

The Conversatorio as an exercise in social pedagogy. Obstacles and opportunities for the establishment of an agenda of Citizen Security and Proximity Police

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For several years now we have been exploring and coordinating, together with a team of young researchers and in an alliance with different governmental aims and decided voices, new roads towards the implementation of actions of Proximity Police (*Policía de Proximidad*) in Mexico. Throughout this process we have gathered views, ideas and experiences that allow us to argue that enabling a dialog between the police, society, and its different communities, makes it possible to delve with imagination and theoretical, technical and human creativity into a fundamental axis of police reform in Mexico such as the role of citizens in the shaping of a democratic police. To this end, we have launched an exercise in social pedagogy, understood as the (informal) social and educational practice that substantiates, justifies and comprises the most adequate normativity for the prevention, help and reinsertion into society of those who suffer throughout their life deficiencies in socialization or in the satisfaction of basic needs supported by human rights.

Thus, the reflection we present here deals with a crucial stage of the different pedagogic processes of implementation of the actions of proximity police we have participated in and that we have called a *conversatorio* between the municipal police and citizen representatives. We understand the *conversatorio* as a space to exchange ideas in the framework of the relationship between different parts, in which we seek to dynamize ideas linked to communication and focused on the practice of the participants, which provides feedback to the visions and gradually inspires a qualitative change in the interventions of each one of the participants in shared environments. This space is built through dialog and in itself, through the exercise of conversation, the free exchange of ideas, visions, arguments and shared, contradictory, conflictive, provoking, novel opinions to discuss and deliberate, sharing concerns that may be asserted or relativized by the participants in a constructive environment. In the processes we have fostered through the *conversatorio* we have sought mainly to identify and show the potential for citizen engage-

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ment of the people who live in the neighborhoods in which we have worked in different cities in Mexico (Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, Guadalajara, Tlaxcala, Monterrey, Solidaridad, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro and Aguascalientes, among others), as well as to learn about the willingness of municipal police forces to make an effort of proximity at the medium term and begin the process of approach between the police and the community.

The paradigm that inspires us is that of *Citizen Security*, and the model towards which we have directed our objectives is that of *Proximity Police*, also known as *Community Police*. Thus we seek to contribute to a necessary transition from a repressive political scheme at the service of the State – which is key in the prevailing paradigm of *Public Security* – towards a more comprehensive one, focused on generating adequate life conditions for the development of people. Already implemented in many countries around the world, the Proximity Police model is consistent with this change that seeks to move away from an emphasis on objectives such as protecting the “State” against “organized crime” – a scheme that neglects citizens – highlighting instead preventive, proactive and collaborative action with other social actors as the most effective alternative to deal with the increase in violence and insecurity.

The *conversatorio* is a key methodological resource in this effort, as well as a space for encounters where the representatives of the citizens and the municipal police institution may have a first exercise in approaching each other (and, in its case, facilitate a route towards reconciliation). Such an approach also serves the purpose of having the participants sensitize one another on the problems faced both by the police institution and the neighborhoods where the citizens live, so that they can generate proposals and agreements that allow them to visualize an agenda for joint work and a strategy for preventive intervention and proximity in the medium term.

In turn, conducting a *conversatorio* is the crystallization of a series of previous efforts to approach the inhabitants of (often very underprivileged) urban neighborhoods and learn about their environment, their social problems, their perspective on security and violence issues, as well as their perception of the police and their function and, on the other hand, approach the municipal police and identify the way they are organized, their progress, their weaknesses, their projects, their preventive views and their opportunities for improvement.

Experience shows that this exercise in previous approach and the *Conversatorios* themselves can be conducted in spite of an understandable initial reluctance. There is always a group of citizens, however small it may be at the beginning of the process and however numerous their motives for distrust may be, who may allow us to speak with them, willing to give themselves the opportunity to sit and talk with the police to describe insecurity issues they face in their neighborhoods, as well as to make constructive proposals for joint solutions based on respectful dialog. Likewise, there are always people in charge of or members of the police institutions who, perhaps immersed in their own processes of proximity with citizens, are willing to rethink

their social function and mission to recognize the important role they can play in the shaping of safer, more livable environments with greater degrees of social cohesion and quality of life.

However, both in the interviews and discussion groups previous to the *conversatorios* and during their development, shared perceptions and attitudes come to the surface that increase the difficulties to change perspectives and structures within the police institutions, on the one hand, and the obstacles to reposition the figure of the police in a society that has grown disenchanted of their functions and results, on the other.

The difficulty of thinking beyond *criminal complaint* and punishment

In recent years the prevailing political discourse in Mexico, as well as official statements and the media, have contributed to the construction of a criminal otherness without nuances where the *other*, enemy or different – “*malandro*” (evildoer), “*sicario*” (hitman), “*delincuente*” (criminal) – becomes a generic entity against whom the feeling of helplessness in the face of risks, criminality and violence suffered by large sectors of the citizenship can be projected. The citizens may then demand “more police” although, at the same time, members of the police force may be confronted with the impossibility of meeting this demand as expected and, therefore, with the discredit and lack of recognition of their authority and efficacy.¹

Some of these circumstances were manifest in the *conversatorios* we have had the opportunity to facilitate and moderate. Many of the complaints of citizen representatives invariably referred to the lack of attention to their criminal complaints, to the fact that the police did not respond to their emergency calls or that when they did they behaved in a negligent or ineffective way. Along the lines of these claims, for these citizens a “good police force”, was one that went to detain “young hoodlums” who threatened their property or used illegal drugs nearby, or that stopped a noisy party in the middle of the night five or ten minutes after a neighbor had called to complain about it. Nothing was mentioned at the beginning about the possible accumulation of vulnerabilities and violence suffered by those “young hoodlums” or about the lack of spaces and recreational, educational or work opportunities that might have marked their previous trajectories. Little regard was given at first to the perspective of greater dialog and a more effective association among neighbors to avoid some of the conflicts and “antisocial” behavior that made the life of the community life difficult. There is still among citizens a difficulty to identify and reduce, as much as possible, everyday aspects that work as a breeding ground

¹ This is one of the steps that precede the creation of a collective attitude of acquiescence with the presence of the Army and the Navy in several cities and communities in Mexico. Characterized by a discourse on the inefficiency and corruption of municipal police forces, citizen demands of this state of exception are also encouraged by displays of “necropower” which consist of exhibiting mutilated and tortured corpses, allegedly by members of “organized crime”, through which violence is perpetuated as terror destined to produce hierarchies of domination and subordination. It is said that citizens feel “safer” with the military deployment of the state of siege, but what is true is that local civil institutions are undermined and everyday life is militarized, leaving as the only freedom available that of the armed forces to “use their discretion on when and whom to shoot”. See Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, *Public Culture*, 2003, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 30.

that generates social risks. This leaves us with a weak community foundation to demand from the police a greater willingness to participate in the management of solutions to issues in the environment, as well as a comprehensive training to function as mediators in the peaceful solution of any social controversy.

The Proximity Police model arose precisely from the need to reorient the human and material resources available not only to “enforce the law” or prosecute crime, but also to attack the risk factors that may lead to these crimes being committed.² However, it is difficult to make member of police institutions stop privileging a coercive and reactive approach while citizens continue to demand it. In this respect, the exercise of the *conversatorio*, first aimed at alleviating the mistrust and distance between the municipal police and the inhabitants of vulnerable urban communities, may end up becoming an arena where both sides show themselves as fellow citizens of a society where it is difficult to think *preventively* about security. Once the line that divided them was crossed in the *conversatorio*, all the actors are situated on the same side of the problem, and therefore of the solution. The main challenge is then to understand security as a joint construction of citizens and government, instead of an exclusively governmental attribution where the only available role for citizens is to demand from the authorities the maintenance of “public order” by prosecuting crime. Too often, police training for this kind of action is equated with “prevention” in everyday discourse.

If security continues to be understood as the mere absence of crime and not as a human right, wellbeing and the free exercise of other rights are undermined. One of these rights is the presumption of innocence, key in the democratic paradigm of citizen security. When this basic principle is not guaranteed, a web of suspicion and distrust of each other is gradually built, threatening to generate more violence and hindering solutions based on a possible process of consensual and collective participation in an agenda of police proximity and comprehensive prevention.

An example of the above is the story of Teresa, one of the women interviewed during research before one of the *conversatorios* held in the city of Nogales, Sonora. Two years before, masked men wearing uniforms of the Federal Investigation Agency (AFI, Agencia Federal de Investigación) had entered her house and found her husband and one of her younger children there. The assailants beat up Teresa’s husband and were trying to push him into the truck they had come in when one of them exclaimed that he was not the person they were looking for. Realizing their mistake, the masked men let him go free after threatening to take the young child away if they tried to follow them or call the neighbors. Afterwards, Teresa’s husband notified the police. After a first refusal, finally a patrol car showed up and the policemen began to interrogate and accuse him: “And who are you? Why did they do that to you? If you hadn’t done

² Cfr. Policía comunitaria. Conceptos, métodos y escenarios de aplicación, Programa para la Convivencia Ciudadana, USAID-Instituto para la Seguridad y la Democracia, A.C., México, 2013.

anything, they would not have come. Because they weren't from the AFI, the AFI is not around here. Then you did something, that's why they came for you". After this incident, the police even began to call his workplace and ask his neighbors to find out about his activities and how he had obtained the money to buy his car and the family home. According to Teresa, her husband "ended up being the criminal".

A serious obstacle faced by those who seek justice in similar cases is the tendency to see any violent event as a settling of scores between criminals. Victims go to the authorities seeking protection, a solution or simply an explanation "and they are confronted with an accusation: the case is solved beforehand and is not investigated".³ We must recognize, however, that this attitude is reflected in the very absence of a presumption of innocence and the same suspicion and distrust of citizens. When a member of the neighborhood association of the same neighborhood where Teresa lives told us about her son's murder, we could overhear another woman muttering: "He must have been into something!"

Members of police institutions are also citizens whose perspectives are fed by those of their peers. Any democratic police reform, including the establishment of links of trust between citizens and police institutions, requires a careful balance between what is demanded from the police and what is offered to them. We cannot expect progress towards a model of citizen security in the police if the community members themselves do not have a degree of relative respect and trust among them.

The difficulty of thinking as we

The latter is difficult in view of the marked tendency there seems to exist in Mexico to dissociate the personal situation from the look at a collective one. Once and again, during work before the *conversatorios* held in urban neighborhoods of the states of Sonora, Baja California or San Luis Potosí we witnessed the difficulty of articulating a common project through the conciliation of individual and collective aspirations. Many of our experiences in this respect illustrate the trends shown in nationwide surveys and studies, which point to favorable views on the personal situation combined with a weak feeling of co-responsibility for the situation of the country or even one's own community, perceived as lacking in direction or increasingly deteriorated: "There is a prevailing idea that at any rate 'my country is my family', the little homeland that can be changed through one's own effort".⁴ This attitude is reflected in the perceptions and everyday discourse of the police force members themselves, who often ascribe a great deal of crime and antisocial behavior to the "decline of the family". As a commander of the municipal police of Tijuana concluded, "preventive work, security work always has to be done, started and become permanent at home. If people do not know about good manners, if people are not

³ Natalia Mendoza, "El derecho a sepultar", Nexos, March 2012.

⁴ "El mexicano ahorita. Retrato de un liberal salvaje", Nexos, February 2011, p. 26.

used to doing certain things, there will always be crime after crime [...] How am I bringing up my children? What are they seeing in me? Values!" María, the president of a neighborhood association in Nogales, would agree with him: "security begins at home", she told us. Her advice about instilling values in families and in their children come from a five-year experience as a volunteer in Visión Mundial, an international Evangelical fraternity that does social work in several countries. Through talks, courses and family encounters, María expressed her desire to take the prevention of violence "to the outskirts of the neighborhood", where public services and police patrols hardly ever go.

María's case may seem very particular, but it is also a reminder of the need to understand the diverse dynamics at play in the neighborhoods where we did our ethnographic approach before the *conversatorios*. In social spaces characterized by poverty, precariousness and the absence of the authorities, people go to the leaders of religious groups and political organizations in marginalized urban neighborhoods in search of solutions to what seems unsolvable. These associations become key pieces and relevant actors whose presence creates, however, a difficult landscape to establish a wider and more profound sense of community capable of helping in the collective production of citizen security, and not only because their everyday battles are made from a different thread, but also because in their agenda of priorities the meanings of 'participation' pass through other definitions.

A clear example of these circumstances is the Terremoto neighborhood in San Luis Potosí, which when we visited it lacked a neighborhood association that could represent all its inhabitants as a group and function as a channel for the communication between them and the police or the municipal authorities. Instead, groups such as Antorcha Campesina, Movimiento Pueblo Libre, Coordinadora del Movimiento Amplio Popular and members of the Triqui organization from Oaxaca, no less than four political organizations, were present in a small neighborhood of 2,500 inhabitants. These organizations do not appear out of the blue. In this case, they are a symptom of the problems that plague the policies of financing and subsidies to social interest housing projects. To the anarchic proliferation of housing disjointed from the cities, and the inability of municipal authorities to provide infrastructure and services to these remote areas, is added the financial cunning and political connections of leaders of different organizations and housing developers, who seek to maximize their benefits in the light of incentives and the rules of the political game, which follows the rationale of budget allocations for aid and resources to social organizations, even at the risk of the meddling of leaders or corporate groups who may require different commitments to those established in social programs or capture them for other purposes. Thus, the federal resources of the Program for Saving and Subsidy for Housing, to which Terremoto owes its origin almost two decades ago, were not transferred directly to potential individual beneficiaries, but – through the government of San Luis Potosí – to leaders of political organizations such as the ones now present in the neighborhood. They are the ones

that must now deal with institutional neglect, fighting each other and the current authorities for the provision of resources.

In this context, security and the police are not part of the agenda of priorities of the neighbors. There are other needs, reformulated in the light of the own views of these political groups, to which neighbors must belong to cover basic needs whose satisfaction appears to be the result of the struggle and confrontation, never as the product of equitable sharing within a State of Law. After the conversatorio held in 2011 between the municipal police of San Luis Potosí and members of all the organizations with a presence in Terremoto – no small feat – a large part of our efforts were aimed at convincing the neighbors to leave their political affiliations aside for a moment and organize as a community. This process was not easy, although it was favored by the road paving of the whole neighborhood and the construction of a Center for Community Development, besides other infrastructure work and urban equipment coordinated by institutions at the three levels of government, albeit with a majority participation of the federal administration. Regardless of the organization to which they belong, the neighbors of each one of the streets of Terremoto elected their representatives, who formed a citizen committee that created a direct link with the Technical Team of the municipal police, aimed at working jointly with neighbors to solve the security problems that affect them the most. Likewise, these street representatives participate in the process to elect the members of a Committee for Improvements, whose directive board participates in turn in the election of members of the Municipal Council for Social Development, the body in charge of the management of the public works of the municipality and follow-up to the use of federal and municipal resources for social development and urban improvement. However, all of this is often in vain if state and municipal authorities, with the consent of the federal government, continue – as they have – turning basic rights and services into gifts and favors in exchange for votes and support. Antorcha Campesina and Movimiento Pueblo Libre are products of such processes.

Other urban neighborhoods in which we have worked, especially those that arose out of invasions of land and irregular settlements, cannot be understood either outside the influence of Mexican politics and its long-lived coils. In quite a few cases it was certain leaders, linked to political parties in local or regional elections, who promoted the invasion of lands to create settlements whose inhabitants would be fiercely loyal to the political party in turn. Local processes of mobilization and organization linked to these circumstances may contribute to the emergence of a strong sense of belonging that, in contrast with the histories and trajectories of other neighborhoods, makes it easier to build a community in the deepest meaning of the word. As the population grows and the process of settlement and regularization of land ownership is consolidated, however, neighbors may lose interest in participating and the association between them may erode. Solidarity and basic loyalties turn back to the home, the family or one's own political or religious group, excluding the community once more from the first person plural.

This happened, for instance, in the Colinas del Sol neighborhood in Nogales. The original struggles for the occupation of the land in the early stages of the creation and regularization of the neighborhood stimulated weekly meetings which many neighbors attended. There were also some sort of internal regulations that, among other things, imposed fines on those who littered or committed other infractions. Once the main objective was achieved, neighborhood associations began to disappear, and with them the joint work to solve key issues related to services and security in the neighborhood. For example, there used to be “cleaning days” in which neighbors did the cleaning of their plots and houses, after which they called garbage trucks that took away the trash.

As it became manifest in the first interviews and discussion groups we conducted in Colinas del Sol in preparation for the *conversatorio* with the police, there is now only one neighborhood association for a neighborhood with more than 2,000 houses. This association consists in fact of a small group of around ten women who are burdened with concerns and activities that should be shared by all neighbors. They alone cannot do anything about garbage and the lack of hygiene and sanitation in the neighborhood, nor can they confront the owners of dogs that are a threat to people or rip open garbage bags placed outside the houses. Faced with this situation, it was fruitless to ask the question, formulated during one of the discussion groups, of what these women and their neighbors as a community would be willing to do to avoid some of the security and crime issues pointed out previously, so they could formulate concrete proposals for solutions when they sat down to talk with the police. In fact, as in other similar cases, such proposals turned out to be difficult to articulate. Joint work with the police to solve security issues cannot take place if citizens are unable to think of a “we”. It is one thing to say “One day thieves came into my house, I called the police and they did not show up. I want them to attend to my complaints”, and it is a very different thing to assert that “we the neighbors are concerned about burglary and we want to work together with the police to prevent such crimes”. Moving from one form of expression to another may look simple but it has cost – and will continue to cost – us days of conversation, discussion groups and workshops aimed mostly at having people start to think as a *community* and seeing themselves as part of it. This is especially hard where there simply is none.

By way of conclusion

In the course of our work and research, after immersing ourselves in different urban neighborhoods and listening to the views of their inhabitants, we observed that, from the position of social actors of their own reality, in the order of their priorities security does not appear as a right in itself nor as a right that enables the access to other rights. Very often, security boils down to an authoritarian relationship with the presence of the police in moments considered “borderline” or “of transgression”, or their absence is associated with neglect in moments considered of

“help” or “emergency”. Hence the complexity of construing or even imagining the police and their officials as relevant actors in conflict resolution, as agents of peace, and therefore as those who provide security.

In this effort, it is not easy either to work jointly with citizens if different media reinforce the image that somehow security is something external or alien to them, the exclusive task of a coercive and reactive State. From this perspective, *citizen participation* is reduced to a mere rhetorical figure that masks important inequalities and antagonisms within marginalized populations, unable to become true communities after decades of political techniques that force them to compete for health, education and housing benefits, instead of being co-participants of them. It may sound as a worn out cliché, but we will say it again: security, as a right of citizens, is not only the task of the police, the government or the citizens. It is a task for all of them. In the parallel reality in which we live in Mexico, built with words made of smoke, few would disagree publicly with this principle of co-responsibility. It is repeated as a mantra by officials in municipal administrations dominated by parties which came to power through conditioning the delivery of resources to votes for them. Members of police institutions ever more detached from the needs and desires of the population say they agree with it. It is expressed by inhabitants of neighborhoods who are unable to identify with or reach basic agreements of respect and coexistence with their street neighbors, whom they do not even know. Precisely for this reason, we can only give our sincere thanks to all the officials, police men and women and citizens who refused to accept this social defeat and allowed us, through that meeting of subjectivities enabled by the *conversatorio*, to approach them and be able to say together that, on the basis of real experience, insecurity issues often have more possibilities to be solved when comprehensive interventions are implemented involving different actors, government bodies and orders. Police work is not an isolated means to decrease violence and crime by itself, but it is a key element in those intervention strategies.