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Lyon Rathbun

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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Lyon Rathbun

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
Department of Writing and Language Studies
e-mail: lyon.rathbun@utrgv.edu

Javier Sicilia: Advocate of deliberative democracy in the Americas

Abstract

When Javier Sicilia's son was killed by cartel assassins in 2011, he transformed into a civic activist, with a mass following sufficiently large for Time Magazine to recognize him in 2011 as one of its "Protestors of the Year." His very success mobilizing public opinion against cartel violence overshadows his more fundamental role as an advocate for deliberative democracy in the Americas. Sicilia's historical importance lies in his recognition that only civic dialogue within the transnational public sphere that includes Mexico and the United States can heal the social pathologies unleashed by globalization and by the war on drugs. His ultimate achievement has been to dramatize what would be required of citizens to realize the democratic ideals that both countries profess as the foundations of their national identities.

Keywords: Javier Sicilia, Mexican public sphere, transnational public sphere, civic activism, deliberative democracy, United States-Mexico relations

JEL Classification: F22, F52

1. Introduction

While Javier Sicilia is not well known in the United States, he is recognized throughout Mexico as a leading public intellectual and civic activist. Founder of the Movement for Peace and Justice with Dignity, Javier Sicilia emerged in 2011 as a leading voice denouncing cartel-related violence in Mexico, while condemning public polices in the United States that enable Mexico's ongoing carnage. When *Time Magazine* named "The Protestor" as its Man of the Year in 2011, Javier Sicilia was profiled as one of that year's exemplary dissenters (Anderson, 2011).

Of course, in 2011, political protest was not confined to Mexico. And within Mexico, Javier Sicilia is only one of many public intellectuals who are active within Mexico's vibrant public sphere (Avritzer, 2011; Camp, 2014). Nevertheless, Sicilia stands out as a particularly compelling advocate for Mexico's *victimtas* of cartel-related violence. The many newspaper articles written about Sicilia since 2011 emphasize that as a bereaved father, whose own son was murdered by cartel thugs, he is a fitting representative of the many thousands who have also lost loved ones to Mexico's ongoing violence (Anderson, 2011). Likewise, scholars who have studied Sicilia as a political activist focus on his leadership of a mass movement protesting Mexico's cartel violence (Gallagher, 2012; Mendoza, 2011). But Sicilia's very success mobilizing public opinion against cartel violence overshadows his more fundamental role as an advocate for deliberative democracy in the Americas.

Democratic deliberation, along with democratic accountability, are still being established in Mexico. Acquired through conquest, like the rest of Latin America, Mexico was founded as an extractive empire, where a tiny Spanish elite lived off the labor of enslaved indigenous people. The patrimonial pattern of governance established during Mexico's colonial era was perpetuated in the "neopatrimonialism" that continues to characterize Mexico's state institutions (Fukuyama, 2014, p. 528). While Mexico became politically stable after the entrenchment of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (the Institutional Revolutionary Party, hereinafter: PRI) in 1929, public office, whether local or national, was still viewed as a means of acquiring private gain. Democratic accountability has only materialized in Mexico with the recent emergence of a robust public sphere. As Leonardo Avritzer shows in *The Public Sphere and Democracy in Latin America*, only since the 1980's have new social actors, viewing themselves as independent subjects, rather than clients of a patrimonial state, challenged office holders, offered informed critiques of the status quo, defended universal human rights, and championed new grassroots organizations. The 2000 presidential election, when Vicente Fox defeated the PRI for the first time, is widely considered to have inaugurated authentic democratic governance in Mexico (Avritzer, 2011, p. 107). But deeply entrenched resistance to democratic accountability continues: Over two hundred journalists have been killed in Mexico since Vicente Fox's election in 2000 (Beiser, 2017).

Before his emergence as an activist in 2011, Sicilia had been participating in Mexico's public sphere for three decades as a poet, novelist, essayist, translator, and magazine editor. Seasoned by his long-standing engagement with Mexico's civic challenges, Sicilia emerged as a public figure in 2011, determined to hold Mexico's leaders accountable for enabling the country's escalating violence. But he was also determined to use Mexico's metastasizing crisis as an occasion for calling upon citizens in both Mexico and the United States to engage in civic dialogue as a remedy for the interconnected pathologies damaging both countries.

Another Mexican public intellectual, Tomás Calvillo Unna, captures the underlying distinctiveness of Sicilia's activism in declaring that Sicilia is "a person of historical import" because he defines himself "by the fundamental expression of relationship with others to embody the possibility of living in a more just world" (Calvio, 2015). As an activist, Sicilia expresses the imperative to be in relationship with fellow-citizens, to forge new bonds of civic solidarity, by creating occasions for civic dialogue that bridge ethnic, class, regional, and national differences. To journalists covering his initial rally in the plaza in Cuernavaca, Sicilia explained, "We have to create a national pact between everyone. We have to leave ideological struggles, and political parties, and think of re-founding the nation" (Grillo, 2011). For Sicilia, "re-founding the nation," means rebuilding community, rebuilding the social fabric, through dialogue.

Among rhetorical scholars and some public intellectuals, dialogue is a revered method of intellectual inquiry (Farrell, 1993; Sloane, 1997). However, critics of deliberative democracy abound (Welsh, 2013). And many contemporary activists, impatient to achieve redress of pressing wrongs, do not embrace dialogue as a means of achieving reformist ends. The public sphere in Mexico, the United States, and elsewhere is clogged with anti-democratic impulses. Observing the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and student responses to institutional racism on American campuses, commentators have noted a shrill intolerance of opposing views (Sullivan, 2016). Having studied popular protests around the world for several decades, Robin Wright notes that contemporary civic activists tend to focus on immediate grievances, without thinking through long-term implications. In a recent interview, Wright explains that, "In the kind of headiness of saying, hey, I deserve my rights, and getting out in the streets to demand it, people are not thinking about, well, what's the alternative? How do we come together to create a viable alternative that does represent the vast majority of the people?" (Wright, 2016). Sicilia stands in conspicuous contrast to the style of activism that Wright describes. He is distinctive as an activist precisely because he views the immediate crisis roiling Mexico as symptomatic of underlying social conflicts that can only be resolved through democratic deliberation enacted within the public sphere.

Inside Mexico, Javier Sicilia has been attacked from the right and from the left for disavowing the electoral process and seeking to mend Mexico's frayed social fabric through civic dialogue. And in his caravans across the United State, attempting to foster cross-border dialogue over the interrelated issues of cartel violence, drug addiction, and arms trafficking, Sicilia has been largely

marginalized. Admittedly, there is a quixotic quality to Sicilia's calls for civic dialogue in a trans-border region stunted by xenophobia, corruption, exploitation, and violence. Yet as an activist, Sicilia has never wavered in his determination to champion deliberative democracy as the only viable means for addressing the interconnected pathologies that threaten both Mexico and the United States. His ultimate achievement has been to dramatize what would be required of citizens to practice democratic deliberation in an authentic manner, to realize the democratic ideals that both countries profess as the foundations of their national identities.

2. Deliberative Democracy: Communicative action in the public sphere

The democratic underpinnings of Javier Sicilia's activism become recognizable when placed in the context of recent democratic theory. In *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, and Contestations*, John Dryzek points out that contemporary democratic theory has taken a strong "deliberative turn" largely in response to the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas (2000, p. 2). According to Habermas, democratic legitimacy is won through the capacity of citizens to deliberate over collective decisions. Deliberation does not only take place in formal settings such as parliamentary bodies, but in any setting, formal or informal, where people deliberate over the whole gamut of social norms, from the question of who is entitled to the rights of citizenship, to the question of who should be entitled to serve in combat. Through a diffused process of will and opinion formation, new social norms become embodied in statutory law and administrative policy.

Critical for understanding Javier Sicilia's conception of deliberative democracy is Habermas' distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality. Instrumental rationality involves deliberation over the means of achieving predetermined ends. According to Habermas, instrumental rationality drives the major institutions of modern societies, eroding the realm of human agency, the "life-world," which promotes the nihilism that characterizes so much of modern life (Habermas, 1987). Communicative rationality, in contrast, is the basis for achieving intersubjective consensus over what ends are worth pursuing; it is enacted an end-in-itself, rather than for ulterior motives. Communicative rationality structures communicative action and argumentation, which provide the implicit, or explicit, reasons that validate all socially sanctioned human endeavors. The restorative, centripetal impetus of communicative action counterbalances the centrifugal tendencies of institutions guided by instrumental rationality. Communicative action provides a basis for addressing social pathologies, for re-establishing social cohesion, because it entails a dialogical loop that moves from deliberation to consensus, to action.

Communicative action is legitimate to the extent that it is rational, to the extent that claims are validated through the "force of the better argument," rather than the force of coercion, or manipulation. For reason to prevail, the "idealized

pragmatic presuppositions of discourse” must be respected. These include the obligation that interlocutors communicate intelligibly to each other; that they speak sincerely and be willing to provide legitimating reasons; that no competent actor be excluded from the discourse, prevented from questioning any assertion, or denied the opportunity to introduce new claims into the dialogue (Habermas, 1990, p. 86). Adherence to these presuppositions, which constitute the “ideal speech situation,” cannot be fully realized in the hurly-burly of social intercourse. Nevertheless, these idealized norms are inherent in any act of communication as they constitute the conditions that make authentic dialogue possible. The very absence of the enabling pre-conditions for discourse, “provides a critical measure of the insufficiencies of currently existing forms of interaction and social institutions” (Giddens, 1985, p. 131). Using the ideal speech situation as a measure of social deficiencies is critical for understanding Javier Sicilia’s activism: Every effort Sicilia has made to use civic dialogue to transform Mexican society is an implicit condemnation of the prevailing realities in Mexico that mitigated against the enactment of authentic democratic deliberation.

Habermas’s distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality is critical for understanding Javier Sicilia’s conception of democratic deliberation. Equally significant is Habermas’s concept of the public sphere. For Habermas, the only non-coercive way to re-formulate norms that have lost legitimacy is through civic dialogue that takes place across the public sphere, the essential zone of deliberation in democratically constituted societies. The public sphere is the intersubjective space where “actors can address issues that cross from private to general concern” (1996, p. 360). The public sphere is a spontaneously arising byproduct of social existence. “Every encounter,” Habermas writes, “in which actors do not just observe each other but take a second-person attitude, reciprocally attributing communicative freedom to each other, unfolds in a linguistically constituted public space.” Founded through the willingness of interlocutors to engage in sincere conversation, the public sphere is open for others to join in dialogue; it can be created spontaneously and episodically, or it can be formally constituted through assemblies, performances, or presentations (p. 381).

The public sphere stands in symbiotic relation to the formal structures of a modern, democratic government. In *Between Facts and Norms*, his fullest explication of the role of the public sphere, Habermas explains that the public sphere serves as “a warning system” that identifies problems and “furnishes them with possible solutions and dramatizes them in such a way that they are taken up and dealt with by the parliamentary complexes.” When social tensions become acute, actors in the public sphere become mobilized, challenging the status quo. “At the critical moments of accelerated history,” Habermas explains, “actors get the chance to reverse the normal circuits of communication in the political system and the public sphere. In this way, they can shift the entire system’s model of problem solving” (1996, p. 359). Renewed through communicative action and rejuvenated through civic dialogue, the public sphere is the discursive center of a democratic polity. “The health of a democracy,” Habermas concludes, “can be gauged from the pulse of its political public arena” (2008, p. 21).

As an activist, Sicilia's fundamental aim has been to provoke occasions where citizens can engage in rational forms of civic discourse, free from the distorting influences of established institutions of governance. He has sought to provoke serious civil discourse within Mexico's public sphere and within the international public sphere that spans the border between Mexico and the United States. Because his activism has highlighted the many conditions discouraging authentic civic dialogue, he has dramatized how inadequately we are enacting our democratic ideals.

3. Javier Sicilia: Sojourner in Mexico's public sphere

The murder of Sicilia's son did not fall on unfertile ground. Long before gaining prominence as an anti-violence activist in 2011, Sicilia had been participating, along-side other citizens, in Mexico's modern public sphere. His early participation in Mexico's civic life established the deep commitment to deliberative democracy that guided Sicilia's later activism. As Leonardo Avritzer shows in *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America*, Mexico became democratic in the 1980's through the emergence of a new public sphere, a new civic space for addressing Mexico's deeply rooted social problems. Beginning in the seventies, new urban organizations, many administered by civic minded Catholic priests, began addressing the needs of the poor outside the established networks of political clientelism. A new grassroots movement, spearheaded by Alianza Civica, began to monitor elections, paving the way for Vincente Fox's victory in 2000. According to Avritzer, a new type of self-awareness circulated among participants in these innovative civic associations. Social actors "saw themselves as independent subjects, as proponents of grassroots forms of discussion and participation, and as claimants of human and social rights" (2002, p. 81). Significantly, original intellectual and artistic voices also emerged, articulating new self-understandings in an array of new publications and journals. Javier Sicilia entered adulthood moving with the cultural and civic currents comprising Mexico's emergent public sphere.

Attracted to the priesthood, and liberation theology, Sicilia spent a year after graduating from high school working in a Jesuit mission that ministered to the poor in Mexico City. Feeling stifled by ideological orthodoxy, Sicilia enrolled in the National Autonomous University of Mexico, earned a degree in French literature, and began his vocation as a poet, essayist, and magazine editor (Felker, 2012). In his early thirties, Sicilia helped found a rural commune that was modeled after the Ark spiritual communities in France. After "all their attempts to cultivate fruits and tomatoes failed," the commune unraveled, and Sicilia settled in Cuernavaca. Here, he founded the magazine *Itxilis*, and embraced the emancipatory ideals of Sergio Méndez Arceo, Bishop of the Cuernavaca diocese, who was promoting the spread of Basic ecclesial communities (Small Christian Communities) across Mexico (Burdick & Warren, 2000, p. 40). Through ministering to local needs and fostering egalitarian dialogue, these communities sought to transform society into an egalitarian "civilization of love" modeled on Christian ideals (Camp, 1997, p. 91).

One of the first grassroots centers that Bishop Arceo sponsored in Cuernavaca was the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) led by the Austrian author and priest, Ivan Illich (Paquot, 2003). When a mutual friend introduced Sicilia to Ivan Illich, “the two began an immediate and profound friendship and saw each other until Illich’s dying day” (Molina, 2011). After Illich’s death in 2002, Sicilia translated Illich’s major texts into Spanish. With Valentina Borremans, who had administered CIDOC with Illich, Sicilia edited a two-volume compilation titled *Obras Reunidas*, or *Reunited Works*, published in 2008. The following year, Sicilia founded a new magazine, *Conspiratio*, inspired by Illich’s writings, and dedicated to “generat[ing] a space of reflection to bear the fruit of a more human society” (Molina, 2011).

From the example of the small Christian Communities that Arceo was spreading across Mexico, and through his friendship with Illich, Sicilia deepened his faith in the restorative powers of dialogue. The seminal ideal animating Sicilia’s activism, the creation of community through sincere dialogue, is threaded throughout the Illich texts that Sicilia translated into Spanish. All the major works by Illich, *Tools for Conviviality*, *Medical Nemesis*, and *Deschooling Society* echo Habermas’s insight that institutions guided by instrumental rationality are dehumanizing. Each of Illich’s texts expose the dehumanizing tendencies of bureaucratic institutions and probe for interstices where agape love might take root and flower. For Illich, such interstices exist in pockets of human-scale communities, like his own cultural center, where companions can pursue dialogue inspired by love of knowledge, love of humanity, and love of God.

For Illich, as for Sicilia, dialogue is the fundamental tool for restoring human dignity and for re-knitting individuals into community. In a series of conversations recorded shortly before his death, Illich explained that he had always sought to cultivate communities of like-minded friends in emulation of Plato’s academy, early Christian churches, European monasteries, and the Catholic worker communities that Doris Day had founded in the United States. “For me,” Illich confessed, “friendship has been a source condition and context for possible coming about of commitment and like mindedness.” The aim of all his writing and teaching had been to “foster the growth of an open group of people who are moved by identity to each other as persons and dare to maintain fidelity even if the other one becomes a heavy burden.” At the table where he shared soup, wine, and conversation, Illich always placed a candle. “Our conversation” Illich explained, “should always go on with the certainty that there is somebody else who knocked at the door and the candle stands for him or her. It is a constant reminder that the community is never closed” (Cayley & Taylor, 2005, p. 151). Finding a place at Illich’s table in Cuernavaca, Javier Sicilia had entered conversations that made him part of Illich’s own particularly vibrant community. The experience would remain a model for how citizens in Mexico and the United States might rebuild their social fabric, one conversation, one group, one community at a time.

4. Participatory Democracy: Antidote to the pathologies of violence

Javier Sicilia instigated the Movement for Peace and Justice with Dignity (MPJD) in direct response to the cartel violence that escalated precipitously after Felipe Calderón was elected president of Mexico in 2006. The new surge in violence had deep roots in Mexico's historical legacy of inequality and civic corruption. In *Political Order and Political Decay*, Fukuyama points out that Mexico's drug cartels exemplify how criminal organizations thrive in the vacuum left by a weak state. He explains: "The drug cartels operating in twenty-first-century Mexico as well take advantage of a state that historically has been (and remains) weak in police enforcement of citizens' basic rights" (2014, pp. 537–538). Mexico's drug cartels benefit from Mexico's weak state and from endemic poverty. Of Mexico's 112 million inhabitants, 52 million live in poverty, an increase of 3.2 million from 2008 to 2010 ("Poverty in Mexico"). In 2012, 5 million people were unemployed, while 13 million people with work lacked a fixed salary, or any kind of social security (OECD, 2012). The passage of NAFTA in 1994 accelerated industrialization and created thousands of jobs in new maquiladoras, but also undermined subsistence farming and contributed to growing inequality (Castaneda, 2014; Manning & Butera, 2000). The import of heavily subsidized US corn has uprooted thousands of small farmers in states like Michoacán and Guerrero where cartels now dominate civic life and offer the glamor of guns and the glitter of wealth to masses of young unemployed men. The impoverishment of the countryside has pulled thousands of young women to border cities like Juarez and Matamoros, where many find work in maquiladoras and where some are gruesomely murdered, macabre femicides being only one of the horrific forms of violence that has metastasized in Mexico (Uchitelle, 2007). With a critical mass of public employees in the pockets of drug traffickers, ordinary citizens are increasingly vulnerable to extortion, kidnapping, or murder at the hands of either police or criminals. After 2008, much of this violence resulted from Calderón's military campaign against the drug cartels, largely funded by the United States' Mérida Initiative (Mejía & Restrepo, 2008). By 2012, over 70,000 Mexican citizens had been killed and 29,000 were missing (Nugent, 2018). The MPJD was born in 2011, when Sicilia's son, along with seven friends, was senselessly murdered by cartel thugs in Cuernavaca.

Sicilia reacted to his son's death with a flurry of civic activism that initiated the Movement for Peace and Justice with Dignity. His first act was to write an open letter calling on the public to protest the rising violence. Published in the immediate aftermath of his son's murder, *Open Letter to Mexico's Politicians and Criminals* introduced what became the vernacular rallying cry of the movement, "Hasta la Madre," (we've had it up to here) which would soon be broadcast on banners held aloft by marchers, and proclaimed at civic rallies across Mexico. Opening with praeteritio, drawing attention to his son's death by claiming not to, Sicilia exclaims that he does not wish to speak "about the pain of my family and the families of each

one of the boys who were destroyed...” His real intention, he explains, is to proclaim that, “[...] we have had it up to here—‘Hasta La Madre’”—with politicians who have “shamed the fabric of the nation by colluding with the criminal class, and leaving the judicial system in a corrupted state that leaves each citizen vulnerable to being violated, kidnapped, molested and assassinated with impunity”. With rising intensity, Sicilia embellishes the refrain, exclaiming, “We have had it ‘Hasta la Madre,’ because the only thing that matters to you [...] is money, the fomentation of rivalry, damned competition, and unmeasured consumption, which are other names of the violence” (Sicilia, 2011). Expressing widely felt frustrations, *Open Letter* announced a new common ground upon which regionally isolated citizens and activists from across Mexico could rally.

Before Sicilia entered the public arena, Calderón’s administration claimed wide public support for its war against drug traffickers, while declaring that civilians who had died were complicit in cartel activities (Quintero & Castillo, 2011). In the counter-narrative that Sicilia began proclaiming, the dead, the disappeared, and those who grieved for them, were re-cast as victims of injustices that demanded redress and reparation. “Victims” included those who had been killed, along with those who had lost loved ones to the violence. As father of a recently murdered son, Sicilia was himself a *victima*, an enormously sympathetic figure, with whom thousands of Mexicans could identify. He, and all who sympathized with him, were fellow victims, obligated to redeem children, friends, and fellow-citizens who had lost their lives. To commemorate the dead, to absolve the stigma of victimhood, Mexicans from all classes, parties, and regions would need to unite against a common threat; they would need to fashion new civic identities and enact a new form of civic agency.

Thousands embraced Sicilia’s counter-narrative and responded to his call for public protest. Immediately after the publication of his *Open Letter*, one newspaper reported, “Mexicans marched in 38 cities bearing placards with the slogan “Ya Basta”—enough. Sporadic marches and vigils in plazas continued over the weekend” (Grillo, 2011). Broadcast via email, activist web pages, and Sicilia’s own twitter feed, Sicilia’s message reached members of Mexico’s human rights organizations, actors from regional and local organizations, and citizens who had not previously participated in civic organizations. United by a new common identity as *victimias*, previously isolated civic actors scattered across Mexico’s public sphere rallied under the banner of what soon became known as The Movement for Peace and Justice with Dignity (Gallagher, 2012).

According to one observer, the MPJD was a grassroots organization, existing outside the established political structure, that established “horizontal political relations in self-controlled spaces, autonomous and sovereign in which nobody imposes and orders the collective” (Urrutia & Zibechi, 2012). It was a broad coalition of citizens simultaneously active in more localized organizations, who shared a common identity as *victimias* of Mexico’s escalating violence. Sicilia conceived of the MPJD as a “dialogue house” where citizens from across Mexico public

sphere could engage in Habermasian civic discourse, where they could renegotiate the fundamental norms upon which a new “post-conventional” Mexico could stabilize.

For Sicilia, the essential act of citizenship was not to vote, but to be actively engaged in civic discourse. In *Open Letter* Sicilia reminded his readers of Berthold Brecht’s famous lament that he had “nothing to say” when the Nazis came for him because he had previously remained silent when the Nazis had persecuted Blacks and Jews. “We must speak” Sicilia enjoined his listeners, “with our bodies, with our walk, with our cry of indignation, so that those verses of Brecht are not made a reality in our country” (2011). For Sicilia, agonistic public deliberation, is *the means* of fostering social reform. But the ultimate aim of reform is to rebuild community, what Sicilia calls “the social fabric,” a cloth woven from inter-personal, inter-regional, and inter-national dialogue. Thus, for Sicilia, as for Habermas, authentic civic discourse is both a means and an end-in-itself. The centrality of civic dialogue in Sicilia’s activism is reflected in his itinerant style of activism and in the MPJD’s six-point platform.

From the beginning of his efforts, Sicilia was peripatetic, caravanning across Mexico and the United States to network with geographically scattered organizations, and to empower local citizens to rebuild their communities through communicative action. From the 5th through the 8th of May 2011, he led a march of several hundred from Cuernavaca to Mexico City, where he delivered a speech in the central Zócalo to an audience numbering in the thousands. In June, he led a “caravan of solace” that travelled from Mexico City to Ciudad Juarez, holding numerous rallies in cities along the way.

In September 2011, he led a second caravan, made up of 15 buses carrying 600 people that travelled South through the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz and Puebla. In August and September of 2012, he would extend the reach of his activism into the United States, leading a third “peace caravan” from San Diego to Washington DC., stopping in 27 cities along the way.

The numerous rallies that Sicilia orchestrated across Mexico were public performances where participants enacted new civic identities as *victimas*. On stage at MPJD rallies were family members of the dead, or disappeared, who told their stories. According to Janice Gallagher, who worked with Sicilia on his third caravan across the United States, those who offered these “victim testimonials” included “the unemployed mother whose son had been disappeared while working for the army, the vendor whose son was disappeared while working as a street performer and the wealthy couple whose son had been disappeared from his car after being stopped at an army check-point” (2012, p. 124). By publicly embracing their bond with actual victims of violence, participants transformed from isolated and intimidated individuals into united and engaged citizens.

Many who were drawn into MPJD events participated in conversations that re-imagined the foundational norms of the country. “For the first time,” Sicilia wrote in a retrospective chronicle of the MPJD, “the left, the right, hundreds of social organizations and many communications media come together” (2014). Through small-group discussions in homes, cafes, churches, and schools, partici-

pants discussed the six points that would become the platform of the MPJD. These six points included passage of a Victims Law, ending the war on drugs, combating corruption, addressing the economic roots of criminality, rebuilding the social fabric, and fostering participatory democracy. An implicit purpose of early MPJD events was to provide occasions for assessing the merits of the six-point platform and discussing how the platform could be implemented in communities where MPJD rallies took place. Initiated through political performance and dialogue, the aim of the organization was to provide civic space where newly energized citizens could deliberate over their collective aspirations, engaging in a new form of participatory democracy that would itself heal the social fabric. But genuine civic conversation is predicated on the “idealized presuppositions of discourse” that Habermas describes in his writings on communicative action.

The kind of Habermasian discourse that Sicilia was attempting to foster requires mutual regard between interlocutors, along with a will to achieve consensus. Often, Sicilia faced resistance when he sought to realize these enabling conditions for discourse. At a rally of some 800 in San Luis Potosi, members of the audience began shouting insults when President Calderon’s name was mentioned. Sicilia retorted that “[...] The bullets, the blood, and the decapitations began as shouted insults and disrespect for the elemental space of empathy that all human beings need today.” For Sicilia, the aim of their gathering was to foster the kind of mutual acceptance that could enable dialogue between estranged parties. “This is not just about Felipe Calderón” Sicilia exhorted the crowd, “this is a different path than they have shown us and what the criminals want. The path is of the heart; the path of peace, the path of love” (Molina & Giordano, 2011). As an activist, Sicilia devoted much of his labor explaining the need for authentic dialogue. “For some,” Sicilia explained to one reporter, “to dialogue is to capitulate. If you haven’t humiliated your adversary, you have failed. But to change the dynamic of the violence that has beset the country [...] it is necessary to change the discourse of violence” (Rosen, 2012). Changing “the discourse of violence,” reconciling with political foes through dialogue, was an ennobling ideal precisely because it was so difficult to achieve in practice.

Participants at MPJD events were not predisposed to embrace their political enemies as civic brothers. Nor were they amenable to achieving consensus with fellow activists who saw the world through different ideological lenses. In June of 2011, arriving in Juarez at the end of his first “caravan of Solace” Sicilia presided over large rallies held in both Juarez and El Paso. After these assemblies, members from some 100 organizations met “in nine thematically-assigned workshops, different groups discussing tactics and strategies of the six-point citizen pact.” In his chronicle, Sicilia recalls that the discussions broke down when “certain hard-line Leftists” insisted on expanding the six points to include a range of economic grievances only tangentially connected to cartel-related violence. “The Six Points become a gibberish of absurd demands,” Sicilia recalled. “There is no way to control the disaster [...] Emilio Álvarez Icaza and I withdraw: The Pact is not the collection of crazy ideas signed in Ciudad Juarez, but, as was agreed, the original Six Points” (2014). Sicilia’s repeated calls for dialogue, and efforts to instigate

dialogue, were gestures that dramatized the cognitive and spiritual distance that citizens would have to travel before they could sit down and talk to each other. Dramatizing this gap is Sicilia's central rhetorical accomplishment.

The apex of Sicilia's use of dialogue, and the peak of his impact on public opinion, were the two televised dialogues that Sicilia held with President Calderón in 2011, in the wake of his triumphal caravan to Juarez, and with the leading candidates for the presidency in 2012. These meetings culminated in the *ley de victimas* (victims law) that Calderón's successor, Enrique Peña Nieto, would eventually sign into law. The outpouring of sympathy for Sicilia after his rallies in Cuernavaca and Mexico City compelled Calderón to meet with Sicilia and other representatives of the MPJD. During their public conversation, Calderón agreed to endorse the Victims Law proposed by the MPJD and to build a memorial in their memory. During the second meeting, that included various parliamentary leaders, a representative of Calderón's own party (the PAN) exclaimed to Sicilia and his entourage, "I add mine to the apologies that have been given here. I beg your forgiveness for not having been up to the speed that the citizens deserve and demand" (Giordano, 2011). With members of Mexico's national congress apologizing, and with the president himself acknowledging the legitimacy of the MPJD's demands, Sicilia knew he had transformed the public conversation over cartel violence. Asked during a 2012 interview what his movement had achieved, Sicilia answered, "Sitting down with the president, and with Congressional leaders, with the victims confronting them, in front of the nation. That is a triumph. It's never happened before. Since then the relations between those in power and the people have had to change" (Garcia, 2012).

But if Sicilia's dialogues with Mexico's highest elected officials were a pinnacle moment for the MPJD, they also highlight the practical limitations inherent in Sicilia's ideal of transforming Mexico through grass-roots mobilization outside the electoral process. From the beginning, Sicilia had been vehemently opposing fellow activists within the MPJD who wanted to enter party politics, or advance specific policy changes. In Juarez, during the first "caravan of solace" Sicilia had resisted colleagues who wanted the MPJD to directly pressure Calderón to remove all troops from Mexico's streets. Such confrontational tactics, Sicilia wrote, "threatened to drain the force of the movement. It showed me that a protest can't be overly ideological if it's going to be successful" (Padgett, 2011). By the time Sicilia had completed the public dialogues with presidential candidates, he was depleted by the effort to refute colleagues who wanted to take the movement in a more pragmatic direction.

As Sicilia entered talks with Calderón, he was being criticized from Mexico's ideological right and left. One ally of Calderón publicly condemned Sicilia as "prideful and as demonstrating a staggering deviation from democratic process" (Tadeo, 2011). From the left, many criticized his efforts at "dialogue" as posturing. Sicilia refuted such critics explaining, "The left has been very critical toward the dialogues. I believe in dialogue, and I believe in mobilization." Dialogue, Sicilia pointed out, had produced "a change in the language of war and pain" (Garcia, 2012). Criticism peaked after Sicilia publicly criticized opposition candi-

date Andrés Obrador, while refusing to participate in the electoral process. Writing retrospectively in the present tense, Sicilia explained, “we have to turn our backs on the elections. Whoever wins, I say ceaselessly, will arrive only to administer the inferno.” Condemning fellow activists who wanted the MPJD to participate in the presidential election, Sicilia lamented, “They delude themselves with the idea that there is still a state and a democracy” (Sicilia, 2014).

Critics certainly had cause to view Sicilia’s position as contradictory: He orchestrated public dialogues with elected leaders and called for specific reforms, such as the Victims Law, but refused to publicly endorse a specific candidate, to cast a vote in the presidential election—to show any trust in Mexico’s established state institutions. Yet, in his dialogues with Mexico’s political elite, as in all his public performances, Sicilia acted with steadfast consistency: he was using the pain generated by Mexico’s violence to mobilize citizens outside conventional democratic processes. “We will not convert this pain of the soul into hatred or more violence,” Sicilia announced during his Mexico City speech, “but into a lever that will help us restore love, peace, justice, dignity and the stammering democracy that we are losing.” Through participating in communicative action within the public sphere, citizens could regain their personal human dignity and realize the civic solidarity they had yet to achieve as a people. “It is possible,” Sicilia had proclaimed in the same speech, “to rescue and reconstruct the social fabric of our communities, neighborhoods, and cities” (2011, May 10). Sicilia’s political vision was not rooted in the realities of Mexico’s party politics, but in the ideal of using dialogue to restore community, re-establish social solidarity, and address the transnational roots of Mexico’s epidemic of violence.

5. Expanding communicative action into the international public sphere

A wide range of scholars have recognized that in the contemporary world, a transnational public sphere has emerged (Bohman, 2007; Dryzek, 1996; Fraser, 2009). In *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, Dryzek explains that “As in domestic society, the transnational public sphere can be treated as the politicized aspect of transnational civil society; that is, it has an orientation to power, as constituted in states or elsewhere” (2000, p. 130). The power of transnational civil society is the communicative power to question and to criticize prevailing discourses and to change the balance of competing discourses. The cumulative effect of thirty years of international environmental activism, Dryzek points out, is to build a widening international consensus that environmental damage can no longer be tolerated as an acceptable byproduct of economic growth (1996, p. 131).

The impetus for becoming active in the international public sphere is to address threats to social cohesion that can no longer be resolved by national governments alone. For example, in a series of recent books, articles, and interviews, Jürgen Habermas has been active in an international public sphere arguing that

globalization has undermined the capacity of national governments to constrain enterprises “that orient their investment decisions within a global horizon.” Unable to retreat into isolated self-sufficiency, governments accept high unemployment and cut social welfare programs to reduce taxes to remain competitive internationally. “Emerging social costs,” Habermas warns, threaten the viability of liberal societies. “The indicators of a rise in poverty and income disparities are unmistakable,” Habermas writes, “as are the tendencies towards social disintegration” (1994, p. 122). Like Habermas, Sicilia recognizes that local social pathologies have roots in transnational economic forces. And like Habermas, Sicilia has felt compelled to foster civic discourse outside the borders of his home country. While Habermas has addressed an international audience that spans across the Atlantic from Europe, Sicilia has exercised his rhetorical powers within the transnational public sphere that straddles Mexico and the United States.

While mobilizing citizens within Mexico, Sicilia had consistently denounced the trans-border forces enabling Mexico’s discord. In his Mexico City speech, Sicilia declared that the US demand for drugs, US banks laundering cartel money, and US businesses selling high caliber weapons had all given Mexico’s criminal groups an “immense capability for death” (10 May 2011). From the beginning of his activism, Sicilia had described crises in the U.S. and Mexico as interdependent. “For me and others,” he wrote in his chronicle of the MPJD, “the war and the horror that Mexico is experiencing have their counterparts on the other side of the border” (2014). Seeing conditions in Mexico and the United States as interconnected, he also felt an urgency to stir the conscience of citizens in the United States. As he told one interviewer, “Violence in Mexico is born from an economic concept that is now dominant throughout the world. I would also like to make North Americans aware of this” (Rosen, 2012, January 31). Seeking to cultivate a transnational form of civic awareness, Sicilia expanded his activism from Mexico into the United States.

Having conducted two “peace caravans” across Mexico, he conducted two more across the United States, mobilizing citizens and pressuring policy makers. While Sicilia remained infused with a sense of righteous urgency, he did not anticipate the rhetorical obstacles he would face as a Mexican activist appealing to North American audiences. Outside the immigrant organizations that facilitated his journey, he was perceived as an object of curiosity, not a fellow victim of cartel violence. Sicilia’s activism within Mexico highlights the rhetorical challenge of engaging citizens in civic discourse. His activism north of the border reveals the even broader challenge of deploying civic discourse within the public space that straddles Mexico and the United States.

Tactically, the first “Caravan for Peace” across the United States was an effort to revitalize the MPJD after the debilitating fracas with fellow-activists over supporting a candidate in the 2012 presidential election. The journey did garner new publicity and connections for the movement. Indeed, the U.S. caravan was a triumph of social networking. In the process of coordinating activities in 27 North American cities, MPJD coordinated with over 100 activist organizations, including LEAP (Law Enforcement Against Prohibition), NALACC (National

Association of Latin American and Caribbean Communities) and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) (Gallagher, 2012, p. 14).

But the caravan also drained Sicilia's energies. His accounts of the earlier caravans across Mexico sparkle with a sense of exuberant accomplishment. In contrast, Sicilia described the trip across the United States as "difficult" (2014). The cavalcade of some 125 people, traveling in several cars, two buses, and an RV, left San Diego in early August 2012, arriving in Washington DC on September 12th. The "Caravan for Peace" did receive local media coverage in cities where they stopped to march and hold forums with local groups concerned about gun violence or the drug trade. Yet Sicilia felt largely ignored by the national press and by the population at large. He later wrote, "Caught in the electoral ignominy [the U.S. press is focused on upcoming U.S. Presidential Election], few pay attention to the agenda that we bring, and few recognize their deep ties with our struggle in Mexico" (2014).

Ignored by the national press, Sicilia also faced hostility from nativists incapable of viewing Mexico as a co-equal neighbor and trading partner. In El Paso, Sicilia and several supporters appeared before the city council to discuss the local impact of arms smuggling and drug use. Outside the council room, a group of protestors heckled Sicilia with a cacophony of ill-tempered shouts: "Get out of here; We don't want garbage; You come only to cause problems; Get out of here, you cross the border to bring dirt; the United States is a great country; Mexico is an under-developed country" (Olmos, 2012). When Sicilia attempted a dialogue with the notorious sheriff of Maricopa county, Joe Arpaio, in Phoenix, Arizona, an open-minded exchange of views proved impossible. A reporter covering the exchange wrote that Sicilia "received the reply he must have had often from others: 'And you, control the flow of drugs!'" (Rosin, 2012). Sicilia had entered the United States determined to engage in agonistic deliberation as he had in forums across Mexico. But he was perceived by many in same light that many North Americans perceive immigrants from Mexico, as a contaminant needing to be purged from the body politic. North Americans with nativist sympathies such as Joe Arpaio were not predisposed to view Sicilia as a co-equal member of the same regional community with whom they needed to resolve common problems. Their impulse was to push him to the periphery of public life, where the dialogue he wished to provoke could not take place (Cisneros, 2008).

One reporter who accompanied the caravan across the country noted Sicilia's difficulty reaching an audience beyond the organizations that supported the MPJD. In Atlanta and Chicago, the caravan was greeted by small gatherings of activists who sympathized with Sicilia's cause. But at Roosevelt University, located in downtown Chicago, only a scattering of students and bystanders showed up to hear Sicilia and other *victim*s share their stories. Likewise, in Toledo, Ohio, the *caravaneros* "marched in a light rain to the campus of the University of Toledo where an Anglo woman professor of law gave a passionate and informed speech about U.S. drug policy to a small audience of liberal whites." In New York City, holding a rally on the steps of city hall, they were "unacknowl-

edged by Mayor Bloomberg, any other city official, or anyone else other than the curious passerby or Broadway tour-bus riders.” Following the rally, they marched “through the perplexed lunch time crowds of Wall Street” and Sicilia spoke on the steps of Federal Hall, facing the New York Stock Exchange (Brundage, 2012). Speaking in the central plaza of Mexico City, Sicilia had connected with thousands of rapt listeners. On the steps of New York’s City Hall, Sicilia could only draw a few distracted financial district workers on their lunch break.

New York, Chicago, Atlanta, and other US cities, lacked a critical mass of fellow *victimas* with whom Sicilia could share victim testimonials. In these locales, he could not enact the rhetorical magic of mutual identification or evoke a sense of civic empowerment engendered by shared grief and outrage. But Sicilia did address numerous gatherings of academics and NGO activists, eager to hear a learned Mexican poet-turned-activist explain how the drug war had ensnared both the United States and Mexico in a mutually reinforcing cycle of unintended consequences. While in New York, Sicilia spoke to students and faculty from the CUNY Institute of Mexican Studies. He gave a similar talk at a session sponsored by the Program of Latin American Studies at Johns Hopkins University. In these presentations, and in numerous interviews, Sicilia argued that the war on drugs, begun during the Nixon Administration, had not lowered the demand for illicit drugs in the United States. Rather, it had enabled Mexico’s drug cartels, filled North American prisons, and financed Calderón’s disastrous war against drug traffickers (Brundage, 2012).

Addressing large groups of Mexican citizens, Sicilia had exuded the ethos of a fellow *victima* who could easily evoke shared grief over Mexico’s ongoing cartel violence. Addressing the small enclaves of North Americans who were sympathetic to his cause, Sicilia adopted the ethos of a global citizen, engaging fellow citizens in problems of mutual interest. In Austin, Texas, Sicilia explained to an interviewer, “As citizens of the world, all of us can stop the war [on drugs] by forcing our states to change to a public health policy [...] and use the savings from the legalization of drugs to compensate the victims and recreate the social fabric” (Hayden, 2012). Here, Sicilia was seeking to mobilize citizens’ support for new drug policy. But he was not directly addressing victims of the war on drugs; he was addressing established citizens to act on behalf of others victimized by the war on drugs.

In Mexico, the crux of Sicilia’s activism had been to mobilize fellow victims. But in the United States, victims of the war on drugs were mostly African Americans incarcerated for drug-related crimes. Repeatedly in his talks and interviews in the United States, Sicilia pointed to imprisoned African Americans as the primary victims of the war on drugs in the United States. During a conversation broadcast on radio with Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, Sicilia vehemently agreed when Alexander exclaimed that “the struggle to end mass incarceration is one in the same with the struggle to end the drug war and the needless violence in Mexico.” Answering Alexander, he declared, “To make African American victims and Mexican victims visible is to make the world’s victims visible.” Referring to his present tour of American cities, Sicilia concluded, “This is a great

moment for us to hold a united front, a common front.” By underscoring how the war on drugs generated casualties on both sides of the border, Sicilia hoped to foster “a sense of binational responsibility” (Backman, 2012). Here, and in other talks during the caravan, Sicilia was not directly addressing victims; he was talking about them to listeners already sympathetic to his point-of-view.

The transnational public sphere which Sicilia entered upon leaving Mexico presented him with far different rhetorical challenges than those he faced in Mexico. Yet every encounter with every audience was an effort to stimulate authentic discourse over the inter-joined pathologies ravaging both Mexico and the United States. Even his efforts to engage unsympathetic interlocutors in dialogue was a rhetorical performance seeking to alter the “balance of competing discourses.”

Sicilia returned to Mexico at the end of the “Caravan for Peace” depleted. In his account of the caravan, he wrote: “We return. Fatigue, failures to understand, the ruptures [...] force withdrawal” (2014). The intensity of Sicilia’s efforts since the death of his son, and the failure to connect with a broader audience during the U.S. caravan, had taken their toll. Though exhausted, he felt a sense of righteous justification for his efforts. When asked why the Caravan had not found a wider reception in the United States, Sicilia answered, “We are doing this out of a sense of responsibility, for love of our country, of our culture, for civilization, for democracy. It is a moral movement; it is not a mass movement” (Gonzalez, 2012). As leader of a “moral movement,” he had sought to instill a sense of trans-border responsibility in his North American audiences, seeking to fertilize the ground in the United States, as in Mexico, to rebuild the social fabric through communicative action. Using Illich’s metaphor for creating community through dialogue, Sicilia explained that the purpose of the caravan was to light a candle. “One must light a candle rather than curse the darkness,” Sicilia asserted before returning to Mexico. “That’s what we have done. If someone else can also light a candle, that’s good. If someone can see from that candle, that’s even better. We did what we had to do, and we’re pleased” (Brooks, 2012).

6. Conclusion

After returning to Mexico at the end of the “Caravan for Peace,” Sicilia scaled back the pace of his activism. In the fall of 2013, after resting with his daughter and grandson in one of the Arca spiritual communities in France, he participated in a second “Remember the Victims” caravan that held events in ten cities across the United States and Canada. He continues to speak out against the on-going cartel violence, to write essays, to commemorate victims, and to vociferously denounce Enrique Peña Nieto, who replaced Calderón as Mexico’s president in 2012. Although no longer commanding public attention as he did when he first burst onto the public stage in 2011, his presence, along with his past accomplishments, still inspire Mexicans to actively participate in Mexico’s civic life. His cross-country rallies were a model for the more recent public protests that erupted

across Mexico in response to the September 2014, massacre of 43 education students in the state of Guerrero. In direct emulation of his “Caravan for Peace” parents of several murdered students have even completed a caravan tour of the United States, raising awareness of the ongoing violence in Mexico (Nuncio, 2015). And while Sicilia did not spark a mass-movement in the United States, as he did in Mexico, he has dared to enter the transnational public sphere that spans the border between the United States and Mexico. From within that space, he has sought to raise awareness that the pathologies ravaging both countries are interconnected.

As an activist, Javier Sicilia has insisted on remaining within the public sphere, where he has sought to use the tools of deliberative democracy to address Mexico’s epidemic of violence and to find new foundations for civic solidarity. These foundations are centered in the culminating aims of the MPJD, restoring the social fabric through fostering participatory democracy. Implicit in these objectives is the Habermasian insight that modern societies can only restore equilibrium through exercising communicative action. Only social norms that have won the assent of a broad mass of citizens can provide foundations for re-establishing civic solidarity. By holding up participatory democracy as a necessary tool for addressing our most pressing civic challenges, Javier Sicilia has dramatized how far we, who live in the Americas, are from realizing our democratic ideals.

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