

**Youth and Groups in Marginal Neighborhoods of Monterrey:
Approaches to the Contingency of Life and Self-Precariousness****Jóvenes y colectivos en barrios marginales de Monterrey:
aproximaciones a la contingencia de vida y precarización de sí**Luis Alejandro Martínez Canales¹

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the perceptions of young men and women who intervene in popular and marginal enclaves of the Monterrey metropolitan area, by means of educational and art projects. Conceptually I refer to them as *cultural producers* as they imagine their own autonomous production. This process, expressed in different modes of subjectivation, is also an instrument that constitutes functional effects of the biopolitical governmentality of western societies. The young members of the collectives go through a variety of aspects with their actions, such as political and cultural self-organization, forms of collaboration, and paid employment. The approach is based on the “*contingency of life*”, and the “*precariousness of oneself*” as ambivalent forms of self-government that oscillate between self-exploitation and modes of subjectivation, from which these groups perceive the risks and opportunities of the city as actionable and moldable.

Keywords: 1. self-precariousness, 2. life contingency, 3. governmentality, 4. urban groups.

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza las percepciones de jóvenes que intervienen en enclaves marginales y populares de la zona metropolitana de Monterrey, mediante proyectos formativos y artísticos. Conceptualmente me refiero a ellos como *productores y productoras culturales*: sujetos que imaginan su propia producción autónoma. Este proceso, expresado en distintos modos de subjetivación, es un instrumento que constituye derivaciones funcionales de la gubernamentalidad biopolítica de las sociedades occidentales. Los jóvenes miembros de los colectivos atraviesan con sus acciones una variedad de aspectos, tales como la autoorganización política y cultural, maneras de colaborar y el empleo remunerado. La aproximación se sustenta en la *contingencia de vida*, y en la *precarización de sí* como una forma ambivalente de autogobierno que oscila entre la autoexplotación y la subjetivación, desde las que estas agrupaciones perciben los riesgos y oportunidades de la urbe como procesables y moldeables.

Palabras clave: 1. precarización de sí, 2. contingencia de vida, 3. gubernamentalidad, 4. colectivos urbanos.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last five years I have approached young members of groups whose performance is based on an area that I will describe as cultural-educational. Women and men between 25 and 35 years of age intervene where low-income families live in the Monterrey metropolitan area (MMA). Their work includes the recovery or opening of spaces where children and adolescents live together, learn, and play. Other groups I studied, spread a reality of their neighborhood to show a different image than the one circulating in the regional media, which was based on criminal acts and insecurity.

To conceptually refer to these young people, I have chosen the definition *cultural producers*, proposed by Isabell Lorey. Their nature is “paradoxical” insofar as it identifies people who imagine their own autonomous production and the production of themselves. This course, expressed in different modes of subjectivation, is also an instrument of government that constitutes functional effects of the biopolitical governmentality of Western societies (2008, p. 57).

The meaning of cultural producers does not necessarily refer to art professionals who belong to this industry. *Cultural producers* is understood with a meaning that establishes a perspective of analysis different from that of cultural manager or promoter, perhaps more attached to the particular action described in a project with a specific scope. *Cultural producer* alternatively refers to a “modern” individual, “dependent on certain existential conditions” within which he develops a creative and productive relationship “with himself”, which allows him to establish himself in a more comprehensive sense. This capacity for self-constitution is not independent of devices of governmentality (Lorey, 2008, p. 62).

The young people (or subjects) I approached have a university or high school education. Alonso and Fernanda, founders of one of the groups, attended university studies in psychology and specialization workshops in music, respectively. Regarding Rita and Saúl, from another of the groups, she trained in theater, and he finished high school plus training to be employed in a company near the place of intervention. Alma, from the third group, was trained in social sciences, as were two of the members.²

Most support the actions undertaken with their own resources or with donations from individuals. Several maintain part-time or temporary jobs, while others have obtained material and economic resources through their educational training. In this article I will refer

² Hereinafter, the exact references to the facts and stories collected will be partially transcribed; those parts necessary to elaborate on an argument, without mentioning dates or exact location. This action, together with the use of pseudonyms, plus the omission of other personal data of the members, are part of the confidentiality agreements that we reached. For this reason, the same category or type of references does not appear for all the subjects.

to subjects from three collectives³ who reflect on the *contingency* of their work, the meaning they give to their solidarity and the situation of insecurity they face.

My empirical approach was established in a modality that included several visits to the intervention sites. In one of the cases, it was possible to record the work in a more detailed manner by agreeing on a form of periodic collaboration. In another, the relationship was based on semi-structured interviews and monitoring of printed publications and social networks. The third group limited my visits to observe their daily dynamics. This study continues in force.

Methodologically, I have approached reality as a reflexive task between its considerations and my own vision, in order to accommodate both discourses (Dietz, 2012). The interest of this article is to outline an analysis of the activities and perceptions of members of these groups based on their elections.

On the motivations that founded the collective actions, the talks dealt with the uncertainty that the recovery of the spaces meant under the idea of autonomy that, in principle, was preponderant for everyone. I used the *emic and etic* categories; the first to glimpse the considerations forged by the members about their work, the second I used as I referred to my own considerations (Restrepo, 2016). I recorded the subjects' reflections on what worked and what hindered their relationship with the neighborhood and other actors (*emic*).

A second aspect was related to the effort to collectivize individual interests, a situation that caused difficulties due to the time that each member had available. Another essential aspect of the study was the metropolitan circumstance in which the groups intervened. Both the public infrastructure, and the use or disuse of it, played a preponderant role in the relationships that could be established and who participated in them.

The fourth aspect was the dynamic that was created by the people of the neighborhood. Although this research has not made a specific emphasis on the ways in which the population dialogues with young people, I have made a record that combines brief appreciations of the families and, especially, the expectations that I have been able to observe about the offerings of the groups and how these actions can become an organic element of their survival.

Contingency and Precariousness

Contingency (or uncertainty) is an ambivalent phenomenon that conditions life in society; it asserts "threat and constriction", while implying "new possibilities of life and work." Precariousness, as a global phenomenon, encompasses all the spaces that in the past were considered safe, it is not an exclusive reality for only impoverished and marginal regions (Lorey, 2016, p. 17).

³ Hereinafter, I will refer to collectives also as groupings or groups.

Precariousness, as an instrument of government, is at the service of social custody. It does not necessarily focus solely on the decline or prevalence of jobs, nor does it seek to legitimize itself through protection and security (Lorey, 2016). It operates “by regulating the minimum social protection that corresponds at the same time to a growing uncertainty” (Lorey, 2016, p. 18). Uncertainty in the community stimulates an instrument that brings together individual wills in pursuit of a series of purposes that can be identified as *solidarity*. This solidarity can be considered organic to the governmentality of social action in the Monterrey metropolis (and in other cities, without doubt) as a combination of volunteering and the application of public resources in extreme social situations. This uncertainty or contingency of life should not be associated, therefore, with ungovernability.

Governmentality and biopolitics is a Foucauldian dyad, revisited by Lorey and taken to a new level. Relative to governmentality, Foucault alludes to three things: “the set constituted by the institutions, the procedures, analysis and reflections, and the calculations and tactics” that allow power to be exercised over the population (2018a, p. 136). With biopolitics, Foucault refers to a power whose purpose is to order life through mechanisms that distribute and normalize the living “in a domain of value and utility” as the essence of political struggle (2007a, pp. 174-175).

The conduct of men outside of ecclesiastical authority raised the question of how to conduct oneself in daily life, with respect to others and authorities (Foucault, 2018a). Let us think about the members of the collectives: their initiative in neighborhoods, considered emancipated, responds to living conditions conceived by the State, in broad terms, through social stratification and how the population should or can get involved for its apparent resolution.

A perspective opposed to Lorey and the Foucauldian thesis on governmentality can be found in Sider’s (2014) analysis of the changing conditions of historical violence in which indigenous towns in Canada have survived. Although the circumstance faced by Sider is relatively far from what happens in the marginalized enclaves of the MMA, his criticism of governmentality provides us with a reference that, from his logic, tries to understand the resistance to cultural and political transformations observed in the Canadian native communities.

For Sider, the condition of “domination” helped shape the governmentality and the identification of the peoples classified as “Indians, Eskimos, Aborigines” (2014, p. 183). Keeping the proportions, it is possible to find parallels between this and the persistent uncertainty experienced by families in the neighborhoods served by the groups in this study.⁴ A very important one is regarding deficient or non-existent public services. The recognition

⁴ Sider offers an ethnographic analysis of Canadian Aboriginal people’s changing experiences of historical violence. He emphasizes the “erosion” of autonomy and dignity within native communities due to the deprivation caused by the lack of sufficient livelihoods and the contemptuous treatment of the State and corporations related to official policy.

of how these deficiencies induce the type of relationships between its inhabitants, between its inhabitants and government officials, and between its inhabitants and groups (generally foreigners), as well as the role that each of these subjects must play.

Sider (2014) considers it incorrect that the conformation that has been made of the native peoples of Canada provokes their governability and, even more, their victimization. Although Lorey (2016) does not take collusion or compliance for granted in binary terms (whether it does or does not happen), but rather in terms of increasing and ambivalent uncertainty, Sider observes that dominance “produces much more chaos than order in the lives of its subjects; so, domination is always in trouble” and has little to do with the routine of native populations (2014, p. 183).

For Lorey, precarious governmentality does not pursue the submission of victims, but the control of subjects who actively respond to the insecurity to which they are exposed. The “problems” that Sider refers to, from the precariousness of governmentality, are constituent elements of contingency as an ontology of life, subject to certain social and political conditions (Lorey, 2016, p. 32). Under these conditions, obedience, and cooperation “on the one hand” and “resistance, evasion, and defiance, etc., on the other” that Sider speaks of (2014, p. 182), occur ambivalently, not in opposition.

The substantial order of precarious governmentality does not equate efficiency with security or with resolution, but with regulation, which does not necessarily dispense with the “chaos” depicted by Sider, but instead turns it into an element that is organic to its operation. Foucauldian-rooted governmentality reaches a new margin represented in the precariousness of a State based on a “maximum of insecurity” (Lorey, 2016, p. 18) distributed heterogeneously among the population.

The contingency that emerges from *precarious governmentality* has sequels of a different order. The young people studied share the uncertainty of professional development and their solidarity works in favor of the children and adolescents. The latter has its roots in the precariousness of themselves (Lorey, 2008). The precariousness of oneself, or chosen for oneself, shows “historical lines of force of modern bourgeois subjectivation, imperceptibly hegemonic and normalizing, and capable of blocking resistant behaviors” (Lorey, 2008, p. 59).

This does not mean that young people invariably move within a vicious circle that vacillates between hetero and self-driving (Lorey, 2016). From an ethical dimension of governing, the subject considers leading and constituting himself (Foucault, 2018b), confronting, as far as possible, discipline and “the procedures put into practice to lead others” (Lorey, 2016, p. 20). Hence the paradox: “governing, controlling, disciplining and regulating oneself means, at the same time, developing, training and empowering oneself”, to which the sense of freedom can be granted (Lorey, 2008, p. 68).

Self-government techniques “arise from the simultaneity of compulsion and freedom” (Lorey, 2008, p. 68). It is through this paradoxical movement that the *cultural producers* perceive themselves as autonomous. This subjectivation makes them participate in the

reproduction of the conditions of governmentality; they expose themselves “freely” to the unpredictable and to the doubt that the future of their role within the neighborhoods contains. From the routine dealing with contingency emerges the ability to choose between being overwhelmed or attempting a kind of counter-conduct that allows them to continue with their community plan. “The potentiality of the exodus and constitution”, as Lorey calls it (2016, p. 110).

The context of this dialectic between exodus and constitution is the government as power, as “action on possible actions, of relations of violence” that can be implemented by that power in different labor, infrastructural, and racial strata, etc. (Saidel, 2018, p. 23). There is no antagonism in this, but rather a reciprocal struggle to discipline free and potentially resistant behavior (Saidel, 2018). Thus, the government does not pursue a common good, but a “convenient end” to the regulation of the population, which is why there is a plurality of goals and devices, whose creation can come from the imagined sovereignty of individuals (Foucault, 2007b, p. 201).

The group led by Alonso and Fernanda coordinates a music workshop as part of the strategy for the recovery of a community house that remained without official attention for some years. Playful activities have been added to the workshop, in addition to linking with different actors—private and state—to carry out celebrations such as Children’s or Mother’s Day. Support to obtain instruments or for boys and girls to attend sporting events are part of the management assumed.

On the other hand, the group led by Saúl and Rita operates a space in which children and adolescents participate in sports games and practice trades such as carpentry or painting; some women also meet to learn dance or to participate in talks that act as group therapy. The conjunction of minors of different ages is a cause of conflict because some boys occupy the place to ingest or inhale drugs. The third group, currently headed by Alma and two other companions, has been publishing a newspaper for five years in which the history of the neighborhoods where they reside is told, in addition to denouncing current problems.

The precariousness of these young people gravitates in certain ways of who and how they are, through projects that position their disagreement with the conditions of their habitats. Imagination in relation to their own freedom or ability to choose are connected with hegemonic modes of subjectivation that make them an active part of the unequal relationships (cultural, economic, etc.) that characterize the society in which they live (Lorey, 2008).

A Context Based on Insecurity

To refer to the metropolitan circumstance that accommodates my study, it is convenient to present some clarifications that help characterize insecurity as a fundamental element of the neoliberal government as opposed to the social State or protective State.

Lorey characterizes the precarious condition as the foundation of the social and the political system within a government that seeks the subsistence of all individuals in favor of

the capitalist economy. The author does not share the vision of a “protective social State”, in which “‘precariousness’ [in a negative sense] is ‘the potential source of danger not only for those who suffer from insufficient protection, but also for society as a whole’” (2016, p. 54). Contrary to the assumption that configures the social State as a precursor to security and “precariousness” as a producer of insecurity (Castel, Kessler, Merklen, & Murard, 2013), Lorey criticizes “the neoliberal discourse on freedom” that supposes the manumission of the individuals from the influence of a “protective and paternalistic” State (2016, p. 54).

Castell et al. ponder precariousness as the only cause of social danger (Lorey, 2016). Lorey warns that an unequivocal conception of precariousness as a threat and insecurity will be read as if it were a “deviation”, which prevents understanding that both security and insecurity are part of modes of precariousness and normalization that constitute instruments and techniques of neoliberal governments (2016, p. 54).

The social State, apparently, would have achieved a balance within which the risks do not contravene the development of society, and the civic and political rights of citizens are guaranteed. However, the core of the institutional framework of security is private property, which focuses the demand for protection of a small group of individuals and gives rise to an endless claim for justice and the appearance of a juridical-legal framework (León, 2006) that controls both the administration of justice and the level of underlying insecurity. According to León, in his reading of Castel et al., it is these unequal conditions that give way to the “omnipresence of the police” as a measure of control, but also of conflict due to the consequent demand for respect of freedom and individual autonomy (2006, p. 286).

The views of Castel et al. project this phenomenon of inequity as a contrast between a demand for absolute security and a claim for autonomy and freedom; it would be “the exasperation of concern for security” that generates “its own frustration, which feeds a feeling of insecurity” (León, 2006, p. 268). Lorey (2016), on the other hand, recognizes in the State of insecurity a government that is not legitimized in the—unfulfilled—promise of safeguarding. The neoliberal government proceeds by regulating the minimum social protection that corresponds, at the same time, to a growing uncertainty. The art of governing currently consists of balancing a threshold of insecurity that does not lead to a breakdown of peace or a social explosion.

Neoliberalism in Latin America gains strength after the crisis of the 1980s, appropriating a discourse compatible with “modernization” as a horizon and a panacea. Neoliberalism promoted an “ideology of transition” to legitimize a political-economic proposal justified by “the need for the reinsertion of the region” as part of the globalization of the economy (Jiménez, 1992).

In Mexico, as in the rest of the Latin American countries, neoliberalism constrained the income of the so-called “popular” sectors, further weakening their purchasing power. Migration to large cities, forced by job uncertainty caused by the current economic model, increased the impoverishment of sectors of the population whose only possibility was to work

in low-paid activities and/or take on informal sales or services as a way to survive. The uncertainty of hundreds of people looking for a source of income becomes a normalized urban phenomenon through which some individuals are exalted as “entrepreneurs”, even in their dispossession and precariousness, as an expected consequence of the capitalist ideal of competition (Katz, 2015, p. 15).

The metropolitan area of Monterrey, Nuevo León, is the second most populous in the country and encompasses nine municipalities.⁵ In its demarcation it holds 5 341 171 inhabitants. Of the total listed 1 142 994 live in the capital (Inegi, 2020).⁶ The recognition of the MMA as a generator of wealth and development stems from a liberal discourse that does not recognize social segregation as one of the mainstays of economic expansion in the northeast region of Mexico (Aparicio, Ortega, & Sandoval, 2011).

By 2014, the municipality of Monterrey already had the highest rate of inhabitants in extreme poverty compared to the other 50 municipalities that make up Nuevo León. In that year, the local Social Development Secretariat invested nearly 100 million pesos “focused on combating food shortages, lack of services and housing quality, in addition to the lack of social security” (Ochoa, 2014).

Another manifestation of segregation is the use of space. Aparicio et al. (2011) locate different periods in the growth of the MMA. They highlight the establishment of working-class neighborhoods that occurred during industrialization, from the end of the 19th century to the 1940s. Hereafter, the authors identify a period of expansion between the years 1940 and 1980, which, according to Aparicio et. al., defined the characteristics of Monterrey current as of 1990.

During the last or current stage there has been a commitment to “a competitive city within global economic dynamics” (Aparicio et al., 2011, p. 175). Much of the discourse and work coined by the globalization scheme have been based on the expansion that forced the conurbation of several municipalities. This opened the door to tens of thousands of migrants to locate themselves in jobs, scarce in the center and south of the country with very little pay. The meagerness of the jobs offered to the less favored natives is a deliberate action in which “the refusal to share the urban space with others” is involved (Aparicio et al., 2011, p. 175).

In 2019, the local Employer Confederation of the Mexican Republic (Coparmex by its initials in Spanish) denounced the growth of the informal sector and the unfair competition that meant the absence of mechanisms to collect taxes from these workers. In its analysis, based on data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Inegi, by its initials in

⁵ The MMA is made up of: Apodaca, García, General Escobedo, Guadalupe, Juárez, Monterrey, San Nicolás de los Garza, San Pedro Garza García and Santa Catarina (Government of Nuevo León, 2020).

⁶ I will use Monterrey and MMA or metropolitan area as synonyms. In the case of the municipality of Monterrey, I will state it like this or, alternatively, as the capital of the state or Monterrey capital.

Spanish), the agency assured that of the total number of self-employed people in Nuevo León (388 999), “310 860 are in the informal sector” (García, 2019).

For its part, the service sector (tertiary) of the economy is currently the fastest growing in Monterrey. Jobs in convenience stores, restaurants, and car washes among others, appear as the most requested and with a continuous offer. The National Occupation and Employment Survey (ENOE, by its initials in Spanish) of the Inegi profiled the sector, during the last quarter of 2021, as the one that concentrates the highest occupation with 63.1%, which includes 60 000 more employees compared to 2020 (Flores, 2022).

The previous count is in collation with the environment that prevails in sectors of the city classified as popular neighborhoods. In these enclaves live families of different origins who share a situation of marginalization. The municipality of Monterrey contains the largest number of people living in poverty compared to those with a small population volume. For 2015, Monterrey, Guadalupe, Gral. Escobedo, Juárez, and Apodaca, had the highest population percentage in poverty in the entity; between them 57% of the population was concentrated (Coneval, 2020).

Modernity brought with it a change in the exercise of power. Now this power unfolds over life “as a space for action, organizes and produces bodies and subjectivities, regulates relationships, develops ways of being and living” (Jordana Lluch, 2021, p. 58). This regency occurs heterogeneously. The MMA is an example of differentiated pigeonholes between natives and foreigners. The undocumented Central Americans who cross the territory of Nuevo León and, in particular, the capital, are considered dangerous and undesirable. This is a debate that fills the media and social networks among those who incite prejudice and fear against those who censor this behavior and describe it as intolerance. Government action takes place between the exercise of migratory control and the relief provided through the support of shelters. These are State containment procedures.⁷

A circumstance of similar discrimination is suffered by internal migrants who come from the center and south of the country. Mainly, the indigenous are the object of ridicule or annoyance when they appear as street vendors. Still others are hired as construction labor or can be found working at convenience stores. On the contrary, indigenous boys and girls schooled in the city maintain a relatively harmless image, in addition to being praised in official rhetoric that applauds their language and other cultural traits (Martínez, 2018).

Aranda (2018) states that the limited exercise of rights in the city of Monterrey correspond to the precariousness of life and the stigmatization that, from his perspective, based on “daily

⁷ These shelters have a limited capacity to receive undocumented immigrants, mostly from Central America and the Caribbean. In an analysis prepared by Coparmex, Nuevo León indicates that in the 2020 Census: “the population over 5 years of age who emigrated to Mexico in search of work was 1 129 177. Of that figure, Nuevo León registered 133 541 people.”, occupying the first place among the states receiving of migrants (Flores, 2021).

resistance” inherent in the asymmetric ordering of the MMA (2018, p. 2). A crisis that, according to the researcher, is reflected in housing and the provision of unequal urban services in informal and impoverished settlements in the metropolis.

In this type of constituency, daily collective actions take place, some more recognized than others, which allow what Aranda identifies as “the disorder of the real world”, which different official strategies seek to reduce based on the work of ordering, regulation, and hierarchy (2018, p. 7). That “disorder” is the contingency, whose understanding must occur within certain social, political, and economic circumstances (Lorey, 2016, p. 32), to figure out the dynamics of support groups and, of course, the survival of those who populate those suburbs.

It is useful to incorporate Wacquant’s approach (Wacquant, 2007), given the disparate levels of insecurity that have prevailed in Monterrey, due to its harmony with the contingency of life proposed by Lorey. We find two interconnected trends: the first, the rise of urban inequalities plus new socioeconomic marginalities with a distinctive “ethnic” influence that feed “processes of spatial segregation and public agitation”; the second, the expansion of ethno-racial ideologies and tensions due to unemployment and the permanent settlement of immigrants, previously considered temporary (Wacquant, 2007, p. 123).

For Wacquant, these dynamics create “a new poverty” (2007, p. 123). To exemplify this statement for the MMA, the accumulation of multiple deprivations in the home and in the neighborhood are repeated leading to the consequent weakening of social ties and “the loosening of social assistance” to remedy the alienation of the inhabitants of urban marginality (Wacquant, 2007, p. 124). The most evident inequity, which is a consequence of this situation, is that related to public infrastructure. The neighborhoods in which the groups intervene suffer from a lack or intermittency of drinking water, burnt out or broken streetlights and clogged drainage, not to mention the poorly maintained pavement of the streets. The work sponsored by the municipalities is inconsistent, and when it is carried out, it exhibits the aforementioned deficiencies.

The deteriorated infrastructure manifests a barely sustainable governmentality within the threshold of what is governable. These demarcations are the object of “extensive processes of marginalization and abjection”, but whose “disconnection” from the rest of the city must be manageable (Rodgers & O’Neill, 2012, p. 401). The inequality of the infrastructure influences the type of relationships that take place in the city and results in the expressions that arise regarding what is believed to be known about its neighbors justifying punitive surveillance.

It is worth remembering the indeterminacy of this phenomenon: the perceptions of the population living in better developed urban areas are not based exclusively on the prejudice of risk or danger; they are completed with the participation of private charity and official assistance. This type of segmentation delimits “literally and figuratively” the interconnection of the city, the circulation of goods, as well as “who can and should be integrated into the

city, and who should be left out of it” (Rodgers & O’Neill, 2012, p. 402). Both initiatives—private and state—are not dichotomous, but complementary, in addition to promoting individual and group behaviors based on subsidiarity that are functional to a precarious governmentality.

The different practices to engage in the day-to-day life of the community depend fundamentally on how relationships are developed, in what spaces and the potential opportunities for interaction and/or damage and risks of a different order. Likewise, marginalization allows in segregation between inhabitants of the same community by complicating the existence of common spaces for coexistence, disputed areas, and borders or limits between gangs.⁸

The situation prevalent in various settlements of Monterrey capital, where the groups operate, goes beyond the prejudices around violence as a distinctive feature of marginal populations. However, it is understandable that some of the crimes broadcast by the news media occur in those neighborhoods and communities. The discrimination that is made in these publications is typical of what Lorey calls “alterification”, which designates different political, economic and legal effects between social strata (2016, p. 27). This differentiation generates relationships of dominance that preponderate selective police action in populations and territories classified as high risk.

The designation of effects arising from the current social policy normalizes a limited structural scheme of protection within the maximum insecurity tolerable. The result is the infrastructural and economic confinement of large sectors of the population in the cities. State programs such as *Aliado Contigo* [Allied with You] externalize the official vision of the *reconstruction of the social fabric*. This strategy led to the temporary stay of more than 60 young people in the marginalized neighborhoods near the Topo Chico hill, where one of the groups intervenes. Likewise, “the creation and rehabilitation of green areas and public spaces, improving the educational infrastructure and the total coverage of physical education in each school” was the vision (Government of Nuevo León, 2016). The initiative, however, was partially abandoned in the third quarter of 2018, when a cut of up to 50% in its resources was reported (Charles, 2018). The truncated social action triggered a permissiveness regarding what could or should be done to survive.

On the social networks of one of the groups, one day an announcement suddenly appeared accompanied by a photo: one of the boys who participated in the activities that were organized drowned in a nearby pool when he and other teenagers were surprised by a rival gang. Alonso wrote: “Another brother leaves us. Stop the violence!! They managed to get

⁸ Territorial disputes between gangs or drug trafficking provide the opportunity for homicides. The total number of “fraudsters” during 2021, in Nuevo León, was 1 069; just on January 2022, 95 had already been registered. As for family violence, the cases in the previous year were more than 21 000; in January 2022, nearly 1 200 new complaints had already been registered (Fiscalía General de Justicia del Estado de Nuevo León, 2022).

them. They brought bats, sticks, and stones. Some were left naked. Without knowing how to swim well, he went to the bottom of the pile” (Alonso, personal Facebook, April 27, 2017).

The risks shared with those who subsist in these neighborhoods do not happen at the same level of subjectivation. Material deprivation, for example, makes young people perceive that the daily life of boys and girls who come together in their music courses or to make handicrafts is especially delicate. This perception prevents them from feeling vulnerable, despite the fact that their decisions place them in a delicate position in at least two ways. The first is the most obvious, as a product of the various days of coexistence in the neighborhoods, their presence becomes conflictive when they break up a fight or ask a teen or adult to leave because they are drugged or drunk.

Saúl gives his arguments about the risk and opportunity in the space they organize:

force is involved, the *picudo* [weevil], the one who doesn't let go, is the toughest one. That is the negative part of the neighborhood law, which is very strong. But they also give opportunity to humble people [who] have a lot of intelligence, but aren't paid much attention. Here any skill is, wow!: he raps, he draws cool, he cuts hair. All knowledge is highly respected; it is like an honor to know how to do something (Saúl, personal communication, June 20, 2017).

The second sense that I identify regarding the role and risks assumed by the members of the groups is related to their aspirations: more than recognition for themselves, their work explores what answers prejudice and balances the feeling of risk. The motivations regarding what they can achieve for children and adolescents suggests that their individual and professional goals are subject to the achievement of the objectives of the plan in the neighborhood. The project becomes a temporary shelter for its postulates and values, adapted to what happens and what *must be done*.

Another of the groups that allowed me to learn about their work was formed in a first stage by men and women, whose family roots and current homes are part of the neighborhoods where they carry out their work. For just over four years they have published a newspaper, printed and online, where they expose the situation of their neighborhoods and reply to the prejudices in circulation. One of its founders explains:

For example, if my sister is robbed, [the media] will say that because she was with the organized crime or something like that. They will always take the worst version of the people around here. I think it's good that the newspaper shows that people are hard-working, that they like art, that they like to express themselves when they are not taken seriously in their jobs. More than anything, it gives people a voice (Alma, personal communication, May 23, 2019).

The unanimous decision was that the newspaper had to describe the routine uncertainty due to the diversity of past and present events that afflict them. Through its more than 10 issues, episodes of police repression, violence against women and drug trafficking have been reported. This initial list attempted by Mario, another of the founders, does not rule out *daily*

violence, which arises from the infrastructure and public transport, as well as what emerges from stereotypes.

In response to a complaint made on their social networks, the group was accused of being made up of *thieves* or of being accomplices. The virtual altercation was due to what they considered a *setup* against a teenager who tried to steal a car. The alleged assailant was shot dead, a weapon *was planted* [hidden] on the teenager to claim self-defense by the officer involved. “It was a murder”, assures Alma, “the media almost always side with the institutions; many [followers of our social networks] attacked us” (Alma, personal communication, May 23, 2019).

Among the young people and the beneficiaries, we observe the contingency included in the strategy of recovery of community spaces or to propose the voice from the neighborhood as an alternative to mass news. Their subjectivity is based on the difference in environments they have for themselves. Regarding the groups in which Alonso and Saúl participate, several families from which the girls and boys who attend the meeting places come add them to their subsistence scheme. The group takes care of their sons and daughters; they entertain them in the afternoons while mom and dad are working. They provide them with a place of recreation and learning without responsibility on the family, or at least they value it that way. Some refuse to cooperate in collections or tasks; instead, they give the group a folder with a request that, they calculate, is easier for them to manage with a municipal official. Another example is when the group is not satisfied with its free journalistic work and seeks to organize events for different purposes: a kermis (a fair or carnival), a photographic exhibition that recounts important events for the colony, or a book harvest fair to raise funds.

The inattention of city councils to situations such as those that concern young people is one of the many facets of both heterogeneous and relational precariousness. For them, doing unpaid work means being part of a population capable of transcending its limitations in search of the common good. The lack of a pecuniary reward is part of that characterization; so is, in an ambivalent way, the qualification of plaintiffs or defenders of criminals and drug addicts.

The police, as the only measure of some of the violent events or crimes that occur in the *barrios* [neighborhoods], highlight them as conflictive, with no other alternative than to subdue them by force. The groups confront these measures, evidencing not only the “abuses” of authority, but the facets that they identify as positive: the history of the *barrios*, their multicultural character, the freshness and intelligence of the minors, and the fight against adversity by their teenagers.

We have a scenario in which a precarious condition is shared in a hierarchical manner. It is not as simple as pitting the population against the government, but the population pitting itself against itself through a fragmented life as a result of differential pigeonholing, based on symbolic and material insecurities. In the same order of ideas, control, now by the State, emerges as a heterogeneous phenomenon that selects some individuals, based on their social

stratification, for their protection against the existential condition of others who are less deserving of safeguard (Lorey, 2016).

The Producers of Culture and their Contingency

The subjects reflect on their commitment to social causes that are close to them emotionally and/or by aptitude. In their saying and doing, modes of subjectivation emerge in a continuous oscillation between their capacity for organization and subjection to relations of exploitation. The dynamics to which they are subject are not functional in absolute terms, since the empowerment that their task arouses gives rise to ambivalent productive moments that arise from self-government techniques (Lorey, 2016).

Along with self-exploitation, subjectivation appears that eludes domination and endorses practices that give scope to the constitution. The latter evokes a certain self-affirmation that captures something new in the individual's attitude (Lorey, 2016). In this sense, regulating unequal relations requires the active participation of the population whose ability to adapt eventually manages to shape or attenuate their insecure environment. This malleability reinforces the idea of autonomy among groups; it is overcoming these risks that establishes the perception of "autonomous production and the production of themselves" (Lorey, 2008, p. 57).

In relative confrontation with the position of autonomy and criticism of official policies, there are a significant number of organizations that can be described as agents of precarious governmentality in the metropolis. Associations that base their existence on a fluid relationship with the public sector and the official guidelines that designate resources and facilities for actions of a social nature.

According to the Registro Federal de las Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil (SIRFOSC) [Information System of the Federal Registry of Civil Society Organizations], as of December 31, 2021, 1 200 organizations with a corporate purpose were registered in Nuevo León. The Programa Vinculación con las Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil (OSC) [Linkage Program with Civil Society Organizations], sponsored by the state government (2021-2027), supports non-profit organizations that operate in the entity. Eligible organizations must be dedicated "to social and/or welfare development without partisan or religious purpose." Through the strengthening of "the mechanisms of linkage and participation of civil society", the government seeks to promote CSOs "in favor of the population in a situation of poverty and/or social vulnerability" (Gobierno de Nuevo León, 2021).

The government strategy is based on the funding, training and/or advice of these organizations with the unappealable requirement of their legal constitution. During March 2022, the local congress approved the *Ley de Fomento de la Sociedad Civil Organizada de Nuevo León* [Law for the Promotion of Organized Civil Society of Nuevo León]. The law ratified the task of strengthening the activities implemented by CSOs in the areas of "educational, cultural, and artistic promotion and development", among others. Article 6

establishes the government priority of the “social meaning of the activities of the organizations.” Likewise, the provision of services by these entities “in collaboration with public entities” and the authorization to receive donations or subsidies from natural and legal persons (H. Congreso del estado de Nuevo León, 2022).

As can be inferred, not all people with an organizational purpose in favor of works of a social nature would seek to formalize and apply for resources such as those described. The causes are diverse. Among the groups and individuals that I have approached, there is the idea that, with greater ties to public bodies, their decision-making capacity could be limited; however, the decisions are dissimilar.

For their survival, Alonso and Fernanda concluded with the procedure to establish themselves as a civil association after several years of economic woes. Their situation motivated the search for a relatively stable job, after a few months in which they even got on passenger trucks to sing to get some coins. But it has been, especially, the notoriety achieved by their actions that has channeled their relationship with different benefactors and sympathizers.

Regarding Saúl and Rita, it is a conjunction of individual interests that, in the medium term, have maintained them. The space they occupy is a loan from a company located in the same neighborhood, which initially granted resources both for the operation and to reward them periodically. As of 2019, the material support from the factory was reduced, as was the compensation that Saúl and Rita received. Saúl has had a part-time job as a designer for a design company for a few years. Rita offers her services as a dance instructor or performer and supports herself partially with the income from her work in a call center.

Saúl preserves in his horizon the art project that emerges from the *barrio* as “an ideal dream” that he always had and that, however, the conditions in which it is carried out are satisfactory, since his perseverance materializes, as he values it, a place beyond any authority and with the acceptance of the surrounding families. Rita, from a more practical point of view, considers that they will not endure the limitations suffered from the beginning for much longer.

To support the space is to defend the children and the positive facet of the colony. It is not just the Sunday football league, but the appropriation by adults who now request permission to hold parties; even a funeral was scheduled once. For Saúl, one of the achievements is the development of the capacity of boys and girls to receive information of all kinds: “philosophy, love, history”, because “they have been provided with the foundation” (personal communication, June 20, 2017) to talk about different topics and learn that critical moments can be overcome, such as when the army raided them due to reported drug use.

It is interesting that there could be an intervention. [But], for example, the colleagues who come from the university do not know what they come here to do. First, they say: “we come to see what your needs are.” And I reply: “ha, ha, ha, are you really going to meet our needs? Like a politician! Who do you think you are to come and say: ‘ah,

since they are from the *barrio* they are in need'?" (Saúl, personal communication, June 20, 2017).

This *misunderstanding* of those who come to the *barrio* motivates the group. Its members position themselves oblivious to prejudices to decide the type of coexistence that can be built. Saúl believes that for the sporadic visitors, such as undergraduate students or those who propose a link, the group *does them a favor* by allowing them access: "Do your homework, but don't come to get into people's lives" (Saúl, personal communication, June 20, 2017). The abrupt answer derives from proposals for psychological support or legal advice that they have received to channel cases of domestic violence; these do not materialize, and those who felt afflicted and promised help do not return to the place.

Rita, for her part, began with exclusive activities for women and girls. The invitation was to learn dance, have a space to chat and get away from the men. Despite the resistance of the boys, two days were allotted for the adolescents and for some adults who were interested. The participation caused one more collaborator to implement group therapy sessions, "a refuge to express oneself" they called it. On one occasion, Rita had to ask one of the boys to leave because he seemed drugged and out of control. He hit her, but Rita did not want to file any lawsuit, the punishment was applied by the *barrio* with the *la ley del hielo* [silent treatment]:

For quite a period of time he could no longer enter the space. He did not take financial responsibility for the damage, and his family never approached me or anything. It was nearly a year after that. One day, out of nowhere, he appeared, he approached me and apologized, that he was drugged, that he had no reason to have done that. The persons who become violent are singled out a lot [in the *barrio*], but they are also accepted and given another chance. The only thing left for me to do was to tell him: "Okay, we'll leave it that way" (Rita, personal communication, January 13, 2022).

From the actions undertaken, we elucidate that self-government vindicates an attitude that repels being governed (Lorey, 2016). Under current living conditions in large cities there is an ambivalence that drives attitudes, whose mission is to overcome or moderate what the personal and neighborhood situations hold. A task that is assumed to belong to the State (assistance, protection, etc.), is not carried out properly in accordance with what the groups expect. This *ineffectiveness* demands that they protect themselves and those who come to their spaces of coexistence. We are talking about an insecurity that has its own complexity. It is about organizing a place where minors arrive who belong to families with their own conflict and need, in addition to the fact that some are enemies.

Just as it is possible to observe the relationships that give rise to each group, their proposals create new uncertainties related to the necessary resources, the management of the space, the claims of some neighbors for their partiality in various incidents or, as in the case of those who do journalism in the neighborhood, their support for criminals. The initiatives and how they position them belong to the dynamics of contingency that configure a way of

being and living in society through divergent practices to the routine of insecurity and submission.

Alma reflects on this:

The greatest political action is to resist as colonies on the margin; it is the most valuable. Our stories are never going to be in an important [official] file. For us, that is the main policy: to create a historical newspaper, that the people themselves realize that our stories matter, that they have to be written. We like to think that being a printed medium, at some point it will be found in a trunk and be read (Alma, personal communication, November 17, 2021).

The collective perspective is based on their belonging to it and is expressed by another of the members: “Name ourselves as part of the community, not as someone who is an expert or who we look at for other purposes or from another level (...) anyone who wants to read about us can understand us” (Lilia, personal communication, November 17, 2021).

Valeria, from the same group, remembers the publication they made during 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, about the Topo Chico prison.⁹ She considers that this edition was a watershed, as it confronted them with a complex and dangerous reality. The interviews conducted with people who were detained in El Topo resulted in *very strong* testimonies, they questioned the best way to share them without falling into tabloids and without putting themselves at risk, because the publication, as they perceived it, could be taken as *anti-police* due to the type of stories they spread.

A fact that was not new to them had an ambiguous effect: the newspaper, even though it was circulated in several stalls and some stores, did not receive many comments; its members believed that it was because the publication was not as widely read as they wished. Most of the reactions occurred, however, when the contents were presented synthetically on their social networks. Due to this, the feeling of overexposure caused by the matter of penalty was nuanced. The main challenge, they say, continues to be opening spaces for true reading, in addition to maintaining the participation of the neighborhood as informants and writing some texts as they have done up to now.

Manuel reflects on the sometimes erratic functioning of the group in which he is also a member along with Alonso and Fernanda. Tensions arose due to the sudden change of plans that became recurrent. Now that they have taken the step to become a civil association, they have social service students; they are affected the most and they complain: “They tell us a *pinche* [f**king] day before that we are going to do something, and then two hours before they change it for us again. The following month Alonso meets someone new and wants to do five different projects” (Manuel, personal communication, December 20, 2018).

⁹ The prison closed its doors in September 2019. This Preventive Center for Social Reintegration, opened in 1943, was the scene of multiple clashes and riots, including what is considered “the largest massacre in a Mexican prison on February 10, 2016, with a balance of 49 dead (Blanco, 2019).

The defense of this style of *creative freedom* is supported by the circumstances in which they work. Manuel illustrates it as follows: “It’s like this here, *güey* [man], you have to get used to the fact that one day we say one thing and next week we’re going to say another, and we’re going to give you an appointment the day before for you to sell and the other weekend for you to sweep” (Manuel, personal communication, December 20, 2018). For the members it does not seem to be a serious problem despite the discussions that the hectic operation incites. What they identify as an inconvenience is the need for a job that pays for rent, and food, etc. The days or weeks in which the job demands more attention are the ones that cause the problems, according to Manuel, because they *started* as a group. Alonso reflects on his employment and the consequences:

It was the emotion of being there, of participating, of contributing. Then came the disappointment, all this stuff about finding a balance, because I did disconnect from the organization. Even when we first put together an organization chart, we invited a partner to be the director because I wasn’t here. What happened? Well, it failed, it didn’t work, there were no results; but for us it was a learning experience (Alonso, personal communication, December 20, 2018).

The glimpse of new collaborators in the conditions in which the new association works, removes the short margin of maneuverability that the members have to organize themselves. Alonso perceives a greater responsibility with the community, which forces them to rethink their mission, which influenced the decision to establish themselves as a Civil Association:

It has been in the *barrio* where the foundations of the organization have been sown, it is where we took a certain maturity and, later, we realized that we had to institutionalize ourselves. Because we saw that if we continued like this as a group, just reacting or improvising, then life was going to end that way, it was going to be too exhausting. So, we already adopted it [the work in the *barrio*] as a life project, knowing, obviously, that not all of us could commit ourselves in the same way (Alonso, personal communication, July 21, 2020).

CLOSING, TWO DIMENSIONS TO FOLLOW

I believe that there is a set of ideas that arises along with the experience of the collectives. It seems appropriate to synthesize them in two dimensions: the first is that of an integrating or structural vision based on the dialectic between the city and its marginalized people, as a way of approaching the insecurity of social existence, that is, the contingency of life. The second is of a more particular order: the task and constitution of the group based on the precariousness of itself as a new self-government.

From the first, it is interesting to follow up on the action of the State based on precarious governmentality that normalizes social inequalities where urbanization has been relegated. Welfare policies are implemented, not new at all, but they signify the human dignity that regulates relationships between people from different social strata and define, in part, what refers to behaviors of solidarity and subsidiarity.

Different supports are legitimized by the situation that prevails in the chosen urban enclaves. But legitimation also comes from a perspective that values protecting its inhabitants and, at the same time, preserving the integrity of the tasks and associated values. On a structural level, the day-to-day contingency is tolerated through different strategies: the police, investment in public works, plus the organizations that intervene in favor of these communities. None of these devices is intended to end insecurity, but only to keep it manageable. Regarding the second, as producers of culture, they face a paradox: the relative emancipation of their actions that leads to a governmentality in which they function organically as co-responsible for less favored urban sectors. This co-responsibility results in one of the ways in which precariousness is evidenced as a condition of life, different but shared. Even more, the cultural production of the subjects must be related to the intangible strategies of the neighborhood to survive. This is a positive quality that belongs to both groups and families (children, adolescents, etc.), since both reflect and reproduce a common sense regarding a type of social intervention that, in some cases, is presented as the only viable option in the short term.

The subjects addressed are precarious in their heterogeneity, they create and maintain work and connection schemes that escape what could be considered the norm in the sense of their social validation under figures such as cultural managers or promoters who, usually, are limited to evaluating the operational relevance of a project, its budget and the return expected from the beneficiary community. This makes them people who have a particular authenticity, which, however, is not alien to power relations or the contingency of life in society.

What other types of behaviors and choices provoke a sociocultural scenario like the one that confronts the collectives? *Cultural producers* are not subjects whose government runs only by *compliance* and reproduction of their sociocultural circumstance. From now on, let us consider how this scenario modifies or induces personal and professional expectations, to the degree of committing oneself (and committing ourselves) to causes that contest the precariousness of oneself and urban insecurity.

Translation: Berenice Martínez González.

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