the traquito way of life. Illegality is for many a source of enough problems. Others reject the whole drug business as they connect it with traumatic experiences, violence, and a source of stigmas and shame.

Many illegal immigrants even limit their social contacts with other Colombians. They avoid 'hot' places and develop paranoid attitudes about police controls. This isolation reduces their opportunities while they compete with legal immigrants in terms of information, self-promotion, contacts and job offers. Moreover, from the traquetos' point of view, illegal immigrants can only offer some loyalty around their vulnerable situation. However, they are unfamiliar with local codes and language, are less prepared to react in case of problems, and they lack local contacts. They cannot drive and cannot offer legal or illegal infrastructure. Illegal immigrants are regarded, as it is the case with prostitutes, as a vulnerable social group.

Flexible internal relationships: the post-Fordist nature of cocaine enterprises

When focusing upon the internal relations inside Colombian cocaine enterprises operating in the Netherlands, I found enough elements to critically question two dominant frameworks on the issue: the 'economic-bureaucratic' and the 'criminal network' approaches.

The first model, adopting an economic-bureaucratic approach, tends to see fixed 'branches' of cocaine cartels. It allows for comparison and further research on the interwoveness of legal and illegal economies. It fails, however, in not providing evidence for the organisational models and structures assumed: Fordist, monopolist transnational corporations with rigid pyramidal hierarchies and labour division. While it refers to a model that has either been transformed - Fordism - or does not apply to the reality of very competitive markets, it also neglects the impact of illegality upon the cocaine business. Within this bureaucratic model, others prefer to use the more militaristic notion of 'cells'. They also fail by placing the drug economy and their actors in the realm of hyper-organised international conspiracies. They have in mind the model of 'terrorist' threats and enemies, and feed the rhetoric of 'war on drug' crusaders. This notion hinders any attempt to understand drug dealer's practices in relation to broader socio-economic relations and contexts.

The second approach, with the stress on 'criminal networks', has the merit of capturing the flexible and dynamic nature of more micro, interpersonal interaction. However, it only
relates flexibility to the illegal dimension of the phenomenon, setting the cocaine business and its actors out of the economic action. In this way, it does not allow cocaine dealing to be understood within the broader picture of profit making, while it neglects the 'non-criminal' aspects of social relations. Internal conflict and collusion with legal structures are also secondary aspects of 'criminal networks'.

By studying internal business and labour relations, I tried to capture both the economic and the dynamic dimensions of cocaine enterprises. I found that Colombian cocaine firms are informal, small, mutating and decentralised. Some are individual enterprises; others adopt the form of temporary partnerships between two or three people. These coalitions are often formed solely for a single project, with some of the people involved also engaging in legal activities or in other coalitions. In many cases, a percentage system is used to divide profits, and payments in kind are not rare. A further conclusion of this study is that despite the importance of kinship ties and the frequent use of relatives, none of these enterprises are 'family businesses'. Brokers (people with contacts) play a central role in bringing about these coalitions and transactions.

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

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

As a tentative conclusion, I claim that these characteristics regarding enterprise structure and labour relations resemble Post-Fordist legal businesses. Illegality only accentuates a 'wild' flexibility (regarding production, labour and service contracts, or capital accumulation), which is in fact a normal feature of any other highly competitive market under contemporary forms of capitalism. These commonalities certainly contribute to the symbiotic overlap between legal and illegal businesses and labour markets.

**Violence, secrecy and trust**

Also exploring internal relations, I further discovered that Colombian *traquetos* resort to violence, secrecy and trust in ambiguous ways. These social resources both serve as essential
Conclusions

tools for business performance, but they also constitute obstacles for success. *Traquetos* use violence in the absence of external regulation, they heavily rely on trust in the absence of written agreements and due to the good chances of ‘dirty play’, and they keep their activities secret to avoid detection. They are successfully portrayed as being very violent, highly secretive, and only working with trusted ‘equals’.

However, these images from outsiders often contrasted with the social reality of drug dealing and dealers, which was more mundane, consensual and public than imagined. Moreover, *traquetos* themselves were either pushed to perform in accordance to those perceptions or simply exploited violent or secretive reputations. Next to the real use of violence, secrecy and trust, *traquetos* and their employees often ‘acted out’ these resources strategically as a form of manipulation, to either defend themselves, to gain power or to construct their social or ethnic identities.

Violence has a permanent presence in the cocaine business. In contrast with political organisations like *mafia* groups or paramilitary organisations, violence does not appear as a commodity in itself, but as an instrumental resource that is carefully measured. The cocaine business imposes structural limitations to the excessive use of violence. Transactions are consensual and not based on violent extraction. The actors involved usually recognise the competitive nature of the drug business and act accordingly.

More important than the exercise of violence is the ‘threat’ of violence. A violent reputation can indeed be enough in many cases to neutralise retaliation or ‘dirty play’ and push forward a deal. Excessive violence can discourage potential partners to deal with a reputedly violent person, can attract the attention of authorities or can damage market performance. *Traquetos* will first try to get ‘civil’ compensation: money or a favour in return. Other conflicts are just ‘forgotten’ for various reasons: fear, threats or the use of a relative. Violence also damages their expectations of being legitimated by broader social groups.

In the Netherlands, Colombian *traquetos* tend to restrict the use of physical violence and keep a low profile. Cases of kidnappings and killings occur but are rare, usually connected with rip-deals and not used for punishment or to settle scores. Fire-arms are carefully avoided. Most people use threats and a mere reputation as effective measures.

Several factors can be pointed out for the fact that Colombians have restricted the use of violence in the Netherlands. Firstly, the Colombian community is too small and unorganised to successfully conceal, accept or tolerate the use of violence. A second factor refers to the Dutch social environment: low crime and impunity rates regarding violent crimes (state monopoly of violence) increase the visibility and vulnerability of violent *traquetos*. A further element to take into account is the cocaine market dynamic at the level in which Colombians are involved, no local or Colombian group ‘fights’ for monopolist control, all respecting a stable and peaceful competition. Finally, low levels of violence are also related to the lack of any internal war on drugs. Drug dealing is relatively tolerated as long as no violence or conspicuous money making are involved. *Traquetos* seem to respect this unofficial policy. Corruption and collusion with the local legal economy also discourages violence.

Operational secrecy is also important for cocaine entrepreneurs to minimise risks, avoid detection and neutralise competition. Secret measures and practices are common at any level: mobile telephones, passwords or codes, cover-ups, and especially discretion. Secrecy functions as a social resource, an adaptive device to conceal information, activities and relationships and protect a profitable business. However, cocaine enterprises cannot be considered secret societies, but instead open associations that keep some operational matters secret. Trade secrets are more difficult to keep than in legal business, which rely on bureaucratised and standardised marketing methods. For a single transaction, there are often many contacts made, meetings, and long discussions about small operational details. This
marks a first limit to secrecy for *traquetos*. Further, secrecy is also directed to concealing the illegal business from social censure, legal punishment and conflictive interests. In the drug business, secrets are kept not so much for loyalty but basically out of fear and self-interest. A second fragile side of secrecy is marked by the fact that *traquito*’s loyalty to other groups or individuals often supersedes responsibility to their employers and employees. They tend to disclose secrets as soon as they do not feel threaten or they are offered a better deal.

Successful operations seem to rely on ignorance rather than on secret shared information. Secrecy appears as social fragmentation rather than as an integrative device. *Traquetos* dislike secrecy. Excessive secrecy can exclude them both from business and from the possibility of public recognition and respect. They enjoy ‘public’ life, especially when they are successful. They like to talk about the business, even with outsiders.

Places like the telephone kiosks reflect the boundaries of secrecy for all *traquetos*, whether they keep low profiles or they show-off their involvement. Their nicknames also reveal the tension between secrecy and open identities. Finally, secrecy is a device for manipulation. People construct their social identity and establish social distances or links through exaggerating or pretending secrecy.

Trust, as a risk minimising strategy, is finally another resource for successful business performance. The particular combination of constraint (illegality, few choices), risk (physical danger) and interest (huge profits) makes trust a necessary tool. Agreements have a great chance of being transgressed or misinterpreted, and so the temptations to cheat, steal or kill counterparts. To avoid being ripped-off or detected, it is essential to work with trustworthy people, both as employees and as business partners. *Traquetos* have many ways of constructing trust. Firstly, using relatives and close friends. Bonds created around a common socialisation or kinship are important guarantees for mutual trust. A past in common can also facilitate trust: a shared criminal background, a common past in the police, some guerrilla group, and so forth. Another way to build trust is through the intervention of a third common trusted person who recommends a newcomer. Trust can also be pushed forward by the existence of a power relation. However, illegitimate coercion tends in fact to reduce mutual trust. Further, trust increases when everybody is satisfied about profit distribution or remuneration. Finally, as in any other business, trust is also a result and not a pre-condition of successful co-operation. Good workers and partners are highly appreciated and carefully kept.

The cocaine business environment, however, does not stimulate the development and reproduction of ‘accumulated trust’: flexible relations vanish, many deals result in one-off operations and expectations about future co-operation are limited.

Most informants were obsessed about distrust and betrayal. They seem to be also essential resources for survival in the cocaine business. Betrayal between relatives is infrequent, though not rare. Betrayal between old friends is very common, even between people working together for many years. Familiarity through friendship or kinship only expands trust under certain conditions. Firstly, social costs of exit or betrayal have to be high. Otherwise, the ‘strong tie’ only serves to improve, rather than decrease, the chances of betrayal. Secondly, ‘blind’ trust (loyalty) often endorsed to friends and relatives cannot only lead to co-operation, but to deception as well.

The intervention of a third person or the recommendation by known people is a trust source that cocaine entrepreneurs often regret. Trust as a result of job satisfaction or agreed profit distribution is also fragile. For people with ‘no choice’ (through coercion, economic hardship, and so on) trust is not even a problematic issue. Trust is also difficult to build amongst people who assess risk in different ways.

Many Colombian *traquetos* develop either fatalist or paranoid attitudes about trusting others. Economic interest, a major drive behind co-operation in drug enterprises, is also a weak incentive for trust in a business based in short-term high profits.
The cocaine business spreads distrust to the whole Colombian community. Most Colombian immigrants in the Netherlands distrust each other as a weapon to resist negative images, bad reputations and possible problems.

Trust over particular groups can favour their inclusion or exclusion from the cocaine business. Colombian dealers trust other groups following some vague notions of professionalism, given word, honour and accessibility. From more to less reliable, they mention Italians and Spanish, Turks, native Dutch, Eastern Europeans, and finally Antilleans and Surinamese. Dealers tend to reproduce stereotypes and standardised images about these groups. Trust over them and actual co-operation does not always coincide.
People can be seen through the lenses of society, for all intents and purposes, whether they keep low profiles or they show-off their involvement. Their motivations also vary, the tension between society and open-identities. Possibly, society is a means for manipulation. People construct their social identity and establish social distances or links through exaggerations or pretending of society.

Trust, at a risk minimizing strategy, is finally another resource for the successful-business performances. The particular combination of constraint (legality, few choices), risk (physical Managers and Internet huge profits) makes trust a necessary tool. Agreements have a great chance of being transgressed or misinterpreted, and so the temptations to cheat, steal or hold counterparts. To avoid being ripped-off or detected, it is essential to work with trustworthy people, both as employees and as business partners. Trust is one of the most important factors in business. Trust is key to common sense, a common past in the police, some general group, and so forth. Another way to build trust is through the intervention of a third person who can act as a trustworthy person, who can act as a new comer. Trust can also be pushed forward by the existence of a power relation. However, untrustworthiness becomes too high to reduce mutual trust. Further, trust increases, where everybody is satisfied about profits distribution, or compensation. Possibly, as in any other business, trust is a result, not a pre-condition of successful co-operation. Good workers and partners are highly appreciated and carefully kept.

The existence moderate environment, however, does not stimulate the development and reproduction of 'accomplished trust': flexible relations vanish, many deals result in one-shot operations and expectations about future co-operation are limited.

Most informants were obsessed about their distrust and betrayal. They seem to have been warned repeatedly to survive in the business. Betrayal between relatives is subsequent, though not rare. Betrayal between old friends is very common, even between people working together for many years. Familiarity through friendship or kinship only expands trust under certain conditions. Firstly, social costs of exit or betrayal have to be high. Otherwise, the large trust does not serve to improve, rather than decrease, the chances of breach. Secondly, 'blind' trust (loyalty) often enforced to friends and relatives cannot only lead to co-operation, but to deception as well.

The environment of a third person of the recommendation by known people in a trust relation that Choose entrepreneurs often regret. Trust as a result of just satisfaction or agreed profit distribution is also fragile. For people with 'no choice' (through coercion, economic hardship, and so on) trust is not even a problematic issue. Trust is also difficult to build amongst people who assess risk in different ways.

Many Colombians trust others develop either fatalist or fatalistic attitudes about trusting others. Economic insecurity, a major drive behind co-operation in deep enterprises, is also a cause incentive for trust in a business based in short-term high profit.