

IN DEPTH

Migrant caravans in Mexico: mass nonviolent mobilisations

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Since the beginning of the Zapatista struggle in 1994, the social actions described as caravans have actually been nonviolent columns of civil society actors that go through or break down the blockades and barriers of war, (para)militarism, hunger or repression. They have been effective in building bonds of solidarity and struggle between the civilian population and communities in resistance, they have constituted a force to help in the material reproduction of the besieged populations. They have also warned the besieging forces that the encircled population is not alone. These caravans have gone from civil society to Zapatista territories or from within Zapatista communities to outside their territories, as ways of breaking through the political and military siege, the barrier or the blockade.

We can currently find two historic experiences of this type of action in Mexico, led by key social actors in national and regional peacebuilding: the families of victims of disappearances; and Central American migrants. Some Migrant Caravans or Search Brigades for the Disappeared have even been carried out jointly, since many Central American family members also come to Mexico to “try to find their loved ones alive”, searching for those they have lost track of for years. One of the main effects of this type of nonviolent action has been the empowerment of some of these social actors, who evolve from struggling for their material and moral survival to becoming active subjects for their rights, fighting for a change in their situation and that of others with similar social identities.

Walking to break the siege

The Migrant Caravans/Exodus/Columns are also a massive action of non-cooperation to “break the barriers, the siege”, in a direct confrontation with the governments and criminal forces in their home countries that rob them of their minimum material conditions for survival. These actions have grown considerably since November 2018, mainly from Honduras, and seem to represent a change in migrants’ strategy of nonviolent struggles, whether or not these migrants are organised. Leaving aside the many hypotheses and conjectures about their origin, the identity of the participants, how they organise and finance themselves, the political and social pressure they exert on the governments of the region, and the manipulation that has been made of them in Trump’s search for re-election, the caravans “are a reality, not an invention,” as the Secretariat of the Interior of Mexico has declared.¹ On the basis of this “reality principle” we aim to make an initial reflection about them strictly from the angle of the strategy and the tactics of nonviolent struggle, and not about their origins, constitution or effects.

The line of the “border of inhumanity” which means not knowing if you will be able to reproduce yourself the next day, reached a point of no return with exponential growth in the regions of Central America and Mexico. The sacrifice and desperation are enormous, but so are the moral and material determination. Gandhi maintained as the core element of his nonviolent strategy the principle that suffering itself would be the main weapon to destroy oppression and change the adversary’s mind. The testimony of mothers, old people, children, disabled people, men... walking and overcoming a thousand problems each day is both deeply painful and at the same time an example of what it really means to struggle. We find ourselves before an admirable column of nonviolent strugglers. Mahatma Gandhi didn’t base his affirmation on a simplistic, idealistic, religious, even masochistic attitude, but rather on a strategy that aimed for the constant accumulation of “moral force” on his side. For that is the first and main nonviolent weapon in every confrontation, to achieve a “rupture” towards truth and justice within the adversary. That moral force, migrants’ key weapon in this peacebuilding action, is based on what Pope Francis has declared: “People [are] exercising their legitimate right to seek a better life elsewhere”.²

“ Walking such long distances *en masse* has also been a widely used form of nonviolent struggle throughout the history of social movements: it generates solidarity and permits a gradual growth in consciousness by the population ”

These caravans occur above all due to two great causes. On the one hand, the hunger generated by predatory transnational capitalist expropriation and economic exploitation of natural resources, bodies and territories in these populations' countries of origin. On the other hand, the terror and hopelessness caused by the use of violence and war –something which the Zapatistas maintain that “we refuse to call by its name”– as forms of control, surveillance, dispossession and extermination of part of the population. War and hunger are deeply interrelated with the establishment of criminal States in this new stage of capitalism.³ Basically, it is about the construction and reproduction of an enormous illegal business: the multiple trafficking in bodies that are very vulnerable due to their being far from their own identities, their family or community networks of origin, terrorised by violence or hunger, with no other real ways of surviving in their own territories.

The migrant caravans have been conceptualised on occasions as actions of “human mobility”. That is only a partial description, since these caravans are also actions of social struggle. Their means of mobilisation are their feet, the train called La Bestia (from Arriaga in Chiapas to Ixtepec in Oaxaca), solidarity rides, buses... and also social networks. The very different types of calls for action from these networks, the collective protection, as well as the follow-up and acceleration of the action, and even the “virtual progress” of actions, have been fundamental in building the massive advancing human tide as well as the social and political perception that, just like the sea, this advance is unstoppable, growing and even “natural” –because of the legitimacy arising from the fact that this is a struggle against hunger and war. Networks –in different senses– bring both virtues and risks: they are largely anonymous, which makes it difficult for the

existing powers -whether legal or illegal- to identify the leaders of the nonviolent actions and repress them, but they also make it possible to hide other objectives.

Walking such long distances *en masse* has also been a widely used form of nonviolent struggle throughout the history of social movements, because it is something essential to people and their daily lives, like drinking water or eating; because it is something that generates solidarity inside and outside the movement; because it is an action that has a “slow rhythm” which permits a gradual growth in consciousness by the population and thus a growth in participation and solidarity, which in turn increases the moral and material strength of the walkers and in some way inhibits repression. This type of action can help establish negotiations. It is a type of action that makes it possible to “uncover the truth” clearly, forcefully and publicly, as Gandhi said. Historic walks of the past include Gandhi’s Salt March (March-April 1930), the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom of the African-American movement led by Martin Luther King (August 1963), or the Zapatista March of the Colour of the Earth (January-April 2001).

Migrant peacebuilders: Non-cooperation with inhumane orders

Furthermore, as well as being a mass mobilisation to break a siege, the caravans are also actions of non-cooperation by the civilian population. Through them, people exercise “due disobedience to all inhumane orders”⁴, since the migrants refuse to let themselves be recruited by organised crime, to kill or to die of hunger and despair. It is therefore a significant “nonviolent strategic offensive”, which has as its leading social subjects Central American migrants, and relatives of victims of the war in Mexico, who decide to exercise their social power, their moral identity and autonomy in a direct way, facing up to political power, “without asking permission” (as the Zapatista *comandante* David said at the creation of the Juntas de Buen Gobierno in August 2003), but also seeking the greatest number of social and governmental alliances.

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Thus migrants are also, in a way, “peacebuilders”. For that reason we should see them not only as a population that has been terrorised and made desperate by poverty and violence, but also as fighters, strugglers in the true sense of the word. Instead of taking up arms, and thus intensifying the spiral of violence in their territories, they choose a form of nonviolent struggle: the “displacement” of their own body beyond the territory involved in the war for power and natural and bodily resources. Deepening its form and meaning, it is not only an action of fleeing from but also confronting the violence, putting their bodies on the line outside of the reproduction and the reach of the war. As we have learnt well from the Mexican populations (especially from Guerrero, Chiapas and Sinaloa) that have been displaced or are in self-defence: when the level of immediate violence shuts us into a siege from which we can not escape without getting involved in that level of inhumanity, there are two options: face up to it with weapons (although this is in self-defence and continually trying not to use them but only to show them, without intensifying the spiral of the war but pushing it back) or move. Both are valid forms of struggle for justice and a dignified life, which help the long-term processes of “humanisation” of our species, distancing us a little from the war.

To analyse this strategy of nonviolent struggle, it is also important to pick apart the “social totality” conceptualised as a caravan, into a set of constituent actions that vary greatly in forms-instruments-subjects, of different degrees of violence and nonviolence (sit-down protests, occupation of spaces, clashes with the police to break barriers, solidarity from the local population, negotiations with authorities, clandestine escapes, rallies, marches, sit-ins...).

These long marches have some common historical characteristics: they gradually create a growing “snowball” of actions and a “suspense” and social expectation about what will come next and what will happen at the end (crossing the northern Mexican border). Media coverage of human tragedies and of confrontations with the authorities and criminal gangs –which are sometimes one and the same– sometimes make it possible for the media –consciously or not– to even become allies of these struggles.

Thus, continuing with the strategic analysis, the migrant caravans through Mexico have, at their most recent stage, since November 2018, gone through an apparent change in their nonviolent strategy, going, in a certain sense and according to a Gandhian logic, from “passive resistance” to “active resistance” on the lines of “satyagraha” (the force of truth), with a high degree of public exposure, with an open “challenge to the authorities” of the different countries. According to their organisers, this gives them greater legitimacy, moral strength, security for the participants, bargaining power and social assistance from the authorities. They thus represent at the same time both strategies of struggle and security.

The migrant caravans in Mexico have experienced a strategic change, from passive resistance to active resistance, and from almost clandestine actions to the most public and media oriented ones

“ In turn, they have gone from a historic process characterised mainly by almost clandestine actions to direct nonviolent actions that are as public and media oriented as possible. Gandhi normally announced his actions publicly before carrying them out, as a way of legitimising them, of relating positively with the authorities and of reducing fear among the participants on both

sides. ”

But the opponents also fight for a historical, political and sociological truth that is often forgotten. So we will also see how all types of provocation, threats and attacks continue to grow. These will mostly come from the Trump government, but the Mexican government is increasingly doing its share of repressive, intimidating and militarised actions on the two borders. What they will be aiming for is to reinforce the spiral of violence and xenophobia and terrorise the local population, so that the caravan actions lose moral strength both internally and in outside eyes, so that the misinformed and terrified local populations demand and celebrate “exemplary punishments”. Thus there will be an increase in racist actions “in the name of the law” and the “hunt” for migrants by right-wing groups and militias. Although this is especially palpable in the United States, xenophobia is also on the rise in Mexican cities.

Finally, as a way of enriching and also giving complexity to the nonviolent strategy, we believe that caravans should have a good number of bishops or religious leaders, university rectors, artists and intellectuals from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and the United States leading them, united in one single body and accompanying them, walking in an “exemplary” way for a few days. In this way an important moral and material “nonviolent weapon” would be activated, whose social power – due to the institutions or other forces they represent – gives these subjects a role of social “moral reserve”. Rarely in history do such people “place their body” in nonviolent direct actions against the powers that be, especially actions of non-cooperation and civil disobedience, which is what is necessary to be able proportionally to face up to and stop the massive level of violence.

It is also clear that “putting our bodies on the line” alongside the migrants is a nonviolent task not only for those actors who have the greatest social impact and ability to pressurise the authorities, but also of the rest of us, as a civil society that wants to show solidarity. We must give our direct support to this struggle for material and moral survival, for the construction of justice and peace in the continent, for the humanisation of the species over the long term, an effort led by so many impoverished masses who struggle, above all with their own bodies, with their sacrifice, with their

moral and spiritual dignity, with their “relentless persistence”.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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1. Martínez, Fabiola. “Las caravanas son una realidad, no un invento: señala Gobernación” in *La Jornada*. México, 31-3-2019.

2. AP. “Los muros no detendrán las migraciones” in *La Jornada*. México, 31-3-2019.

3. Equipo Bourbaki. “El costo humano de la guerra por la construcción del monopolio del narcotráfico en México (2008-2009)”. English translation [here](#).

4. This slogan was initially coined by Dr. Juan Carlos Marín, a noted Argentinean sociologist, and was revived in the Final Declaration of the XXII Congress of the Latin American Sociology Association (ALAS), held at Concepción, Chile, in October 1999.

Photography “Los migrantes no somos ilegales, somos trabajadores internacionales”

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