

Gabriel Feltran, new researcher at the CEE : “Studying the governance of transnational illegal markets”

I am Gabriel Feltran, research professor at the CNRS, working at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics at Sciences Po.

Tell us about your academic background

I am an ethnographer and sociologist, and I started my research in Brazil, in São Paulo, studying the politics of criminal violence.

When I started my research, the level of violence in the poor neighbourhoods was increasing significantly and nobody understood why.

There were not really any empirical studies on violent crime in São Paulo at that time and on the transformations of urban conflicts. People were talking about a war.

As a fieldworker, I studied the regulation of this violence, which was not chaotic at all, but was beginning to be regulated by the PCC, the “Primeiro Comando da Capital” (the “First Capital Command”), a local crime organisation at that time, but now the main criminal group in Latin America.

Surprisingly, this organisation was not increasing the rates of violence in the neighbourhoods (of course, they were increasing outside those neighbourhoods), it was decreasing it, especially homicide rates.

So I started to study the daily mechanisms of this regulation. I was doing research about the political side of this organisation: its internal justice, its rules of conduct, its values, etc.

What is your current research about?

When I studied the criminal everydayness through ethnography, I realised that there was a lot of public debate about the criminal group and its leaders, but not about the illegal markets they rule.

And at the same time, the PCC was controlling more and more positions in transnational chains of these illegal markets, including cocaine, firearms, stolen cars and money laundering.

In terms of methods, at that point, I started to really follow these objects through their illegal trades and their illegal tracks. This led me to a transnational dimension of this research.

With French, Mexican and Ghanaian colleagues, and from other countries as well, we prepared an international project called Global Cars, financed by the French ANR and the Brazilian FAPESP, to really study empirically the governance of global illegal markets.

Now, we have ethnographers working in several places, in Latin America, West Africa, Europe and the United States, following stolen cars, their spare parts and the consequences of this accumulation for local politics.

We are really interested in the connection between legal and illegal economies, as well as in its political effects; that's why cars, vehicles in general, are a very powerful object of study.

Why did you choose to work at the CEE ?

My research has these two sides: on the one hand I study criminal governance and the way it is grassrooted in everyday life.

But on the other hand, I study the global criminal economy that underlies this governance and the consequences it produces for people.

The CEE research streams correspond exactly to the ways I want to develop my research. For example, we can look at the transformations of capitalism through the transnational chains of illegal markets, or to the transformations of the State and security policies, or to the consequences in the city brought about by contemporary global economies, or finally the strains to democracy around the world.

In conclusion, I hope to develop an analytical framework for thinking about power based on my fieldwork on criminal global networks.

Interview by Véronique Etienne, Knowledge Exchange Officer at the CEE