

From Tijuana to Zucotti Park A Mexican Caravan Clamors For Justice in the United States

Ruth A. Dávila Figueroa*



Javier Sicilia (center, with raised arm), the leader of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity.

*Not all parents are poets, but all children are poetry.*¹

A couple of months ago, the Caravan of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity passed through several U.S. cities to create awareness about the violence in Mexico caused by the war against drug trafficking. The caravan left its mark; a meeting with Obama was not possible, but there was one with Joe Arpaio, the fiercely anti-immigrant sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona. It was not possible to convince people about controlling weapons sales to stop the violence in Mexico, but it was possible to create awareness about the situation of “illegal” migrants and

about the need for the most vulnerable groups, Afro-Americans and Latinos, to join together.

The caravan brought civic organizations together. Some offered food and a place to sleep, and others took charge of the caravan’s logistics as it went through the country, like Global Exchange (GX). Organizations in favor of legalizing drugs, or fighting for de-militarization, or against mistreatment of migrants, etc., plus multiple voices and positions came together around the caravan. In that same space, individuals participated who, without being direct victims, made known what Mexico is going through because of the so-called war against drug trafficking.

Rodrigo, Debora, and Louise shared their experiences during the caravan’s journey, explaining the criminalization that Afro-Americans and Latinos are subject to, the mistreat-

* Fellow at CISAN under the UNAM’s Postdoctoral Fellows Program, ra_davila@yahoo.com.

ment and humiliation migrants without legal status suffer in the United States, the criminalization of social protest, and the fetishism surrounding guns. What follows is the summary of the voices of three activists committed to their cause.

“STOP AND FRISK”

The population most sympathetic to the caravan were African-Americans. “They felt sympathy for the migrants, the ‘brownies’ because as Afro-Americans they had lived with racism for decades and have fought for their civil rights, and they are familiar with that struggle, which is now also the struggle of non-legalized migrants,” says Rodrigo. Today, the struggle of Afro-Americans and the “brownies,” Latino migrants, is not only for civil rights or the legalization of immigration status, but against criminalization.

Marijuana is still an illicit substance and the laws are still being used to justify the search, detainment, and questioning of populations deemed “untrustworthy” and “suspicious” by modern society, namely the poor and young men of color. A prime example is New York’s Stop and Frisk program, which stopped nearly 700 000 people in 2011. Hailed as a strategy for removing guns and violent crime from the streets, this method of stopping and questioning “suspicious” individuals highlights the racial inequities associated with drug laws. From 2002 to 2011, African American and Hispanic residents made up close to 90 percent of people stopped. This is not limited to New York. In California, African-Americans are 4 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana, 12 times more likely to go to prison with a felony marijuana charge, and 3 times more likely to go to prison with a marijuana possession charge.²

The New York Police Department (NYPD) Stop and Frisk program is the best example to illustrate the growing criminalization of minorities, particularly Latinos and Afro-Americans. Since Michael Bloomberg became mayor of New York, this practice has increased 600 percent. Stop and Frisk actions target whites 9 percent of the time; Latinos, 33 percent of the time; and African Americans, 51 percent of the time. During these stops, officers have used force 9 765 times against whites, 53 107 times against Latinos, and 76 483 times against African Americans.³

There is a tendency to criminalize individuals according to race. Following the logic that he/she “is suspicious” because

of the way he/she walks, dresses, and/or because of racial characteristics, NYPD officers detain and search, using physical force, offensive language, and discriminatory messages. Alvin, a young African-American student, was detained repeatedly. When he asks what the charges are, “At one point, an officer answers the teenager and tells him he’s been stopped because he’s a ‘fucking mutt.’”⁴

The aim of the Stop and Frisk program is crime prevention; the idea is to arrest drug dealers. However, few detentions end in arrest. This leads one to suppose that the “detainees” have not committed any crime. The program has a big impact in the communities because they are discriminated against and criminalized simply for belonging to this or that racial group. One of the impacts is fear, but also the feeling that their rights are systematically violated, like the right to freedom of movement.

GET YOUR BRAND NEW AK47S WHILE THEY’RE HOT!

Debra and Rodrigo’s most memorable—perhaps most surrealistic—experience involved weapons. Caravan participants witnessed the adoration, the fetishism, U.S. Americans have professed for weapons when they visited an armory and gun fair and exhibition. Weapons are a sticky issue because it involves the second amendment to the Constitution: for U.S. Americans, the right to bear arms is not under discussion, much less if it is foreigners who are trying to impose that discussion or it stems from something that, in their opinion, is a result of corruption.

It is generally believed that Mexican organized crime’s weapons come from the North, from the armories north of the river. It is easy to purchase a gun in Texas, even for a foreigner. Weapons are big, profitable business. If you’re a foreigner and you cannot buy one because it is illegal to do so, the owner of the armory “gives it to you.” With no invoice, no sale has taken place: the gun is a gift. Rodrigo tells us,

The population most sympathetic
to the caravan were African-Americans.
“They felt sympathy for the migrants, the ‘brownies’
because as Afro-Americans they had lived
with racism for decades.”

Caravan participants witnessed
the adoration, the fetishism, U.S. Americans
have professed for weapons when they visited
an armory and gun fair and exhibition.
For them the right to bear arms
is not under discussion.

A *compañera* from the caravan purchased a gun and asked the shop owner in her British accent if she needed to show any kind of document to make the purchase. He said it wasn't necessary because he was giving it to her, and it's completely legal to give away guns. Actually, what was happening there was a sale under the table, an illegal sale. . . . Another *compañero* told the armory owner that he was going camping and he needed a gun to defend himself from bears; the man brought out an enormous AK47 and handed it to him.

Gun store owners defend themselves saying that they sell, for example, a rifle for US\$900, but if you purchase it wholesale, it costs US\$500. That is where the corruption comes into play because, the gun store owner told Rodrigo, "Our government sells them to yours, to the army, and they distribute them to the drug traffickers. . . . They make the purchase for the army, but they're so frigging corrupt that they sell them to the drug traffickers." That is what the weapons dealer argued when confronted with the statement that the sale of weapons in the United States hurts Mexicans: for him, everything is the fault of the Mexican government and army, which resell wholesale the guns they purchase legally from the United States. What he was forgetting when he talked about corruption is that he had just sold a weapon illegally to a foreigner. For him, selling weapons under the table, as Rodrigo would say, is not corruption, and if there is no receipt showing there has been a sale, that weapon was a gift, and giving away AK47s is completely legal, besides being a nice keepsake to take back home to the United Kingdom.

At the Weapons Fair, the experience was no better. Rodrigo remembers that, being there amidst whole families, from grandparents to little children, he felt very strange, uncomfortable. He had never been so close to so many and so many different kinds of weapons, and "so many crazy people who love guns." One man, remembers Rodrigo, told him that "his grandson asked him what it felt like to kill a person. The man responded by making a silicon doll so his grandson could shoot

at it." Rodrigo remembers, stunned, that "the man laughed as he told that story, happy, thinking that he was teaching his grandson a lesson."

Pensive, Rodrigo comments, "All those massacres, like at the premier of *Batman*, don't happen because of the movies or the music; they happen because they are surrounded by guns in real life." The United States is the country with the highest number of guns among civilians: almost 90 firearms per 100 inhabitants.⁵

RETURN TO ZUCOTTI PARK

"I took a sabbatical to be able to participate in the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) actions; I participated for six months in Occupy the Congress, Occupy NATO, and others," says Debora. As she gets settled, the talk turns to the caravan's journey through the United States. Debora wears jeans and a red Occupy T-shirt and carries an enormous backpack where she keeps her camera and all the paraphernalia a good activist has to have with her.

She hasn't finished settling in when she interrupts herself to start her story: "They arrested me." I ask why. "I'm a free-lance photographer. Even though I participate in OWS actions, sometimes I separate from the group a little to take pictures. I was in Zucotti Park on the OWS anniversary taking pictures when they arrested me for obstruction of public right-of-way."

In New York City, police routinely abuse their authority to engage in the false arrest of protestors (or persons associated with protest) who are lawfully present on sidewalks. These unconstitutional actions send a threatening message to those engaging in political protest and to the public; free speech activities are viewed as criminal by the NYPD and those who participate in demonstrations, associate with them, or are just in the vicinity, assume a risk of police violence and false arrest.⁶

Debora remembers that in the vehicle that took her to the police station were at least three other journalists arrested on the same charge. In the United States, social protest and political activism are also criminalized, trampling on the most elementary rights and freedoms. This was Debora's case, who despite identifying herself as a journalist, was violently arrested as she demanded her First Amendment rights. "As I was walking toward the contingent to take my photo-

graphs, a ‘white T-shirt,’ a kind of supervisor, grabbed me from behind and pushed me against the wall. My arrest wasn’t all that violent compared to what I’ve seen at the Occupy actions.” Debora says that the plastic handcuffs they used on her hurt a lot. “I asked the officer to loosen them, but he didn’t. On the contrary. And I was in a lot of pain. I was in them for about an hour and my fingers turned purple; they left marks.” After showing us where she felt the greatest pain, Debora became pensive, saying,

The New York police aren’t in control. The limit they have is that they don’t use tear gas in the subway. In Chicago, a few blocks from the anti-NATO demonstrations they were bashing heads, and the first ones I saw were the photographers. I was wearing a helmet, goggles, etc.; you go prepared for anything. A few blocks from the demonstrations there were two squads, one with federal cops and the other with Chicago police with rifles; and they didn’t fire rubber bullets, they fired real bullets. The riot squad also carries guns. What for? [Debora is indignant.] I wasn’t in the caravan representing the OWS. I was an odd case nobody was there representing Occupy. Originally, I wasn’t going to accompany the caravan through the States because I didn’t have a place, but they sent me a last-minute email telling me there was space, so I went, but not exactly representing Occupy.

THE CARAVAN PLANTED A SEED

The Caravan of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD) “sowed a seed, and for that seed to flower, there will have to be follow-up and lots of work,” says Louise, a French activist with experience in the fields of human rights, resource use, the right to the land, and indigenous peoples’ rights, above all in Guatemala and Argentina.

I heard of the MPJD and the caravan through the United States for the first time in December 2011 because I wanted to work with GX [Global Exchange] on its Mexico and human rights program. When I started reading and studying about the caravans, the MPJD, and Javier Sicilia, I thought the situation in Mexico was gripping, terrible, and very important, and I did everything possible to become part of the team in the U.S.

But how did Louise find out about everything that was going on in Mexico, all the violence, the disappearances, etc.?

Before approaching Global Exchange, I didn’t know about the MPJD. I knew about the violence, the impunity, the power of the cartels, the corruption, the journalists murdered, because I worked on those issues with Guatemalan organizations and because in France I worked in the PBI [Peace Brigades International]. Through PBI, I heard of the urgent alerts for human rights defenders threatened in Mexico. I hadn’t imagined the situation was so terrible and that it was rapidly worsening, or that there were so many dead, many of them civilians.

What does the violence in Mexico look like from Europe, I asked her, intrigued. She answered,

In Europe, or at least in France, Mexico is viewed as a nice tourist destination, particularly southern Mexico. People know that it’s a little dangerous because of common criminals, particularly in Mexico City. People don’t know that Mexico City is almost the safest place in the country now, not because things have gotten better, but because it’s much worse outside Mexico City. People don’t know how powerful the cartels are, or that traveling through the South, staying in the hotels, you might be helping launder drug money. Recently, several articles dealing with the violence have been published in important media like *Le Monde*, but they usually just make a list of barbarous actions, like beheadings, people hung from bridges, but without analysing why this is going on. They focus more on the shock-value of the horror, on the spectacle that gets the public’s attention. In France, it’s very difficult to talk about Latin America because there’s no strategic/political interest in the region, except for the case of Florence Cassez. People don’t know there’s a war going on in Mexico. From time to time, the press publishes an article about the arrest of some drug kingpin; this gives the Mexican state the image of making some headway, but there are organizations, activists, students who know what’s really happening.

Louise emphasizes that she learned a lot during the caravan “about the impact of the prohibition of drugs and the

The Caravan of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (MPJD) “sowed a seed, and for that seed to flower, there will have to be follow-up and lots of work,” says French activist Louise.

repressive policy to deal with them. We have a lot to learn from the situation in Mexico so that we don't follow in Felipe Calderón's footsteps. During these times of crisis, unemployment, and the destruction of public services, fear and repression (because of drugs, terrorism, etc.) are a good way to keep the population quiet." For Louise, the caravan's greatest achievement in the United States was that it "sowed a seed; for that seed to flower, a lot of follow-up and work have to be done." Among the concrete achievements, she thinks, are the alliances forged and the fact that many people were directly sensitized to the issues, members of organizations and politicians both. She continues,

In my work with GX, I contacted local groups to create organizing committees to receive the caravan, organize events, etc. First I had to explain the situation in Mexico, what the movement is, who Javier Sicilia is. Most people had no idea. Now they know and they have heard the victims themselves. I think many organizations and individuals realized that they had interests and objectives in common with the Mexican people and the MPJD, particularly African Americans, victims of mass jailings in the United States. But I think forging a Black-Brown alliance is a long term thing; it has a lot of opponents. We also learned a lot from each other on the caravan, and from the people we met along the way, since not all of us had the same political background. This will help the MPJD reorient its political strategy. I think that the achievements will be visible in the long run. But the big achievement is that we were talking in the United States about the situation in Mexico and raising our voices about the U.S. responsibilities (foreign policy, weapons trafficking, money laundering). This is very heavy symbolically, and an expression of dignity.

For Louise, the caravan's success will depend on the follow-up with the organizations in the United States. The

end of the war on drugs has to be a bi-national and international, long-term fight; alliances will also have to be made with academics and universities:

We have to keep this up, sending movement delegates to give lectures, etc. With Peña Nieto's election, prospects are terrible. As a foreigner, I can say that he seems to want to present the image of a democrat. The situation is very difficult for progressive and human rights organizations, but I believe that to protect themselves and to be able to exert certain pressure on the government, alliances with human rights organizations are important.

Debora and Rodrigo agree that it does not matter if Javier Sicilia has announced his withdrawal. His is only the most visible face. They think the movement will continue, adding, "There will not be any big differences with Peña Nieto in the presidency." Time will tell. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ Sign on a placard at the first march against violence in May 2011.
- ² Amanda Reiman, "75 Years of Racial Control: Happy Birthday Marijuana Prohibition," *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/aman-da-reiman/marijuana-prohibition-anniversary_b_1923370.html.
- ³ "The Impact of Stop and Frisk," <http://stopandfrisk.org/stop-and-frisk-info-graphics/>.
- ⁴ "NYPD Cops Calls 16-Year-Old Harlem Student Named Alvin A 'F**king Mutt' During Stop-And-Frisk," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/09/nypd-stop-and-frisk-search-harlem-student-fucking-mutt-alvin-harlem_n_1952169.html?utm_hp_ref=stop-and-frisk.
- ⁵ "Ranking de países por posesión de armas de fuego y su relación con la violencia," <http://politikon.es/2012/07/24/ranking-de-paises-por-posesion-de-armas-de-fuego-y-su-relacion-con-la-violencia/>.
- ⁶ "New Federal Lawsuit Filed against NYPD for Occupy Arrests," http://www.justiceonline.org/commentary/new-federal-lawsuit-filed.html?goback=gde_4122540_member_170304113.

