

“Business is business”: a journey into a French suburban drug-dealing bureaucratic gang

Suburban
drug-dealing
bureaucratic
gang

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Abstract

Purpose – Illegal companies remain an underexplored research avenue. Indeed, although extant literature has already discussed organizational analysis of illicit businesses from a marketing or an entrepreneurial point of view, few papers have focused on it. The purpose of this study is to explore and uncover the bureaucratic aspects of this kind of structure. To do so, this study intends to demonstrate that even the most hidden organizations in a given society are shaped by common representations orienting them toward well-disseminated models.

Design/methodology/approach – An ethno-sociological study was conducted, thanks to a long non-participant immersion (over one year) by observing a drug-dealing organization in a French suburban area located near Paris.

Findings – This study illustrates that illicit organizations reproduce traditional organizational schemes that help them to ensure efficiency and sustainability. Indeed, they fit into modern bureaucratic models within which procedures remain highly normative and formal, but also within which interactions between members are both constrained by a regulative framework and, at the same time, enable a certain amount of autonomy and creativity at work.

Social implications – The business case in this study analyzes the implications of seeing illicit businesses as organizations like any others. The counterintuitive results show that these organizations set and normalize processes allowing the establishment of a formal hierarchy, and specific yet strict rules.

Originality/value – The originality of this paper comes from its unit of analysis and specific subject.

Keywords Organizational behavior, Business ethics, Observation, Bureaucracy, Drug dealing, Illegal organization

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Illicit organizations have attracted research interest for a long time. As a matter of fact, extant literature details the specificities of this kind of business (Jankowski, 1991; Monin and Croidieu, 2012). However, few studies have already analyzed how illicit businesses are structured and organized. Some interesting perspectives may, nevertheless, emerge and provide findings that would shed light on wider organizational processes. Indeed, what if illicit organizations are first and foremost organizations?

This paper explores this perspective and offers several additional contributions to the literature on illicit organizations. First, our study illustrates how this kind of structure fits in very well with modern bureaucratic models within which procedures remain highly normative and formal, but also within which interactions between members are constrained by a regulative framework and, at the same time, enable a certain amount of autonomy and



creativity at work. Indeed, an organization remains an organization, whatever its activity may be. We found, counterintuitively, that these organizations set and normalize processes allowing the establishment of a formal hierarchy, and specific yet strict rules. The content of the business and its possible morals therefore matter less than the fact that this is first and foremost a business. Second, our case study illustrates how deep managerial representations are anchored in the wider society, as even its illicit and clandestine areas are influenced by management principles without ever being accustomed to them.

The article is organized as follows. First, we present extant literature on both illicit organizations and recent developments in bureaucracies, to position our research project and specify our theoretical puzzle. We then detail the data setting of our case study and explain how we collected and analyzed our data set. In the third part, we present the findings and indicate how they contribute to elucidate our initial research question. Finally, we discuss the article's contributions and explain the utility of organizational analysis with respect to illicit organizations. As a conclusion, we envision avenues for future research.

Literature review: illegal businesses and bureaucracies, and research perspectives

Study of illegal businesses in organization studies

Several studies have already addressed the specificities of non-standard, informal or illegal ways of doing business. What we may learn from them is not new to organization studies (Goodman, 2011) and covers a wide field of research, from, for instance, the analysis of precariousness and sometimes undeclared work of seasonal workers, the Hobos (Whyte, 2007), to very hostile environments of African-American gangs (Venkatesh, 2009). Regarding the latter, Venkatesh (2009) indicates that gang-related studies are numerous and deal with different subjects. These range from statistical studies on crime rates (Carr, 2005; Block and Block, 1991) to the analysis of organizational structures (Jankowski, 1991; Paoli, 2014).

Illegal businesses have recently attracted research in management sciences. Without necessarily being exhaustive, these approaches mainly look at the boundaries between illegal activities and the broader social system (Monin and Croidieu, 2012; Very and Wilson, 2012; Durand and Vergne, 2012; Bureau, 2014). As a matter of fact, it seems crucial to study the social context of illegal organizations, as there may be a tension between the illegality of their actions and the moral bases on which people justify (or not) what they are currently doing. It can therefore be crucial from an organizational perspective to look at the mechanisms an illegal organization sets up to find its place in its broader environment, without necessarily needing to step into legality (Webb et al., 2009).

This requires studying the ways used by illegal companies to structure themselves (Jankowski, 1991). From this perspective, extant research has mainly focused on how illegal organizations gain legitimacy, i.e. how they deal with their broader social context to appear more compliant and thus ensure their sustainability. For instance, Monin and Croidieu (2012) consider that the legitimacy of illegal organizations is acquired by the establishment of four types of strategy: invisibility or secret strategies; discursive strategies, namely, denial or framing; political strategies of lobbying and philanthropy; and decoupling strategies between the legal and the illegal.

However, the organization's legitimacy may not necessarily be the only stakeholder to push illegal organizations up the research agenda in organization studies. Besides, this would limit the research opportunities. Indeed, as Webb et al. (2009) illustrate, when studying organizations, there are distinctions to be made between formal, informal and renegade economy. The latter are structures using illegal and illegitimate means to achieve illegal and illegitimate objectives. In such a case, Webb et al. (2009) consider that an activity

can be accepted by a group of stakeholders without necessarily being considered as legal by society. This opens new perspectives, as the internal legitimacy of illegal business would be ensured in such a case. Then, beyond the acceptability of the business by its members, the way the structure operates may also drive research projects.

This would require a direct observation of this kind of structure and their local integration, as the basic structure for illegal organizations is determined by the space they occupy in their immediate surroundings (McLean *et al.*, 2018). Yet, the majority of studies based on non-participant observation in a hostile environment, including studies on African-American gangs (Levitt and Venkatesh, 2000), do not analyze the interactions between gangs and their environment, or the day-to-day practices developed by gangs to organize themselves as a business. There are naturally some exceptions (Jankowski, 1991; Shelden *et al.*, 2012; Ochieng *et al.*, 2013; Bankston, 1998) but Venkatesh (2009) and Jankowski (1991) seem to be the only authors who deal with a direct description of gangs.

We therefore intend to proceed with non-participant observation of an illicit business to further explore its organizational processes. To do so, it first seems necessary for us to define what a stereotypical organization would look like, as it would help us to build representations of what an illicit organization may be and establish a model that, despite its simplified features (Pesqueux, 2002), would help us to compare it with more traditional (i.e. traditionally studied) types of organization. The bureaucratic organization retained our attention here.

Bureaucracy, a counterintuitive model to study illicit businesses?

Indeed, from the seminal work of Max Weber (1958, 1968) to more recent interest (Adler, 2012; Olsen, 2008; Greenwood and Lawrence, 2005; Courpasson and Reed, 2004), the concept of bureaucracy is still fashionable in organization studies. For instance, in their work, modeling a typology of bureaucracies, Adler and Borys (1996) indicate that this mode of organization is based on the centrality of rules, and implementation of procedures. Bureaucracy thus appears to be a model with multiple practical applications and what is of particular interest is Adler and Borys' call for "go[ing] beyond the pejorative connotation that has swamped the term bureaucracy" (Adler and Borys, 1996, p. 85).

Indeed, authority, rules and procedures still remain, and this is not the end of bureaucracy (Clegg, 2012). Its vitality is observable through the various forms these structures may take. This has led researchers to actualize and refine the concept of bureaucracy. First, we may notice that there is now a traditional stream of research, starting with the concept of "soft bureaucracy" (Courpasson, 2000) studying the persistence of the managerial mechanisms of domination within organizations despite their apparent and increasing flexibility. This leads to the emergence of research on the post-bureaucracy concept (Courpasson and Reed, 2004; Courpasson and Clegg, 2006; Rhodes and Price, 2010) that illustrates the capacity of modern bureaucracies to "transform and adapt to changing conditions" (Rhodes and Price, 2010, p. 244) and integrate requirements for creativity and innovation while still controlling people and rationality of procedures.

More recently, these tensions have been greatly highlighted by researchers. Some of them pointed out the paradox of the so-called formal-rational shape of bureaucracy described by Weber, and the "chaos, contradiction, ambiguity, and unpredictability" frequently reported in the organizational literature (Hodson *et al.*, 2013, p. 66). This led them to claim that modern bureaucracy resembles more of a Kafkaesque bureaucracy than a Weberian one (Hodson *et al.*, 2012; Hodson *et al.*, 2013). Finally, on a more empirical level, the recent developments regarding the concept of neo-bureaucracy (Sturdy *et al.*, 2016) illustrate the decoupling between the so-called new forms of organizing and the persistence of

bureaucratic modes of governance, power and management described in the literature. Then, if bureaucracy is still constituted of rational procedures, three elements allowing their implementation can be studied to characterize modern and adaptable forms of bureaucracy: hierarchies, knowledge and management.

First, bureaucracies are based on hierarchies. This is illustrated through the reinforcement of procedures based on regulation processes more than on hierarchical management (Harrison and Smith, 2003). Hierarchies, nevertheless, remain in organizations and tend to mutate from a visible and strongly formal shape to a more complex mix of formal and informal modes (Diefenbach and Sillince, 2011). The authors indicate that formal hierarchy refers to an official system where a vertical line of command is set up to facilitate top-down control. Besides, formal hierarchy represents an official and legitimate framework within a given organization. On the contrary, informal hierarchy is unofficial. Built on social interactions, it is constituted of “relationships of dominance and subordination” (p. 1517) that may become persistent and routine. Even if formal hierarchy is predominant in the bureaucratic organization, people can always play with the rules within an imposed framework (Crozier, 1964; Crozier and Thoenig, 1976; Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). The way in which the informal hierarchical mode imitates the formal one and co-evolves with it constitutes a specific feature of bureaucratic organizations. It represents “its continuation by other means; it further conditions people to dominate and to obey where the formal order cannot reach them” (p. 1521). This is of particular interest to study illicit businesses, as they are supposed to be ruled by coercion and violence (Duplat *et al.*, 2012), which means that instructions should always be followed, but, at the same time, turnover and informal mechanisms should prevail to keep business going (Duplat *et al.*, 2012).

Second, according to the traditional description of the technical efficiency of bureaucracy (Adler, 2012), promotion and diffusion of knowledge are important characteristics of the bureaucratic organization. In this configuration, organizations build up a socialization framework fostering reliance on explicit, codified and globally controlled knowledge. This elucidation and supervision of knowledge is disseminated at all levels of the organization through various processes. First, as previously described, formalization and standardization allow the unveiling of tacit knowledge, which becomes a social medium within the organization, widely accessible and used to foster performance, especially by means of best practices and procedures. Second, the hierarchical line allows knowledge to be orchestrated and its overall importance for the whole organization to be demonstrated. Third, knowledge is a means of socialization as it upgrades the level of expertise of employees and makes them committed to the organization. Last, knowledge allows the creation of specific and new organizational communities of workers, and ensures a specific role of diffusion to staff members who will share it at all organizational levels. This would imply a human capital-centered organization capable of setting up specific recruitment and reporting processes to attract and retain talented people (Lawler, 2008). Once again, this could be interesting, as illicit knowledge is obviously not taught at gangsters’ schools. Then, the question of how to become an illegal stakeholder remains.

Finally, in our modern times, the positioning of managers as consultants (Sturdy *et al.*, 2016) is described as an organizational way of both re-inventing and perpetuating bureaucracies. The posture of managers as consultants results from a rhetoric oriented toward new management issues. Indeed, this so-called new form of organization insists on the necessity for modern managers to be project oriented; embody change; be intermediaries between external novelty and organizational settings; and adopt an advisory style, which are the four main characteristics of consultancy, all at the same time. This particular form of management may be a perfect fit for the neo-bureaucratic organizational form (Tengblad,

2006), a modern model of bureaucracy that combines the necessity to follow both market developments and set up organizational procedures and rules. Indeed, compliance appears to be really important here, to ensure the quality of work. This may be a new way of setting up rules, securing cooperation and controlling employee work and overall organizational quality.

Looking at bureaucracy may be counter-intuitive for research on the organizational processes of illicit businesses. Indeed, as they emerge from relative chaos and societal disorganization (Paoli, 2014) and are now ruled by flexibility and decentralization in contradiction with the traditional image conveyed by famous Hollywood movies (Goodman, 2011), the bureaucratic model seems to intuitively be an “antipodal ideal type” (Florian, 2018) for such organizations. Nevertheless, this does not prevent stakeholders in the field from being attracted by structured modes of organizing and, as Florian (2018) demonstrates, bureaucracy may remain a frame of reference for organizing in many “unorthodox places.”

Besides, beyond the established models of bureaucracy, this research intends to look at the specificities of illicit organizations that may uncover how the bureaucratic model copes with clandestine organizing, and maybe help to enhance our understanding of the modern form of bureaucracies. Our research question is thus: “Is an illicit organization an ordinary bureaucracy?” We will address this question by underlining the proposal that an organization, regardless of its activity, refers to the dominant representations of business in a given society. From such a perspective, illegal organizations dealing drugs may not only be networks made up of outlaws and unmanageable free riders. They should also be studied as social structures embedded into the wider society.

Methodology: a complex case study based on non-participant observation

We adopted a grounded approach in this research (Glaser, 1999; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Indeed, the first author, without ever taking part in drug trafficking, grew up in the district while the second author was totally unfamiliar with it. Then, our theorization was built after a period of assimilation in the field and a confrontation of perspectives, to avoid biases and stereotypes. Our research hypotheses emerge from this discussion. The design of our research, on the other hand, has largely been based on the case study method (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994, 2013), taking into account the work that shows that the delineation between context and phenomenon is complex (Lemoine, 1994).

Data setting

The drug-dealing environment is considered as a hostile one (Sciarrone, 2000). The network we studied was a reselling structure that became very influential in Paris’ suburbs at the beginning of the 21st century. It experienced a loss of momentum following the discovery of a large amount of money and 400 kilos of drugs by the French Drug Enforcement Administration (French DEA). This administration also arrested a member of this organization in September 2017 after someone was killed. During the mission, €250,000 was found. A stakeholder in this network, we called him Z, has been recently arrested in possession of 22 kilos of cannabis, and “gone down.” We further develop these facts, as the importance of Z increased after this event and had an impact on significant changes in the structure. First, it seemed important for us to describe the organization and its stakeholders as it helped understand the environment in which this took place. The main stakeholders in the drug trafficking stopped school early. Indeed, studying was not a common habit in this community. Even the most talented ones were usually tempted to stop to “earn a good living.” Some succeeded through sport [1] or music, but for many others, the “sale” (mostly drug selling) was seen as a quasi-mandatory way.

Most of the organization's members were officially unemployed, except for M who worked for a public transport company as a taxi driver for the disabled. Many inhabitants of this area had already been confronted with refusals in "traditional" recruitment procedures because of their place of residence. Even strong-willed people, like C's little brother, who did not want "to stay more than a week without working," had difficulties finding a job. Besides, the organization hired "occasional sellers" who were satellite members, not working for it full time, as they had a regular job, but doing this to "put butter on their bread." In addition, over time, some moved on to have a comfortable life, and then ceased to be "occasional sellers" like A, who completed A-levels in Accounting and used to be "an occasional seller," and is now an asset manager in a large French bank. He stopped all his illegal activities and is now interested in completing one of the best French MBAs.

Everyday life in the housing project was a very confined one, where the famous French motto "subway, work, sleep" was the mundane reality for the residents and also for the organization members' relatives. Besides, social misery prevailed there, and prevented people from socialization. As a matter of fact, members of the organization only accessed the outside world through "Kryptions [2]" who only stayed a short time in the building lobby. It is also important to note the balance that reigned in this area between organization members, children living in the housing project and the rest of the inhabitants.

This housing project consisted of a quiet area of three towers comprising 6–22 floors. Trafficking happened in the highest tower, more easily accessible for buyers ("Kryptions"). Dealers were known by all residents and respected by the vast majority who considered them as courteous "kids from the block." Indeed, they regularly helped women without driving licenses to go to the post office, and prevented youngsters from being uncivil. As two elderly residents confessed:

[...] we know what young people are doing but we cannot judge them, they are always polite, drive us to the shopping center, hold the door for us, protect us in the evening if we come back a little bit late and so on.

These elements revealed some ambivalence in the activity of this organization, as people confessed that selling drugs in the housing project also contributed to local life, despite this being illegal.

Becoming a member of the organization did not occur through a traditional process based on job interviews or qualifications, but rather according to the time spent "holding the wall" [3]. Age also played an important role in the hierarchical division. "Kids" that were still at school were not allowed to play a role in this trade by joining the world of "the great housing project"; they were automatically kept out of the trade because they do not pay enough attention to danger. Besides, one needed to prove his worth if he wanted to be promoted. For instance, when T, K and Z, three managers, were about to leave the district for a weekend off, to see one of their friends during a football match, they needed someone to hold the business together while they were away. They decided to give JC, a young adult, a chance, and test him for later.

Data collection and analysis

We conducted an ethno-sociological study (Badot *et al.*, 2009), thanks to a long non-participant immersion (over one year) by observing a drug-dealing organization in the suburbs of Paris. This allowed us to describe the organizational structure and served as our main source of data. Besides, we also conducted an observation phase in another drug-dealing organization in the northern district of Marseilles, in the south of France, during three trips (one lasting five days,

and the other two lasting two days each) to compare the collected data with a similar organization and control the reliability of our data set.

The ethics of this work are consistent with Venkatesh's (2009) research. Our work has been that of researchers in management sciences, and we have therefore made the distinction between the moral judgment we may have had about illegal drug trafficking, and the analysis we made of an organization. The main difficulty of this research could have been to gain trust from the interviewees. Our access to the field was facilitated, thanks to two different situations. In Paris, as we mentioned previously, the first author grew up in the immediate vicinity of the organization, so he naturally obtained the opportunity to observe it. Furthermore, this situation allowed us to be transparent with members as they were aware of our activity. Moreover, there was a period of validation of our work by the group similar to Venkatesh's (2009) case study. The situation was in Marseilles. In the district where we stayed, a non-governmental organization (NGO) had been set up to help children in this environment. So, while studying the organization based in Paris, we were in contact with the general secretary of this NGO who asked us to create contacts with drug dealers. The interest for the NGO was to create contacts with the organization, thanks to a researcher who knows how it develops.

In addition to that, we used a method based on biographies (Bertaux, 1997, 2005) to collect overlapping data. In total, we conducted 30 interviews between March 21st, 2014 and March 27th, 2015, representing a total of 27 recorded hours.

The key characteristics of our interviewee sample are detailed in Table 1.

In addition to this data set, and to better contextualize the case study, Table 2 sums up some characteristics of the organization's emblematic members.

A basic chart of this organization could be represented as in Figure 1.

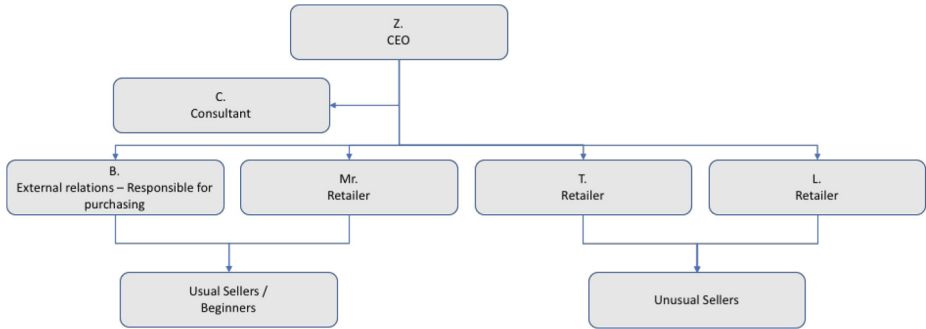
Name	Age	Position	Years in the activity	No. of interviews	Total duration of interviews recorded
D	43 years old	CEO	27 years	3 interviews	1:35:35
C	41 years old	Consultant		3 interviews	1:23:47
B	32 years old	COO – responsible for purchasing and public relations	14 years	3 interviews	2:27:19
Mr	30 years old	Retailer	14 years	3 interviews	3:13:34
T	29 years old	Retailer	14 years	4 interviews	3:57:22
L	33 years old	Retailer	10 years	3 interviews	2:39:12
Y	47 years old	Former retailer	Unknown	1 interview	1:24:48
Occasional seller 1	Between 20 and 25 years old	Temporary worker		2 interviews	2:12:56
Occasional seller 2	Between 20 and 25 years old	Temporary worker		2 interviews	2:31:47
Occasional seller 3	Between 20 and 25 years old	Temporary worker		2 interviews	2:26:17
Krypton 1	Between 30 and 35 years old	Buyer		1 interview	00:46:55
Krypton 2	Between 35 and 40 years old	Buyer		1 interview	00:52:13
Krypton 3	Around 60 years old	Buyer		2 interviews	1:26:41

Table 1.
Key characteristics of the interviewees

Table 2.
Emblematic
members of the
organization

Person	Facts	Police record
Z	Head of organization Victim of several unsuccessful murder attempts made by rivals. He always replied with shotgun Shy 43 years old	No long-term sentence since 2005 for drug dealing Spent a few days in prison for bank robbery
C	Made his debuts in trafficking Entered into drug trafficking in contact with D Was arrested several times for drug trafficking Former associate of D 41 years old, married, four children	He started by robbing banks Many drug convictions Four years in prison for drug dealing Currently in prison
B	Started directly with drug dealing Former European kickboxing champion at the age of 15 Created a drug business in jail Really friendly 31 years old, married, two children	Two years in prison for drug dealing
M	Started by doing bank hold-ups with T 30 years old, no children	A few short sentences
T	Started by doing bank hold-ups with M Discreet 29 years old, married, one child	A few short sentences
L	Former dealer He explained to the police how the dealing was done The group decided to punish him. He had to pay to re-join the group 33 years old	A few short sentences

Figure 1.
Basic chart of the
“Business is
Business”
organization



As our research question was relatively general and the business we want to study was unusual, we decided to use grounded theory principles (Glaser, 1999; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Besides, as the contextualization seemed both crucial and complex for us, we favored a case study approach. Using personal connections that helped him gain access to the field, the first author of this study started his work writing a research journal every night after spending time with a group of drug dealers. The choice of an observation *in situ* (Hughes, 1984) for one year with an almost daily presence on site, late in the day associated with regular interviews with various stakeholders of the organization, was required because of the organization’s illegal nature. Indeed, for instance, presence in the morning or in the

Technical aspects of bureaucracy	Category	Empirical practice	Empirical evidences
Hierarchy and HR rules	Recruitment	Based on testing	“Well all right, we can let M. manage the shop while we are on vacation and then see what’s going on, but well we know he’s an outcast in this housing project, so well, we’ll have to take care” (Interview)
	Dismissal	Outsourced by the police → depending on if the member denounces the others or not	“Concerning L, I learnt that he denounced some people when he was caught, so for a while, he was persona non grata in the neighborhood, otherwise he would have faced physical punishment as a kind of penalty” (Field notes)
	Salaries (employees)	Top and middle managers have incentives based on results	“I can observe that there is a fixed price between ¥100 and ¥300 per day for sellers depending on their involvement in the organization and their age” (Field notes)
		Fixed salary is applied for basic and occasional sellers	“He is a small-timer, we do not know what he’s worth, you cannot pay the same price, he never takes any risks, so . . . well. . . that’s it, it’s already fair he’s making ¥100 a day. His m other is a cleaning lady, she does not earn so much” (Interview)
	Interim	Interim recruitment based on replacement of usual staff by seasonal workers	“The group is scheduling a road trip to Marseilles to see a football match where they have a friend playing. They organized a meeting in order to decide who is going to replace them for the weekend. This is interesting as this trip was not prepared. It made the recruitment much more difficult as there was a difference with summer vacation when they decided to organize their vacation with different shifts. So they needed to find a temporary worker during vacation” (Field notes)
	Evaluation system	Evaluation system is outsourced by the police – use of a neutral system	“In fact it’s quite simple, if he denounces, you cannot take him back, he’s a kid, you do not know what he’s worth, at the beginning you make sure that he doesn’t know too much, he will obviously make rookie mistakes, he will do stupid things with a moped or whatever, so you wait, and when you have seen several times that he doesn’t denounce anyone, then you can start giving him small tasks” (Interview)

Table 3.
(continued) Bureaucracy data set

Technical aspects of bureaucracy	Category	Empirical practice	Empirical evidences
Knowledge management	Learning curve	Trial and error: no written process – adjustments are made <i>ex post</i>	“We didn’t know before how to do it so as not to be caught, basically, we made all the mistakes you can imagine. We had to change all of that. When I got out of jail, we grilled the methods of the cops and we changed everything. For example they can take fingerprints from gloves, we didn’t know that, now we burn them each time we use them” (Interview)
	Information securing	Securing phones and communication	“For information, it’s simple, we all use this type of cellphone, it’s a terrorist thing, nobody can hack it, it’s a PGP, Pretty Good Privacy. . . Pretty Good Privacy. . . Hell yeah You see with this stuff, you can only send text messages, I have to put a code of minimum 30 characters for each button I click, for fuck’s sake, I paid € 1000 for that shit, just for texting. Well, you can do something more simple. . . you go to the taxiphone. . . well call shop around the corner, I think it’s phone-tapped, so you can take the cheapest phone you can find, let’s say an old Nokia with a prepaid SIM that you change every 3 weeks but this is annoying, you lose customers, it’s used by the kids, they can’t spend €1,000 just for texting” (Interview)
Supply chain management	Market positioning	Ensuring quality of goods	“You see we didn’t do any studies, but we’re not so bad anyway. For sure we could manage things even better but hey we know our suppliers, we say that we prefer to buy a little more expensive per kilo and sell a great quality product, basically we pay 4,000 \? per kilo, we could buy it for 3,000 \? but it’s shit, guys who come to us they know they’ll have fun” (Interview)
	Quality management	Collective system	“In fact, I’m in charge of negotiating with the wholesalers, but to pay for the shit, we have a common pot with M., T. and Y. It’s always like that, but I’m always the one who is looking for the shit. I do not know why, it reassures them, maybe because I’m always smiling, or it’s the past of mixed martial art that makes. . . you know” (Interview)

Table 3.

afternoon would have been useless, as most of the activity occurred in the late afternoon and evening. Presence in the late afternoon was the most judicious, as all stakeholders were present. Besides, during some periods (e.g. Ramadan), the first author was more careful with observations, spending some nights in the field. On a few occasions, he decided to stop observations for safety reasons (a shooting, a dangerous point of contact, etc.).

As time went by, we were struck by one counterintuitive fact. Despite their illegal nature, drug-dealing organizations were behaving like ‘traditional’ organizations. Indeed, they were selling an illegal product. Yet, it remained a product and the people who sold it set up processes that resembled those that have been widely described in management literature for decades now. As a matter of fact, if entrepreneurial and marketing approaches of illegal companies have already been analyzed in the literature (Fairlie, 2002), we noticed that organizational mechanisms were also set up to generate performance, optimize sales, anticipate unplanned events and organize work through a vertical and clear hierarchical line. Besides, if the people dealing drugs all had a relatively low academic capital, they surprisingly instinctively set up procedures that are normally learnt at management schools (e.g. marketing promotions, sales techniques, HR processes, etc.).

We then decided to proceed with an organizational study of our data set, coding interviews and the first author’s research journal, to reveal bureaucratic features of drug-dealing structures, namely, how they manage performance and how they hierarchically organize work and chain of command. Table 4 and 5 present a synthetic overview of our data set and the following section details the results of our analysis.

Findings

Relational level: work and structure, a genuine and situated work division based on a local community

Task division took a particular form in the organization. On the one hand, just like more conventional firms, the gang adopted HR procedures and organized hierarchies, recruitment procedures and career in the organization. Indeed, the organization’s managers easily found novices to sell drugs, and quickly entrusted them with mundane responsibilities such as “troubleshooting” minor issues. This allowed managers to test new members and also to envision different roles. Besides, as members themselves indicated, this was like a “convenience store,” and the small size of the organization required people to be adaptable and prove their capacity to evolve and take on other roles. Then, the division of labor and tasks led to the emergence of status and professions as some organizational leaders labeled themselves and their subordinates as, for instance, “head of external affairs,” “head of retailing,” “consultants” and even “leader.” Moreover, this formal hierarchy allowed the organization to define the level of responsibility associated with each position and then allocate a level of income to each job. In addition to that, the organization regularly used extra temporary workers to “give the organization a hand.” Then, when needed, peripheral logistical and sales support was set up using “small-timers” and “occasional” sellers. As a consequence, the organization was a highly centralized one as this extra workforce needed to be tightly controlled, because of the risky business the organization was doing. Indeed, the evaluation of people and, sometimes, dismissals were based on trust and loyalty, i.e. the ability (or not) for members to not denounce the others when arrested. For instance, C evolved from a position as seller to a consulting role, as his arrest and the time he spent in jail was associated with legitimacy and maturity as he never “snitched on” the others.

Then, beyond these functional aspects, this particular business had consequences on the frame of the relationships within and even outside the organization. The importance of trust led to envisioning the organization as something more than a group of people working

Social shape of the organization		Category	Empirical practice	Empirical evidences
Social data set	Code of honor	Rules	“Keeping your mouth closed”	“You see, I cannot denounce, I had to keep it to myself. You see, the Police. . . for sure they grab you and they do everything they can to make you snitch, but you have to keep it to yourself” (Interview)
			Being faithful	“In fact you can’t possibly denounce anyone, it’s like that, you say anything, you’re dead. It’s not that you will have problems, but it’s shame for you and for all your family” (Interview)
			Being discreet	“It is sure that the youngest are more exposed as they are the ‘Crazy guys’ . . . you can’t let a dude do bullshit, it will get the cops . . . you see. . . on the other side of the housing project well. . . there. . . at Christmas’e l\ guys they get happy when they burn cars, we never let it happen here, it’s too risky” (Interview)
	Community	Initiation	Proving your worth starting from the bottom	“So if you give them good positions at first . . . well. . . straight away. . . they will be caught. They need to learn before” (Interview)
		Solidarity	Helping families of members	“You see. . . my mother lives here, I could not say anything, but hey. . . they were decent, I got 2 years, my mother did not have to take care of anything during those 2 years” (Interview)
			Helping the environment	“Me, I have nothing against them, they are nice, they are helpful, hey they may sell cigarettes that make you laugh but they must live you know, nobody offered them any other job” (Interviews, a person belonging to the outside environment)
		Brotherhood	Being part of the family	“We all grew up together, we were all in kindergarten together and we spent so much time holding the wall. . . we are like brothers” (Interview)
			Being together outside work	“I had a very nice and strange time tonight in the neighborhood, we are in Ramadan, a gang member came with a very big dish at midnight, and everyone came to the stairwell to share a couscous together, there did not seem to be any hierarchy or power relationship, it was just very close friends who grew up together and had a special time” (Field notes)
	Spirituality	Beliefs	Religious bricolage	“Well, I really know that what I do is wrong, Allah condemns drugs, but I prefer to do this on Earth and pay for it by a few years in hell, that’s my choice” (Interview)
			Religious compensation	“You know that we all have an angel and a devil on our shoulders, they note everything and when you die, Gabriel analyzes the balance and tells you your sentence, so we know that it won’t be great for us, but sometimes we act for good” (Interview)

together to achieve the same objectives. This was particularly visible through two main aspects. First, at the internal level of the organization, members considered themselves to be “brothers.” Then, in the organization, everybody was part of the business in everyday life and people could do the same things at all levels. Even the leader participated in the main production activities. In addition to that, the organization developed common signs of recognition. For instance, they developed a language that only members understood. This certainly aimed at securing the business, but it also seemed very important for the members to distinguish insiders from other people. For example, the word “Krypton” we mentioned previously was unique to the organization. This kind of neologism was also coupled with slang, rap culture and American mimicry. For instance, they used the word “dollar” instead of “euro” when talking about money. In addition to that, there was also a special dress code and this led to members of the organization wearing the same trousers. Being part of the “brotherhood” had to be visible. Second, the organization encompassed all the members’ lives. Indeed, working for the organization was seen as something natural, as all members belonged to the housing project, were born in it and had grown up there. They belonged entirely to the structure, but the structure also belonged entirely to them; each member had the desire to settle in the gang in the long term. Indeed, members, at all levels of the hierarchy, envisioned the organization as a community which was locally rooted in its environment. This also implied a strong relationship with the environment, and led members of the organization to not only help other members’ families when, for instance, they were arrested and not able to give money to their relatives, but also to adopt a kind of local citizenship through helping the other inhabitants of the housing project, even without any “blood ties,” e.g. helping the elders to go shopping or driving them to hospital.

Regulatory level: an ongoing knowledge management system tied to symbolic rules

The organization had its own internal rules, communication and processes, and was highly centralized under the direct supervision of the leader and orders had to be followed immediately. Nevertheless, this did not mean that all processes were enacted through a top-down process. There was a learning curve based on trial and error, and consequently, the number of rules grew after each incident. This was perceived as a necessity to evolve in a very hostile environment and the organization was seen as requiring a certain agility. As a matter of fact, major transformations within the structure all occurred as a way to resolve difficulties related to the external environment. For instance, after the arrests of Z and C, some changes were made in the week following the arrests, to protect the organization and its members, and the group tried to take fewer risks when Z was arrested and adopted a more hierarchical way of operating to speed up communication and clarify instructions. On the other hand, some decisions were taken in a concerted manner between dealers and Z. This was also a test for dealers to demonstrate their engagement and also their abilities to oversee their customer catchment area. For instance, a high number of customers, or customers that the organization wishes to retain, benefited from special prices, decided upon between Z and the dealers. Besides, after Z was arrested, members of the organization became aware that they could be observed. They therefore developed the impression that they were being watched and should take more precautions. New rules consequently emerged, such as using latex gloves to cut the cannabis. In addition to that, safety of information became crucial. The group began to secure phone calls, using special phones or going to the call shop and, before any unknown person could come and buy cannabis in the housing project, he/she had to be introduced by someone already known to the organization. The person who introduced the new Krypton had to guarantee that the new client was

“safe,” and then the Krypton community became a kind of closed shop under the patronage of senior members and the acceptance of suppliers.

Apart from these rational processes, everyone was supposed to prove his worth and pledge allegiance to a specific “code of honor.” Indeed, evolving in the organization was considered as an initiatory journey for youngsters, and they had to have spent hours “holding the wall” before taking part in the business. The organization’s “code of honor” was based on two main rules. First, members had to be discreet and inconspicuous. Indeed, the purpose of the business required people to not make any waves as this could catch the police’s attention. Then, members did not want to take excessive risks, and wanted to rehabilitate the housing project’s reputation. This required being both efficient and quiet as the organization needed things to get done quickly, gently and locally. Second, loyalty to the gang was considered as a major commandment for members. This implied being faithful. For instance, as we mentioned previously, members should “shut their mouth” when arrested and never denounce the others. If this was used as information for HR procedures, the roots of this are to be found in a common vision of how members should behave and respect inviolable rules.

Moral level: reputation and spirituality as two sides of a gangster’s pride

Quality management was considered as something that would create, maintain and foster a good reputation for the organization and, most importantly in the eyes of the customer, its products. Members of the gang, therefore, took care to ensure the quality of their supply. Indeed, as they were only dealers, and not producers of the drug, they could have opted for low quality to maximize profits. Customers could hardly complain as the business was clandestine and illegal, and took place in the organization’s area. However, like any other business, a dissatisfied customer who cannot complain may choose to not come back. Then, the reputation of both the product and the service was important. Members of the organization, therefore, adopted high-quality positioning and chose to buy and resell quality products. As trust was one of their principles, this encompassed all the aspects of their organization and then also influenced the way of doing business. From such a perspective, supplies had to be secured and the gang systematized not only its sources but also the supply chain itself. To do so, they always entrusted the same person with the task of purchasing and collecting the goods. Indeed, as this person himself confessed, his experience in martial arts and his stature would, for instance, probably prevent him from being robbed during transport.

This pride regarding the quality of business, nevertheless, had a downside. Indeed, apart from the mundane symbolism, we presented in the previous section, a more encompassing morality was developed by the organization’s members, as it seemed that religious beliefs or “magical” thought had an important moral role in the organization. Indeed, as many of them were believers of different religions with an overrepresentation of Islam, they threw different principles together to cope with the paradox of being a believer doing “very bad things.” As a matter of fact, it is explicitly forbidden by all religions to sell illegal substances, and the members knew this. This had a strong impact on their religious practice as they began to feel very guilty about being a gang member. For instance, during an informal discussion with T, this religious argument was mentioned, and he expressly indicated that he “was suffering for what he was doing” and that he was clearly “fearing the day of judgment.” Some traffickers justified this ambiguity between what was permitted and what was prohibited, indicating that if they were not sellers, other people would be. Having said that, this moral compromise did not prevent them from developing religious principles, sometimes even based on superstitions. For instance, there were taboos, and it was prohibited to talk about being “caught” as it could “jinx” things. To solve this moral dilemma, they minimized the impacts of their acts, arguing that the care they had for the

inhabitants of the housing project could counterbalance the fact they were selling drugs. In other words, a good action was able to redeem them.

Discussion

Going back to our research question, we wondered if an illicit organization could be an ordinary bureaucracy. Indeed, our findings illustrate that, in this case, the organization showed similarities with the bureaucratic model as follows. This extends our understanding of illicit organizations, as illegality does not always mean coercion and violence at all levels (Duplat *et al.*, 2012).

First, we noticed several points of reference suggesting that the studied organization looked like a bureaucracy. Indeed, if we refer to the main characteristics of the bureaucratic model defined by Adler and Borys (1996), i.e. the centrality of rules and the implementation of procedures, being illegal and clandestine does not prevent an organization from having either a normative or a regulative framework. However, the nature of the studied organization required discretion. Then, the development of a written handbook of procedures was simply impossible in this structure, but even if rules were based on “oral” principles, this did not prevent the organization from setting up explicit and formal processes, as the compliance with procedures seemed crucial for organizational sustainability.

As we illustrated in the Findings section, both the stability and growth of the organization relied on three main pillars. First, the gang had a strong hierarchy but also adopted human resources management processes that allowed the organization to recruit, test, evaluate or even dismiss people. This illustrates how the human capital of the organization is crucial in such a business, and also how regulation processes matter just as much as hierarchical management (Harrison and Smith, 2003). Second, information and knowledge management were also of decisive importance for organizational sustainability and prosperity. This is a typical indicator of the efficiency of a bureaucratic organization (Adler, 2012). Indeed, in our case study, a trial and error approach was developed throughout the multiple events, incidents and crises the organization encountered. These were analyzed *ex post* by the members and helped them to redefine new principles applicable to their daily business. Last, we noticed that quality management was really important in the organization and the selling areas were the realm of managers as consultants (Sturdy *et al.*, 2016; Tengblad, 2006). Indeed, members were project-oriented as their risky illegal business led them to envision it as temporary selling places that might change, depending on the required discretion. Second, frequent turnover among dealers and arrests of some leaders, even for a short while, led all members to embody change. Third, their intermediary position between the business and the customers, especially through their ongoing commercial relationship with “Kryptons,” allowed them to “stay tuned” into the outside world and, at the same time, comply with but also suggest modifications to the organizational setting. Last, the organization encouraged them to take part in the business and give their opinion.

Then, this organization could be seen as an “enabling” bureaucracy (Adler and Borys, 1996), as employees were highly encouraged to be autonomous in their mundane business and master tasks to become good dealers. This illustrates the modernity of the shape of the gang. Not only did the organization adopt principles that resembled bureaucratic ones, but also did so in the spirit of the times. Indeed, the gang, beyond its procedures, was constantly confronted with a paradox between flexibility and compliance. In fact, both were required by the illegal nature of the activities and the fact that members were sometimes arrested, and business had to remain secret to avoid the police. These tensions, despite the illegal nature of the activity, may somehow be analyzed as being similar to any neo-bureaucratic analysis that has been described in the literature recently. Indeed, the gang faced

Kafkaesque issues (Hodson *et al.*, 2013), as chaos was part of the members' universe and expressed by the permanent risk of being arrested. Besides, change, a modern feature of today's bureaucratic model (Rhodes and Price, 2010), was also a mundane necessity to avoid the police. Finally, despite the autonomy left to members in their everyday business, control remained strong, and this typical aspect of post-bureaucracies (Courpasson and Reed, 2004; Courpasson and Clegg, 2006; Rhodes and Price, 2010) was illustrated by the necessity to secure business and find ways to trust new members and customers.

Then, in addition to the stream of research on illegal organizations that demonstrates the similarities between practices in illegal organizations and legal organizations (Very and Wilson, 2012; Monin and Croidieu, 2012), our paper intends to include the illicit organization in the wider scope of organizational analysis, by demonstrating that common representations leading to a model (Pesqueux, 2002) of organizations are possible regardless of their activities, even illicit or clandestine ones. In other words, common representations, i. e. bureaucracy as a dominant model of organizing, disseminated at societal level, will induce organizational modalities, even on the margins of society.

Nevertheless, and despite the limits of the analysis of illegal business as a bureaucracy, because of the specificity of this kind of activity, it also offers interesting insights into the concept of bureaucracy itself. If the modern developments of the literature on this subject explain the persistence of a decoupling between the visible autonomy of people inside a given organization and the remanence of compliance and its assimilation by people, it seemed to us that the social modalities of this decoupling are still elusive in organizational literature. Our research intends to suggest new contributions to this theoretical issue. As a matter of fact, the existence of a "code of honor" enabled the organization to survive over time. Here, the "code of honor" represented specific but genuine ethics for the organization and its members, and, as such, constituted the guidelines for being a great organizational member, even a "brother." Besides, there was a real hierarchy within the organization, and the only way to grow there was to get yourself noticed by your "feats" without ever denouncing anybody in the "brotherhood." Besides, the "brotherhood" had social implications at local level. This meant that the intra-solidarity between members was extended to the housing project and constituted inter-solidarity beyond the organization. The roots of this phenomenon were to be found in the religious and magical principles that preoccupied members as they tried to find an ethical compensation to the fact they were doing something illegal. This moral dilemma had the consequence of fostering tremendous allegiance. Indeed, the "code of honor," the feeling of being both a "brother" and a member of a local community, enhanced members' pride. Our case study, therefore, reveals the importance of considering the social aspects of organizing.

Focusing on the technical aspects of bureaucracy does not fully explain why members should comply with a given organization. Here, and maybe because of the risks that every member took on a daily basis, the organization developed that little something special its members needed to join and remain. Then, the intertwining between the formal organization and a tied "code of honor" reveals that bureaucracy has to be an inhabited model to perform. This relied on three societal pillars in our case study: a common moral ground, i.e. the code of honor; the constitution of a prosaic and united community, i.e. the "brotherhood" and its extension to the housing project; and the emergence of an anchored spirituality, i.e. beliefs that help members cope with the illegal nature of their business. This opens perspectives for further research on the societal aspects of the functioning of bureaucratic as well as other models of organization.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how modern bureaucratic *models* (Pesqueux, 2002), based on management and organization principles, are so well spread over a given society at all levels

that even hidden, clandestine and illegal businesses adopt their features. This opens up two interesting perspectives for further research. First, we can notice that it is not because an organization is illicit that it is not an organization anymore. Indeed, our case study illustrates that all organizations have processes, rules and hierarchies, even if they sometimes take a specific shape. In other words, illegality does not mean immorality but rather a bricolage of morals. This being said, the organizational principles on which this kind of organization lean may open up interesting research perspectives. Second, our case study reveals how deep business moral is widespread all over a given society. What struck us while being in the field was that organizational members, without ever having been introduced to management theories and principles, practiced mundane management that was very efficient and close to traditional organizations. Besides, they even set up an informal knowledge management system, through which failures were analyzed and new organizational settings emerged to solve problems. This illustrates the intense domination of managerial representations in society, as even the most hidden and clandestine sides of the latter are penetrated by management principles, even though we could intuitively think they would do otherwise.

Notes

1. In the housing project live an international football player in the French team, an international football player in the Algerian team and an international hopeful, European Under-19 Champion and fourth in the Under-20 World Championships.
2. Word created by the organization to define a drug addict.
3. The term “hold the wall” means staying all day long in the lobby doing nothing. It is a term that comes from the Arabic “Heitt” or “Hitt” (en. The wall, ar. « حيط ») which has created the word “Heittiste” or “Hitiste” (the one who holds the wall).

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