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Two Stitches Over and One Under Weaving Resistance with Hemp Thread For Good Living and Well-being¹

“Potheads united will never be defeated!” “A conscientious user, not sick and not a criminal!” “4:20 assembly present and accounted for, until the green victory.” These are some of the slogans shouted in unison by a collective of men and women called the More Awareness and Less tv Cannabis Assembly. These voices give me goose bumps because they remind me of slogans used by other groups and movements like the LGBT community, first nations, students, farmers, teachers, and women, many of whose members have been disappeared, while others continued the struggle, and thanks to all of whom we now have a better life.

These slogans are shouted every day at around 4:20 in the afternoon in a space this collective has transformed over the past five months, located on Mexico City’s main and longest street, Insurgentes Avenue, very close to the Federal Commission for Protection against Health Risks

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All photos are courtesy of the author.

(Cofepri). When the time comes, this institution will be in charge of issuing licenses for production, research, and the prescription of marijuana for medical purposes.

The “occupy” or sit-in location brings together a spiritual, political, cultural, social, and economic movement to continue the cannabis community’s struggle. It includes people from a wide range of backgrounds, such as artisans, students, writers, artists, clerical workers, unemployed, and many others who see cannabis consumers from a very different perspective than the stereotyped and stigmatized views that have done so much harm to young people in Mexico and throughout the world.

The circumstances of my meeting with this group put me in a privileged position and gave me access to one of the protagonists in the debate on the legalization of cannabis in Mexico. My aim is to use ethnographic research to explore the complexities involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of this substance. This includes, for example, the sustainability of production; the importance of making women’s participation visible



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as consumers, producers, sellers, or actors in other related activities; the creation of regulations that are neither restrictive nor simulations; market protection to the detriment of consumers’ and small producers’ rights; and using public policies to perpetuate the stigmatization and criminalization of certain sectors related to this culture and these practices.

My encounter with this collective became the starting point for the research I have recently initiated in the Center for Research on North America. I believe that, in the near future, when I do ethnographic research in Canada and the United States to explore entrepreneurs’ social responsibility in the cannabis industry, I will probably find some commonalities among the different groups involved.

So far, I have limited myself to carefully observing some of the assembly’s practices and listening to their stories. It is evident that it is building bridges, shaping events, forming communities, and eliminating barriers that separate them from others, in order to make marijuana visible as an option, not only for recreational, medicinal, and/or spiritual use, but also as a sustainable element for our planet, understanding sustainability as “the conjunction of three vertices of a triangle: economic equity, social justice, and environmental security.”² In this respect, marijuana’s very sustainability was one of the main reasons for its stigmatization and penalization. Given its many possible uses as a raw material for pro-

ducing fuel, fibers, food, medicines, paper, rope, and canvases, among other goods, in the eyes of the free market it was seen as a very competitive plant that could rapidly unseat others and therefore affect companies that traded goods such as paper, nylon, and, of course, medicines. “As a narcotic and sedative, cannabis was rivaled by substances such as chloral hydrate, paraldehyde, and barbiturates,”³ which were already positioned in the market and whose producers were not going to accept a decline in their profits for any reason whatsoever. “Cannabis prohibition has always been about money, power, and the centralization of economic and political control. Hemp fuel and fiber are inexpensive to make and naturally decentralized. Small groups of people created the marijuana myth so they could profit from the expensive, capital-intensive petrochemical alternatives that dominate our political process and economy today. Hemp will decentralize our economic system and return wealth and control to the majority.”⁴

Precisely, returning wealth to the people, in terms of managing their own resources, creating awareness, building their autonomy, fighting for and defending their rights, and fighting against corruption related to cannabis are the main premises of this group, founded in 2014.

This place on the street, now taken over by these actors, can be viewed as a “space where the participants’ actions are projected, a platform where social energy and

information can unfold.”⁵ This site is full of (re)significance for Pablo, one of the collective’s founders, who was born only a few blocks away. He speaks of his longing for the sense of community that existed a few decades ago, exemplifying it by mentioning that the people in the neighborhood knew each other, did things together, and the pace was slower and more harmonious. The location was occupied by the collective in order to lay the foundations of a cannabis civilization with clean, sustainable energy that will support local production and build diverse spaces for communication based on principles of fraternity, with no room for machismo. In this regard, Pablo points out how alcohol has contributed to strengthening the power relations and manifestations of violence that have caused havoc in our society.

As the interview with Pablo ends, Arturo approaches; he is another of the protagonists of the weft and warp of this space. He has knowledge, acquired in the streets since childhood, derived from the abuses of patriarchal power, which has left him with scars that have healed but not disappeared over time. Whenever there is a chance, he shouts out fiery language to all those who stop and listen. He entralls me with his profound analysis of the structural violence exercised by the state and the power mechanisms it uses to make people vulnerable and control them. I am amazed by his ability to construct an optimistic discourse and his eloquent display of the art of public speaking.

Arturo, welcomed by the assembly, expresses himself, states his purpose, seeks, explores, constructs, and deconstructs himself, collaborates, and interacts, connects with others through his own strengths and weaknesses, empowers, and is empowered. He channels all of this energy through the communication he establishes with all who, for whatever reasons, cross paths with him. Arturo says he was stepped on, spit at, ignored, and that he also has done harm. He does not want other people to endure this bondage, so his goal is to transform, to liberate through actions, through revolution, by means of a superior power emanated from God, in order to find balance. Finally, he shares with me that he would like to work with the Cannabis Assembly to build a green space full of plants to improve mental, physical, and spiritual health.

Ricardo is another person who arrives at the meeting, and he listens with attention as I state my objectives in writing this article. He spontaneously and enthusiastically

offers to participate in the interviews. Ricardo expresses himself freely and tells me things he has not told many others; on January 7, 2021, a little after 4:20 p.m., I recorded it all on my cell phone and, with his permission, I share it here.

Ricardo is one of the assembly’s youngest and most recent members. Just a couple of months have passed since he began sharing with the collective his stories, his time, and, of course, a few hits after finishing his shift. He says this helps him relax after work. He was invited to the occupied space by another member of the assembly who saw him smoking a joint, in front of a nearby building across the street, and told him that if he wanted to smoke, he should come over to the assembly because it was a safe place to avoid the risk of being bothered or extorted by the police. Ricardo didn’t hesitate a bit because he had already had various run-ins with the police, which he by no means wanted to repeat.

Ricardo is very happy to be part of this group, because the members all have different ideals; it is a very diverse group and he finds this enriching. He loves to be in a calm space, smoking together with people from different neighborhoods. He enjoys talking to everyone because they all share interesting stories, and the discussions enrich his view of things and give him a chance to connect with other people. He says marijuana is for people with good vibes and he feels that in this group. He feels that there is kinship and sharing. Like thousands of other young people in the world, he has had to face the consequences of the stigma and the corruption associated with marijuana, created by certain sectors and socially reproduced by various institutions and organizations worldwide. He relates his experiences in this regard:

Yeah, they nabbed you, but to take your money and whatever else they could. They even took away my cell phone and hit me two or three times. Since you’re young, 15, 16, or 17, you’re frightened. They instill terror. The police also parade you around; they take you to school, to the principal’s office. They do whatever they want; even though they only found a single joint on you, they’re just looking for a pretext to screw you. I think the last time, just about a month and a half ago, they wanted to plant more marijuana and other stuff on me. Two cops came dressed in black with no name badges or anything. They started hit-

ting me and they wanted to take away my phone. They'd already put me in the squad car, but my friend started to run and they went after him. Since they left the car door open, I was able to escape, but then I fell and another police car came. I got up and started running; it probably looked like I was a thief. I ran, and ran, and hid in a market. It was really bad.

Unfortunately, Ricardo's testimony is more common than one would think; the goal is to fight to keep this from happening over and over again. His youthful gaze reflects what he says to me with his words: "Even if I change jobs I want to keep coming here; I want to be a part of this. I want us to transform this space, with some really neat banners, make it a mini-park, a recreation area, with a statue of a marijuana plant. I want to help any way I can."

Vizuet, another member of the group, also wants to participate in the interviews. However, first we talked about his Mayan ancestors, spirituality, his liking for the practice of Jeet Kune Do, and the wooden sculptures he made some years ago. He spoke of his many trips in different dimensions, and, of course, the Cannabis Assembly, a space that makes him feel at home, that attracts people so they can exchange knowledge, experiences, dreams, and ideas. He says,

Ideas are what's most important, because that's where we begin to weave, from one idea to another, and another, and what it leads to is like a vast spider web made by many people and opinions; and the spider web becomes more and more perfect; a little more tightly woven and a little more visible, so you can define its propose; it's not just coming here to smoke. The idea is to come and talk, with a marijuana cigarette. Cannabis opens a world of different ideas for you. You can learn many things. The Cannabis Assembly is a point from which we can expand these ideas and maybe, someday, have various places like this one. The idea is to weave a cannabis family where we support each other and help people. We even help dogs; Bacha just arrived and we take care of her here. I'm here too. I lost my job and they're helping me. This is what we need, for people to be people, to have real feelings, not just material interests; people who can help each other, a place where consciousness reach-

es its highest level, where there are values, ethics, and where there can be natural, family coexistence.

Vizuet, like the others, sees the assembly as a space for communication, learning, artistic expression, and, of course, for inclusion. Though not many women are present, this is something they are working on. In fact, it was Mariana who, with her solidarity, opened the door for me to this point of view that I wasn't even aware of and that makes me vibrate in harmony and fills me with energy and dreams, by sharing part of her vast experience as a member of the assembly.

Mariana, who has been a consumer for half of her life, and for a few years now has been selling paraphernalia, began participating in the assembly some months ago, though she has been part of this struggle for about 15 years. It's a battle that is both social and legal, she says. "Familywise it's been hard; they changed their minds just a few years ago. Last year my mother finally agreed to take some drops with *Cannabidiol* (CBD) and now she's doing fine; she's noticed a change in her health. Legally it's also a struggle, even though the police aren't as tough on women as they are with men, anyway, they're still shit."

Mariana's participation in the group has come slowly and more as a paraphernalia provider so everyone can have a good smoke, good materials at great prices. She also shares products for the common good, without making a profit. Recently she has participated more actively in the organization, sharing her perspective on issues when she agrees and when she disagrees. In this respect she has had some confrontations with assembly members. Mariana is avid to participate and become more and more involved in the cannabis world, drawing from her other experiences. She has participated in other, women-only events, where she has expressed the importance of talking about more specific issues like cultivating the plant, sharing know-how, or taking a clearer stand as consumers. Mariana concludes with an argument that is highly relevant for understanding cannabis in different spaces:

I'd like the Cannabis Assembly to focus on defending consumers' rights more than those of producers or the industry. I think they should share knowledge. There are many talented people here who know a lot about growing, making extracts, and a lot of other

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things. I also wish there were more women. Since everything is centered here in Mexico City, whether the economy is good or it isn't, the perspective is always more opulent. I come from the State of Mexico, on the outskirts of the city. The issue of cannabis and women isn't a question of whether the dealer gives you more or not because you're a woman, like it is in Mexico City; it's more a problem of segregation, of women who are treated violently because people assume that since they consume drugs, or are with a group of men, they don't have to be respected. I'd really like it if everything the assembly is doing here could be replicated in the State of Mexico and other outlying areas.

Just as is the case elsewhere, the existence of these groups and territories makes us think about the importance of words, of solidarity, unity, and collective work in the struggle for rights, for breaking down stigmas, specifically in the case of cannabis, that have, on one hand, benefitted businessmen from various sectors, as explained above, and, on the other, have affected the lives of entire families for generations, belittling them to the point of taking away their dignity. We all have the obligation to build a truly just world where this nascent legal industry doesn't become rapacious in the way it operates and where collectives' voices will be heard by those

who design and carry out public policies. Including women is fundamental in this quest for social equity. "Women rolling joints are part of the struggle" and "Women pot-heads, united, won't be busted ever" are slogans chanted by groups like the Cannabis Network of Women Rolling Joints, Shaping Struggles, who are also building community along with so many others, both men and women. **NM**

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Notes

- 1 This article was written thanks to the cooperation of people from the More Awareness and Less TV Cannabis Assembly. The "Arturo" cited in the article has chosen to be called that; it is not his real name. The others are the interviewees' real names.
- 2 María Eugenia Chirinos, Lizyllen Fernández, and Guadalupe Sánchez (2012). "Responsabilidad empresarial o empresas socialmente responsables," *Razón y palabra. Primera revista electrónica en América Latina especializada en comunicación*, no. 17, www.razonypalabra.org.mx.
- 3 See Antonio Waldo Zuardi (2006). "History of Cannabis as a Medicine: A Review." *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry* 28 (2): 153-157, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1516-44462006000200015>.
- 4 Paul Stanford, "Hemp, Cannabis and Marijuana: What's the Difference?," in CounterPunch.Org, March 29, 2016, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2016/03/29/hemp-cannabis-and-marijuana-whats-the-difference/>.
- 5 Álvaro Bello, "Espacio y territorio en perspectiva antropológica. El caso de los purhépechas de Nurió y Michoacán en México," *Cultura-Hombre-Sociedad Cuhsó* 21, no. 1, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.7770/cuhsó-V21N1-art119>.