

Silence on Fire

A Mexican Protest in the United States

Hilda García*

The whole world is . . . on fire./ The stones/
burn, even the stones they burn me./
How can a man be still/ or listen to all things burning?/
How can he dare to sit with them/ when all their silence is on fire?
Thomas Merton



Mexican activist Javier Sicilia confronts Joe Arpaio about his position on undocumented immigrants.

Thomas Merton's words marked the end of 10 000 kilometers traveled by Javier Sicilia and his followers on his "Caravan for Peace" in the United States. Along the route, which began in San Diego and ended in Washington, D.C., stopping in 25 cities, activists and those mourning the loss of loved ones and friends gave speeches and staged symbolic acts to make the United States and its civil society aware of their link to Mexico in the so-called war

on drug trafficking. On the one hand, our neighbor to the north is the world's largest consumer of drugs and, at the same time, the leading provider of weapons to criminal groups in Mexico. An estimated 90 percent of arms in Mexico come from U.S. gun shops.

Since 2006, some 70 000 have been killed as a result of this fight against drug trafficking, a war closely tied to turf disputes between rival gangs; but however much this conflict only "between them," it also sucks in citizens without any connection to crime, caught in the crossfire during their daily

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The Caravan for Peace during a rally in New York.

lives by a stray bullet or *levantados* (literally, “picked up,” a euphemism for kidnapped) in a case of mistaken identity or simply because *they were in the wrong place at the wrong time*.

Felipe Calderón, Mexico’s president who declared this war on organized crime, is nearing the end of his six-year term. We must now take stock of the situation. No one is arguing against the importance of offering greater security for citizens, especially not since it is a guarantee that the government must provide, but both the strategy as well as many of the decisions made to put an end to drug trafficking are more than questionable—decisions not only by the Mexican government, but even involving U.S. federal agencies, as evidenced by operations such as “Fast and Furious” or “Wide Receiver,” which allowed arms to be taken to Mexico in order to follow the trail of the drug traffickers who bought them. The result? Over 70 percent of these arms were lost track of, and ended up in the hands of criminals in Mexico; arms are called “weapons of extermination” by the Caravan for Peace activists in the United States.

Apart from the fact that this kind of operation could have equipped an entire army, according to declarations made by federal agents during inquiries carried out in the United States,

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part of the “collateral damage” is that we as citizens feel increasingly vulnerable and insecure. We are terrified of going out, of letting our children play on the street as we used to, out of fear of an “express” kidnapping, extortion, or violent assault. In other words, the general public we call civil society is paralyzed by fear, and yet no one appears that concerned.

Amid the placards bearing the photographs and names of dead or missing family members, Javier Sicilia uses verses by poets and speaks of the “silence on fire, of the silence of those killed in a war that is on fire”; and he asks that “we act to stop it, and name the victims out of the love, peace, justice and freedom that we owe them.” These words are born of his own pain, but also that of an entire society that is suffering, angry, and afraid.

Javier Sicilia is just one of the countless Mexicans who have lost a child, a nephew, a father due to the war on drugs and between drug traffickers in Mexico. The poet represents the pain felt by those who have not been given a response to the thousands of murders over these past six years. Here is a writer, a Catholic, a political activist who has had enough; he opens his speeches with verses by Thomas Merton or Bob Dylan. With his grey beard and glasses, this 56-year-old man has the look of an academic who, dressed in his trademark fisherman’s waistcoat and explorer’s hat, shares the pain of being the father of a murdered young man, just 22 years old, killed along with six others one early morning in March 2011, allegedly by members of the Beltrán Leyva cartel. Their bodies were abandoned in a car in the state of Morelos.

At the same time as Sicilia began mourning, he decided to go into battle: he would fight to be heard and to give a voice to those affected by the violence, driven by a feeling of impotence of seeing that justice was not being served anywhere, and that the judicial authorities or politicians lacked compassion and understanding. Therefore he decided to begin the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity. Various activists joined this cause, as well as many other fathers and mothers who shared his concerns and desire for justice.

Sicilia led the March for Peace that started in Cuernavaca, Morelos, on May 5, 2011, and went to Mexico City, where he was granted an audience with Felipe Calderón one month later, when the president met with victims of the violence. At that time people spoke of 40 000 victims, but now some estimate the figure to be closer to 70 000. Sicilia challenged Calderón: “You must admit the Mexican state’s debt to the victims and their families.” His advocacy led to nothing, even after the president heard heart-rending stories of mothers, fathers, brothers who suffered directly from the real impact of the violence.

Just over a year later, Sicilia and his movement decided to travel 10 000 kilometers through different parts of the United States. They crossed over the border to the world’s leading consumer of drugs to demand what our authorities keep quiet. Meanwhile, the Mexican government maintains that the war on drugs has delivered good results. During his last annual report to the nation, President Calderón even highlighted the increase in numbers of federal police agents, as well as pay hikes for soldiers and sailors.

During this outgoing administration, the number of Mexican federal police has risen from 6 489 in 2006 to 36 940 today. But even with such a large investment, they have not been able to arrest the man most wanted by the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Joaquín Guzmán Loera, alias “El Chapo.” Even the much-publicized capture of his son, “El Chapito,” proved to be a mistake: they got the wrong person. And yet the president said in his sixth report, “Mistakes have been made and in some cases some individuals have committed abuses, but these are the exceptions to the rule, and far from trying to hide them, I have always taken action against those responsible. But these cases cannot be used to judge the institutions and the thousands of women and men who risk their lives every day to defend Mexican citizens.”

Members of the Calderón administration travel frequently to Washington to make press statements asserting how the

U.S. and Mexico support each other, without mentioning anything about failed operations or the so-called *non-strategy* of the war on drugs. Enrique Peña Nieto will take over as president in December, and he has declared his firm intention of opening up a new dialogue with the United States to define a new strategy. According to his statements made during a recent tour of Latin America, his model will be Colombia. Speeches aside, no statements are about civil society: the victims, those who leave their houses afraid of falling prey to extortion, kidnapping, being “disappeared,” or not returning home. And this fear is by no means ungrounded. The latest report by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) reveals that 50 Mexican citizens are killed due to the violence every 24 hours. According to the organization, the number of drug-trafficking-related murders has “increased dramatically” and added that around 1 250 people receive medical treatment every day and 100 more suffer some kind of disability due to the spiraling violence. These are the numbers seldom mentioned.

“When governments lose the clarity of focus that enables a dialogue between two countries to stay on course, as has happened in Mexico-U.S. relations, the civil societies of both nations must develop a citizen’s diplomacy that can build bridges of understanding, alternative mechanisms of solidarity and a bi-national agenda to find a way out of the blind alley that has been created with the military-police approach to the war on drugs, imposed by the governments of our two countries,”¹ said Javier Sicilia on starting the caravan off in Los Angeles.

And how right he is. Since last year, Mexico and the U.S. have been absorbed by their presidential races, and bilateral issues, in particular the drug war, have been excluded from their agendas. For example, Mexico has turned HSBC’s money laundering activities or the U.S. operations in Mexico (carried out without Mexico’s knowledge) into mere anecdotes. Felipe Calderón himself stated that he first heard about “Fast and Furious” from the press, and that he would not lodge any complaints because it was part of the United States’ domestic policy. Official figures on the numbers of those killed or disappeared during the government’s six-year period as a result of the war on drugs are no longer even published.

According to Sicilia, the Caravan for Peace made it possible to organize a new “citizen diplomacy” working agenda with the objective of assuming shared responsibilities. At the end of his long tour, the leader of the movement indicated in a review, “For the first time, citizens and U.S. and Mexican organizations are getting to the heart of a bi-national agenda.”²

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Javier Sicilia

Few people joined the caravan. It got little press coverage. The civil society agenda is hardly ever addressed in the media. We know that many argue that the war on drugs has been positive because it was already impossible to live in certain places where the violence had taken control of the area, the institutions, and society. But it is equally true to say that with another type of strategy, we would have found ways to reduce the violence. Other countries fight drug traffickers and the levels of violence are not the same.

It seems like, since we are in freefall, nothing really matters. The Caravan for Peace in the United States has reported the facts of those who have suffered from the violence brought about by this war, of those who have been paying the price; it has sought to make both Mexican and U.S. citizens realize that both countries and societies have shared responsibilities. It has awakened civil society to the need to understand the phenomenon of consuming drugs and selling arms as markets that affect Mexicans in their daily lives, and not only in the places and regions where the illegal transactions take place. Undoubtedly the work by Sicilia and his followers has been insufficient, and the movement has not achieved its final

objective. It has had virtually no impact on U.S. public opinion. Raising awareness is going to be a long process, and it is only just beginning.

Hopefully, the Caravan for Peace will serve to make people aware of the importance of changing tack, to keep struggling against drug trafficking, money laundering, and the violence that the industry generates, but now by other means. Although one can recognize the government's good intentions in its struggle against organized crime, civil society must make itself heard and demand that bilateral diplomacy be readjusted and focus on making it a priority for people to be able to live their daily lives in peace. We do not want a Mexico engulfed in a silence of fire any longer. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Speech given on August 14, 2012 at Los Angeles City Hall, <http://mivimientoporlapaz.mx/es/2012/08/14/javier-sicilia-en-el-city-hall-la/>. [Editor's Note.]

² "Llama Sicilia a EU a detener la venta de armas de exterminio," *La jornada* (Mexico City), September 10, 2012. [Editor's Note.]

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