Challenging silences as everyday surviving mechanisms in uncertain settings.

(working title\(^1\))

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Abstract:

This paper draws on 8-month fieldwork as a part of doctoral study on how people with precarious resources cope with and respond to everyday insecurities related to criminalised violences. It takes a particularly hostile setting in Mexico as a case study, where silencing becomes a form of everyday coping with uncertainty. Although it explores a variety of forms of informal communication among diverse local communities, this study addresses the strategies through which people inform about insecure settings. This is considered as a knowledge co-generation, together with the researcher living alongside in the field.

Prior to exploring particular forms of silences as responses to insecurities, this paper briefly introduces a general purpose of this doctoral research, together with a context in which the silences are embedded. Following uncertainty as a component of the unsafe context, it elaborates on diverse silences pronounced among polyphony of voices detected ‘on the ground’. Finally, ‘embodied listening’ challenges a usual division between ‘speaker’ and ‘listener’.

Introduction to a wider research

This PhD study research aims to explore informal practices, coping mechanisms and social interactions among community members in a specific Mexican urban-rural setting in the face of precariousness related to social and criminal violence. The main purpose is to attempt to understand community responses at the local level that arguably allow survival. These reactions are formed through informal interactions among local actors, which constitute the main subject of this study. The focus is on local ability to adapt to, and negotiate within uncertain and potentially violent conditions over time. Thus, the main research questions are:

\(^1\) Please kindly consider as a first draft after the research in field.
* How do local communities negotiate, confront with and adapt to environment of criminal violence in Mexico?
* How do people cope with uncertain contexts on a daily basis? Why do they employ certain approach to the generalised insecurities?
* What types of coping mechanisms allow people to survive?
* What makes communities resilient in contexts of generalised insecurity?

This project aims to contribute to understanding how—and why in these ways—people choose certain coping mechanisms that enable survival. Everyday ‘action’ centres this study on humans and their capacity to react through informal practices, while creating a distance from uncompromising labels of perpetrators, victims and witnesses. Whereas this interpretative study recognises subjective interpretations of types of actions, survival is acknowledged as their implicit goal and component of a reaction to violent context.

Whereas an everyday response to criminalised violence in a local community often becomes a matter of urgency, this study turns the reader’s focus from violence(s)² to creative, visible and hidden forms of dealing with ‘normality’. This research is driven by a challenge to learn about different—sometimes very personal, familiar, collective and individual—forms of “navigating”³ in this reality, aiming to survive. In particular, this study explores forms in which these interactions are socially and culturally shaped in Mexican communities. For this purpose, it engages in an interdisciplinary dialogue drawing from international relations (IR), critical feminist theories, social anthropology, and human geography.

This research enquires on possible outcomes for the Mexican population of the violent climate of uncertainty, built jointly by armed non-state actors, as well as authorities at different government levels⁴. While taking a non-representative community under the research loop, neither does it pretend to reach a conclusion on a society-scale, nor to make an effort into universalization of the ways in which Mexicans are resilient. This project stems from the disturbing enquiry on how the silenced communities respond to the violent control that interrupts their everyday action.

³ Used in a similar context by Roger Mac Ginty in a third conference on critical peace studies, Shaping Peace - Local Infrastructures and State Formation, Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI) The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK 11th-12th September, 2014.
⁴ In Mexico, there are three parallel levels in which government operate: federal, state and municipal. Hence the majority of state institutions count with their corresponding, often competitive representatives at other levels of authority. In addition, it is worth distinguishing ‘common’ from ‘federal’ jurisprudence, for different types of crime, under the rules of state and the federation, respectively.
existence in particular conditions and time. It is a question of the future analysis to determine whether any further generalisations may or may not be made⁵.

**Instead of context**

“In Mexico everything is happening and …nothing happens” (Solano Abadia, 2011). Since December 2006, when President Felipe Calderón declared ‘war on drugs’, the explosion and scale of suffering of the Mexican population has been constantly shocking public opinion worldwide. Since then, increasingly cruel criminalised violence has been affecting inhabitants of some Mexican regions⁶. Despite the recognised on-going confrontation between state forces and armed groups occupied with traffic of illicit goods, among other disputes, no civil conflict has been acknowledged, according to the official discourse. Federal police, military and navy forces have been constantly employed to combat against numerous organised crime groups, focusing on capturing their chiefs and seize their properties, without a preparation to protect civilians or to fulfil tasks corresponding to public security. Meanwhile, these ‘criminalised’ organisations have become ever more harmful for the society, affecting ever more civilians through extortion, assault, kidnapping, and a threat of an accidental gun-fight. The official numbers that estimate increasing human loss have become largely normalised, in addition to their problematic misinterpretation and sources⁷. A few are still asking who are those victims, while receiving a persistent ‘official’ answer: they were criminals, responsible for increasing violence in the country⁸. Black-and-white panorama of dehumanisation of those labelled as perpetrators, as opposed to victims and rarely mentioned witnesses, leaves a very small room for paradoxically on-going coexistence. However, people live, eat, go to work, visit family, have fun and make jokes, observe life passing by, growing children, and take care of their parents and relatives⁹.

But, how do people manage to continue their everyday lives despite continuous threats, shifting dynamics of violences, and uncertain future? How do communities respond to increasing insecurities affecting their members? Thus, how do people cope with growing uncertainties in their own local communities? How do they survive despite the threats?

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⁵ Further analysis will tackle this dilemma, which is beyond the interest of this paper. Also, for example Nordstrom (2002) asks a vital question: “How responsible, how representation, can any generalisation about death, suffering, and survival, be?” (p. 277).
⁶ Also, those from other countries, who cross the territory in search for better living conditions in the North.
⁷ See, for example: Benítez, 2012; Davis, 2012, p. 27.
⁸ Amnesty International, HRW.
⁹ As reaffirmed in a number of studies, family still remains the most relevant informal institution that Mexican society revolves around. (e.g. Sefchovich, 2014).
Finally, how do they communicate within ‘noisy silences’; and what allows them continuing coexistence within their local communities? These research questions are of a central interest of this study.

In order to explore potential silences as a form of communication in a particular hostile setting in Mexico, this paper aims at three main purposes:

- It briefly introduces selected elements of the local context, affected by complex insecurities;
- It elaborates on different forms of understanding of silence as a form of voice amid contextualised uncertainty;
- In addition, it challenges ‘embodied listening’ as a part of the reflexive ‘digging’ silences.

Introduction to voices

If there was a continuum with two extremes, voice and silence, perhaps the first one would be perceived as empowered and the latter as powerless. On the contrary, silences explored in this paper are located far from the opposite ‘extreme’ of voices. Moreover, such approach would involve a linear exploration of responses, from which this research differs. Rather, silences resonate with a number of voices, expressing powerful responses to given circumstances. Silences thus are mapped on existing power relations yet revealed through diverse forms of communication. Hence the question: what resonates in between silence and scream? And if voice is relational, how could a strict division between ‘speaker’ and ‘listener’ be overcome, to look beyond listening? This paper begins with shedding light on silences as primary co-generated voices. It challenges what is unspoken, apparently hidden or interrupted, immersed within uncertainty.

The focus is to address ‘voices’ in a quite literal fashion, creating space for those usually omitted or unspoken given their position in power dynamics, whereas it is relatively common to analyse state responses to so-called transnational threats or violent non-state actors (arguably relevant to the traditional IR and security studies, as affecting ‘national security’). Yet hereby undertaken attempt at examining a spectrum of ‘marginalised’ voices leads through layers of -declared and disguised- everyday reactions to insecurities. Importantly, ‘to speak for others’ problematizes one of the main dilemmas this research encounters, which involves the explicit risk of ‘extracting voices’. Yet this study carefully looks at and learns from the feminist, anthropologist and postcolonial critique of the ‘going native’ approach hence its endeavour to mark a way for ‘speaking with others’ (Heron and Reason, 2006). In this line, it engages with its research partners in attentive critical reflection of ‘getting to know’, i.e. mediating ‘others’ voices’, within the relation created between -only apparently clearly divided- ‘listener’ and ‘speaker’ (Landry and MacLean, 1996).
**Silencing in a context**

This section attempts to delve into silences considering their relation to uncertainties. Prior to unpacking silences as responses, they also possibly define uncertain context in three ways. In the fog of uncertainty, the central form of articulation expresses through silences, hence different shades of the unspoken stem from at least three components of uncertainty, namely direct ‘silencing’, surveillance, and finally disappearance, examined in detail as components of the context. The first refers to limiting or cutting off other’s expression, to literally silence what others’ have to say. This imposition of power through subtle, as well as direct forms of censorship, of which local journalists are the most contrasting example, requires a careful further exploration in this study. This sharply limits a possibility to stay active for those who decide not to subordinate to the state-and-or-criminal ‘authority’, in any of the ‘visible’ groups, such as students or academics, artists or media professionals. The second form of contextual silencing links to the exercise of a potential-uncertain-almost subjunctive control, exercised through surveillance in a top-down fashion, indirectly by ‘authorities’, yet in practice through a web of its collaborators (such as ‘ears’, further elaborated), permeating local communities and perverting difficult to detect interpersonal trust, arguably providing all present suspicion as a mode of operating. The third and perhaps the most ultimate form of silencing, exercised on the subaltern is the so-called disappearance of persons. As a consequence of the uncertainty, ‘to get to know’ the localisation of a missing familiar becomes a luxury\(^\text{11}\).

\(^{11}\) Also: F. Mastrogiavanni (2014) *Ni vivos ni muertos. La desaparición forzada en México como estrategia de terror*. Mexico Grijalbo

In addition, the rarely questioned term ‘disappeared’ claimed that such labelling disguises the actual state of a missing person, is at the centre of the following poem (its fragment). It is written from a position of a mother of the disappeared and is boldly directed to the state authority. It grasps the intermediate, the in-betweenness of life and death.

\[no sir, people don’t disappear over here…\]
\[\ldots\]
\[(4)\]
\[people do not disappear,\]
\[they do not fade in the air,\]
\[no,\]
\[there is no spontaneous disappearance,\]
\[no,\]
\[it has to be denominated,\]
\[people are kidnapped,\]
\[tortured,\]
\[assassinated,\]
\[no sir,\]
\[people do not disappear,\]
\[we are killed over here.\]
\[(5)\]
\[that one,\]
\[they say he disappeared,\]
Distrust as a silent response

The following phrase illustrates a dominant, under condition of the unknown, doubt of what is actually sensible or ‘truthful’, hence a constant search for a ‘second’ meaning folded at the bottom or inside one’s expression: ‘everyone lies. don’t fall for it’\(^ {12} \). The graffiti on one of the nearby street walls accompanied me for duration of my fieldwork. It functioned as a subtle but direct reminder to disbelieve of what one is told. If I were to simplify, this may be interpreted as a sign of resignation rather than warning, and perhaps sometimes it becomes\(^ {13} \). However, this relatively common approach towards information may be also deciphered as a distance –creating a ‘protective’ barrier– to the story that one is offered, mostly by ‘authority’, or constant distrust that arguably becomes a component of cultural formation, living among partial truths and flexible reality (e. g. Bartra, 1987). Finally these consist in creative elements of uncertainty.

Whereas it may be argued this type of scepticism ‘to buy an official story’ has accompanied Mexican people for quite a long, a tension produced by the unknown arguably drives a doubt of what to consider trustworthy to the edge, making a perceived reality rather than flexible, even more rigid. Uncertainty may appear having tangible life-affecting consequences, enhancing a circle of silences around the vulnerable. When confronting a web of apparent factual powers, no way out may seem as a straight ‘solution’. A number of examples uncover permanent distrust used as a protection strategy, specifically in conditions of crisis.

What is silence, then?

In this context, silence at first appears as an empty space among pronounced voices. Yet through a slow exploration amid different layers of meanings, whether declared

\begin{quote}
but no,
his absence remains here,
present,
(…)
\end{quote}

Eye of the wind, 2\(^{nd}\) March 2016. Courtesy of the author (translation – mine)

\(^ {12} \text{(Sp) ‘todos mienten. no te claves’ (– my translation)}\)

\(^ {13} \)In addition, cultural and to be precise, linguistic dimension of the context requires considering the operating of ‘double meaning’ as quasi-silencing of what becomes partially revealed - possible to understand only to those who gets the second, bottom meaning that is revealed through the symbolic and word-game, very common in Spanish in its Mexican version, yet culturally and locally embedded and possible to comprehend. Layers of double meanings, impermeable at first glimpse, symbolise not only the complexity of language and meanings, but also grey layers of apparently ‘obvious’ reality. Another cultural dimension requires consideration is constant avoidance of straightforward expression. Both of these influence the way silences are addressed in this study, in addition to a consistent doubt in what one is told that problematizes question of interpersonal and collective trust, a topic that is partially tackled further in this text. Often, a constant doubt is expressed while joking and is laughed at, creating even more flexible and blurry message.
or mispronounced, it also emerges formed through denial or screamed out-loud. In a configuration with its visual and kinaesthetic dimension\textsuperscript{14}, it formulates disguised forms that potentially allow persisting. Silences unpack a subjective experience of uncertainty; appearing in several configurations, which this section attempts to introduce through particular examples that the embedded research repetitively spotted. Further still, how are the silences disclosed within a surrounding tension of a threat? Eventually, is it possible to listen to the silences, at all? Drawing on some valuable examples of living amid violence and insecurity, (such as Green, 1995; Mo Hume, 2008; Taussig, 2002); how could silences benefit survival?

\textit{Does one remain alive (thanks to) keeping silent?}

Is it possible to observe how voices become disguised yet effervescent under the surface of declarations? Their temporariness allows further comprehension in time, and their often deliberate function to disguise actual meanings. Without determining actual motivations, the following intends to uncover layers, through which silences slowly disclose some of the misspelled voices facing web of factual powers.

\textbf{Silence as an interlude}

Most explicitly, silence may be conceived a disruption of voice. Further, it ‘sounds’ like a suspension of pronounced voice(s), yet allowing the interlocutor to hear the background sounds and to presence the immediacy, density of a momentous interference. Rather than to ‘hear nothing’, it resembles an intermediate space (in time) of awaiting for further words to come up, but also to feel the silent present of ‘the other’. It teaches about the texture full of tension of in-betweenness. It is sudden yet carefully prepared. The following passages not only embrace silence as interruption, but also play out almost-tangible forms of surveillance.

\textit{His voice sounded as if it was covered by density of that cold air. Not sure if it was shaking due to the fog we found ourselves in, or he was speaking through his nerves. His voice was additionally trembling, speaking quickly, as if he was in rush, throwing out all sorts of local - vernacular expressions with great confidence I would understand them straight away, or as if he didn’t care too much if I actually got them right. Perhaps he was using them to actually check if I was following him in a good-enough comprehension of the ‘street’ language. Sharing fragments of his professional and personal life-story, he immediately dived into details of his neighbourhood coexistence, where he has recently returned after a while of ‘keeping the necessary distance’.}

(…)

\textsuperscript{14} Further categories through which responses are examined (visualisation and movement) are beyond the focus of this paper.
Suddenly he stopped. Something has cut out his whispered sentences.

Showing a subtle but obvious sign, he clearly instructed me to shut up. Words froze for a glimpse. We made another eye contact. Perhaps I could have counted to five, not too much further, for him to start whispering again. The indication to silence our conversation for a moment, was a result of unwanted presence of an ‘ear’, for us to be overheard.

The ‘ears’ –as they are literally called– denote those, whose job is to operate a literal web of surveillance permeating the town.

In this brief moment he not only opted for silence as a protection mechanism for both of us. Silence also filled up the very dense air we inhaled. We were breathing this tension in. This seemed as everyday conscious silence that those under threat need to breath in.

There is a constant, continuously lived everyday doubt: whether you are observed by ‘ears’.

- How do you go on with them on a daily basis? - I asked.
- You get used to. What else is there to do? You learn to live with it.

[E1. Field notes.]

Several of my interlocutors have repetitively brought constant surveillance into a conversation, where the coexistence with the ‘ears’ appeared as far from surprising.

‘- They have always been there. Working for the military, federal police, state police, ‘the palace’ (state government), state attorney…they register what one says. The ears are also very much visible. It is very quickly [possible] to know who they are.
- So, what are they there for?
- Well, obviously, to have a control over us. To know beforehand (to report to their supervisors) what is going to be published. That is why while working in this, you gain an ‘ear’ very quickly. And yes, to spread fear among us.
What does it mean to be followed? For example, you are working and they shadow you. Yes, they know what you are doing. Sometimes they also serve as a source of information. Once I had this call, I’ve been told that this and that was happening. They let you know about an ‘event’ to shoot. They know what’s going on, so they cooperate; they call you to give you a tip that there was an ‘event’ you may be interested in. In that case he was my colleague, working also as an ear for the navy. You have to be very careful’.

[T-2. Field notes.]

15 (Spanish) ‘oreja’ (lit.); also: ‘halcón’.
It is only possible to move toward contextualised silences in a particular setting, rather than ultimately understand them in any terminated manner. In a sense, silences not only guide us through living uncertainties, but they also enable ‘grey’ coexistence under uncertain conditions of insecurity (further partially explored). Yet silences not only indicate fragmented, or often even empty spaces between those words that are spoken, but they are also found postponed, almost moved further, away, and ultimately, explicitly detected, declared, and purposefully obvious. Hence to unpack silences is not about tracking down what is not said. When all is known but in the end nothing is certain, to paraphrase Taussig (2002), the unspoken may be revealed through what is actually openly said.

Towards pronounced silences

The following lines aim to slowly unfold disguised voices in a fog of uncertainty. In the context of silencing from above, which intensifies the state of doubt, this section attempts at situating arguably ‘silent’ responses on a map of power relations. Silence is regarded here as a reaction, hence a verb as opposed to a static noun. Thus the endeavour is to explore a number of forms in which people silence their reactions to insecurity. The following preliminary division suggests their diversification among nuanced everyday complexities, without pretending to compose any exhaustive list.

1) To submerge in a web of ‘obvious’:
   a) ‘All is known here…’

It may appear problematic to elaborate on approach that uses silence, when at first glimpse the information seems to be open to all. Yet it is transparent to those aware of the informal and often invisible web. Thus ‘all known’ is arguably located nearby ‘all silent’.

‘We know it all here’ suggests to be fully informed regarding local state of affairs. It provides the ‘inner circle’ with implicitly exclusive legitimacy (a neighbourhood, zone, street, region, village) to those who live there, hence the “local people”. Thus they — here ‘we’ — are the one who are able to observe, listen, capture all relevant information of ‘what’s going on around’, and ‘who-is-who’. The ‘localisation’ of information moves further. To provide an example, there is a supposed certainty that those who pass by are somehow related to one of the neighbours of a particular street.

‘We see everyone who passes by. In fact, we know everyone who passes by. If a person doesn’t visit / isn’t related to / doesn’t come to buy or offer anything to my house, it’d be equally a neighbour’s or the other neighbour’s house, and so on. There is no one who wouldn’t be known to us, or somehow related’. (After introducing myself, a ‘new’ one. Field notes, July 2015)

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16 Fog as a metaphor supports depicting uncertainty in this particular context in Mexico.
This declared (imaginary?) ‘possession’ of knowledge expands also towards the rest of local everyday actors. The news will finally arrive, as everyone shares them around. But where are ‘we’ located? The extended family and neighbours’ bonds expand as the information is lived, asked and responded along a day. There would be a notice whether to avoid a specific crossing, after which “everybody knows” which one is this. The taxi driver, who knows every hole on surrounding unpaved streets by heart, would be perhaps the one to bring a rumour to the neighbourhood. This may be reconfirmed by a mum walking children to the school and on her way back passing by the corner shop, which owner would eventually confirm, deny the news, or add something new. Before that even, a mobile seller of any goods would also verify it. Next to the local market, the church would function, as an after-Sunday-mass source of information, on a top of all additional religious celebrations would also become a gathering space for exchanging ‘news’.

Finally the very window -at a family house- would be considered as a legitimate source of information: ‘You see people passing by’. The micro mechanisms of living in a community would than involve ‘knowing while living’. In all these spaces, things would also come to somebody’s notice ‘while hearing’ (Sp.: “a oídos”) hence it is just assumed that everyone’s (let us call them neighbours’) attention is at some point directed towards surrounding ‘happening’.

Therefore the news became apparently ‘obvious’ for those inside the inner circle, and hence those who live locally are implicitly entitled to know. By claiming ‘all is well known’ the rest is ignored and the information becomes exclusive. The external evidence is often doubted or silenced, and what is accepted as known may actually be carefully selected. The self-confirmation mechanism in a relatively small collective isn’t new, yet acquires a slightly different shape under dominating uncertainty.

The enabling mechanism provides an assumption that all is simply feasible to know.

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17 Such as vegetables, cheese, tamales or cleaning supplies, among others.
18 A relevant mechanism to warn a local community about any disruption was also implemented through ‘whistling to inform’. Almost every evening people would suddenly hear a ‘whistler’: a neighbour, later on community policeman, who used to serve to confirm the community safety - notifying that ‘all is fine’.
19 F was travelling roughly at the same time from one place to another by public transport as me. We did the same route, yet we did not see each other. The explanation is very simple, as the route is hugely congested by public transportation and cars, specifically buses and collective taxis, hence a few minutes of difference could be significant and made it impossible to meet. Yet this answer was doubted and nearly refused. She seemed not believing and continued questioning what exactly was my route and when and how I did arrive. My version was openly doubted and confronted with her ability to look for familiar faces around (at the bus stop, in the bus or alongside the route). (Field notes, October 2015). Similar premise functions facing a supposed ‘greetings refusal’ of a person accidentally met on the street. It becomes suspicious to not respond to salutation: as if there was no possibility of not seeing someone on the street. Again, the common assumption is to constantly observing the environment to the extent of being able to catch a familiar face.
b) …yet nothing is certain

A community member translated living with a tension of ‘all unknown’ to a random ‘question of luck’. ‘Just like when I was almost shot twice that day. I left home and there was a shooting just behind me, on the corner of the street I live in, and then on my way back, I’ve gotten to know there was another one just ‘behind me’ - all this I’ve only known afterwards’. [K. Field notes.]

The ‘all known’ may convert into ‘all doubtful’, too. This specifically connects to the web of surveillance with irremovable possibility of beings seen, overheard and hence under control. The ‘all known but silent’ presence of ‘ears’ makes the reality even more ambiguous.

2) ‘Nothing happens here’: denial as a form of momentary silencing

Not only ‘we know it all’ but also apparently ‘all is fine’, often simultaneously accompanied by another sentence that reveals some elements of preoccupation.

In this case, silence is literally spoken, pronounced and simultaneously denied.

At a first glance, this arguably stems from adopting the top-down discourse of refusal to acknowledge the levels of insecurity (by state and federal government), but also may function as self-reassurance, to be able to move on (‘We’ve lived here for such a long time, come on, it is [must be] possible to live’). To a certain extent, it may also function as a buffer zone, ‘smoke screen’ –layer of fog- that aims to provide the interlocutor with a ‘calming message’ to avoid exaggeration of inflated opinions about insecurity in the zone.

Both accounts of negation and concern may coexist alongside, perhaps demonstrating a possible coexistence of apparent contradictions. Hence they open a possibility to keep living despite the potential surrounding tension. Silence may also enable forms of grey coexistence between the old neighbours and the newcomers, whose houses children of the prior settlers broke-in. In this sense, the Neighbourhood Watch gathered another meaning 20.

3) Declarative ‘not willing to know’

The following quotations illustrate silence that may also appear as laughed, mispronounced and disengaged.
- ‘We’re all very comfortable here: living and not seeing. As if nothing was happening’. [G.]

‘It is safer to avoid asking questions’: at a public event performed at the local university, where the Q&A session was deliberatively silenced. [O]
- Declared preference of ‘not wanting to know what was going on in [her] neighbourhood, next-door’, facing a rumour going around that ‘safe houses’ were only next-door.

4) Temporary withdrawal: disguise to postpone speaking.

‘Uncomfortable’ or considered risky topics may also be purposefully silenced. Two examples open the possibility to disguise through replacing with an apparently safer alternative and-or postponing in time.

- Apparent substitution of one topic of a research project by another, on less ‘sensitive’ themes for an official record: a recurrent practice at local universities.
- To declare a candidate that was not of a preference, then voting for the opposition, under circumstances of a high tension.

Postponing in time:
- ‘Clandestine books’ - not revealed yet published – on ‘sensitive’ topics in a state/locality.
- Artistic projects that had been planned, framed and proposed but not proceeded to move forward towards the realisation due to a concern of not calling attention of a local government.

5) Towards ‘scream’

Silences may also be pronounced, or even shouted. The following examples illustrate them being disguised yet visible, surrounded by uncertain violent settings.

- An interactive play in experimental theatre aimed at redefinition of spaces, addressing recent violent attacks, as well as embedded within a history of organised and state violences. In this manner present-day concerns may become finally revealed through historical violent context. Silenced for long, relevant stories became reiterated through redefinition of spaces where they took place.
- Shifting the nameplate in the central plaza of the city, to the one, crafted, engraved with the name of the assassinated person, who became a public figure of the ‘opposition’. On the other hand, problematic for some who acknowledge that the murdered person would not have liked her name to be so exposed. ‘She wouldn’t have

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21 ‘Safe houses’, contrary to their name, refer to locations where kidnapped people are kept. The places may also form a part of a typical residential neighbourhood, also seemingly referred as to ‘middle class’.

22 Interestingly, local elections appeared as an appropriate time for presenting ‘clandestine books’; uncovering the existent projects above the surface, hence presenting e.g. a book on a local exhibition following five years from its publication.
**liked to become a protagonist of this theatre**’. [P 3]
- Short anonymous messages against the local government on leaflets, hanging all around the city.
- Live music containing improvised verses expressing critique and concern with opaque power exercised over people.
- Traditional music recovered and preserved through teaching youth amid uncertain violent tension.

Tracing silences consists in a first step to detect pathways of flow of information. Under ‘constant uncertainty’, with dominating tensions of disguised violences of criminal but unknown origin, silences allow to track down how people actually communicate in these conditions. To follow Michael Taussig’s uncovering nuances of lived uncertainties in Colombian paramilitary terror context, his strategic assumption of ‘knowing what to know’ converts into a question of survival (Taussig, 2002).

Silences allow pronouncing voices either in a different from explicit manner, or in a different from the immediate time.

The tension when silence is shouted brings above the surface further forms of pronounced voices, uncovered in multiple organised forms of communication: traditional phone calls, internet group messages for every purpose, or ‘mantas’—pieces of fabric communicating messages to the authority reporting demands by ‘organised’ neighbours (Neighbourhood Watch) to the authority23.

To shed light on silence as a form of local agency in a wider category of voice was a purpose of this paper. It locates unprivileged people responses in a centre of this enquiry and challenges the usual binary between the powerful and powerless. Silence may therefore act like a plural and contextual, situated and collective process of improvising amid uncertainties, rather than a static ‘coping mechanism’ or ‘everyday resistance’ (Scott, 1990).

**Instead of concluding remarks: to listen to silence(s)**

In the end, how to listen to silences? Far from the exhaustive answer, the following passages make an attempt to begin to dig ‘listening’ as a mutual rather than one-side experience of the research ‘in field’.

When one puts attention to voice, a critical moment is a reflective action of hearing. This may be converted to listening, but not necessarily. The very moment of listening differs from an instant of grasping it to write about – in time, space and in a state of mind. Also, listening alters depending on the context; whether it is individual, repetitive collective, or alongside daily practices (also: Bennett, et. al., 2015).

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23 Otherwise commonly used by violent groups challenging adversaries or members of government.
The process of ‘embodied listening’ takes place through exchanging rather than one-side listening. Listening ‘sounds’ passively, as well as observing and taking a distance from. Co-creating data within ‘the field’, on the contrary, through empathy engages mind-body connection. It is an active process that combines multiple senses through which ‘living uncertainty’ was addressed. Listening seems thus far from passive: it makes sense when connected through speaking; indeed, it rather resembles a dialogue that gives sense to listening (and vice versa) hence it is dynamic and relational.

Rather than ‘extracting’ voices of ‘others’, the category of listening addresses experience of researching uncertain conditions, accepting the impossibility of a strict separation between the researcher and ‘the researched’. There is no illusion left to achieve any ‘objective’ observer / listener’s vision, or rationally voiced ‘responses’ to insecurity. Instead of proposing oneself as an outsider, (or ‘partial insider’) that implies ad hoc separation, the starting point locates this research alongside with ‘togetherness’ or rather, in-betweenness of perhaps fluid relation between the ‘other’ and the ‘local’. In fact, the latter only makes sense in regard to the constantly shifting nature of positionalities, which examination locates beyond the focus of this paper (Cousin, 2010).

In this line, I challenge my initial attempt of ‘extracting’ voices and listening to ‘responses’. Situating voices in a primary position, I nevertheless include a humble position of ‘embodied listening’ (staying ‘speechless’ included). Rather than asking ‘what did research partners say’, I examine the declared, interpreted, the contextual, other than verbal forms of expression (from the sounds of surroundings to the practicing mundane activities), and other than linguistic forms of sound (Bennett, et. al., 2015). ‘Embodied listening’ acknowledges the difficulty of separating oneself from emotions and from the way in which they affect one’s also physically, mainly through empathetic approach. Hence it is relevant for the results of this research to acknowledge that -although transformed over time-, a complete body-mind separation in a process of listening was accepted as a misconception.

References:


