

On the Edges of the Social: Disappearances, Protest, and Social Performance in Veracruz

En los bordes de lo social: desapariciones, protesta y performance social en Veracruz

Erick Alfonso Galán-Castro  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1946-3921>

Secretaría de Ciencia, Humanidades, Tecnología e Innovación SECIHTI - Universidad Veracruzana, México, erick.galan@secihtti.mx

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyze the mobilization of family collectives of the disappeared in Veracruz from a socio-anthropological performance perspective, considering it a social and symbolic process that exposes the social situation of the actors and seeks structural change. Using a qualitative methodology (ethnography, press, social media, and analysis with MAXQDA 2020), tensions between levels of performance visibility (explicit and implicit). These tensions not only challenge the social bond (by questioning society and the State), but also reinforce the affective and solidaristic bonds among protesters through the reproduction of specific structures of cultural meaning. The article concludes with a discussion of the heuristic possibilities of a cultural performance approach for understanding victim mobilization processes in Veracruz, and the importance of an ethnographic perspective to complement this theoretical approach.

Keywords: victims, performance, ethnography, social movements, Veracruz.

Resumen: El objetivo es analizar la movilización de colectivos de familiares de desaparecidos en Veracruz desde un enfoque socioantropológico del performance, considerándolo un proceso social y simbólico que exhibe la situación social de los actores y busca el cambio estructural. Mediante una metodología cualitativa (etnografía, prensa, redes sociales y análisis mediante software MAXQDA 2020), se identificaron tensiones entre niveles de visibilidad del performance (explícito y no explícito). Estas tensiones no sólo desafían el vínculo social (cuestionando a la sociedad y al Estado), sino también refuerzan el vínculo afectivo y solidario de los manifestantes a partir de la reproducción de estructuras de sentido cultural específicas. Se concluye con una discusión sobre las posibilidades heurísticas de un enfoque de performance cultural para comprender procesos de movilización de víctimas en Veracruz, y la importancia de un enfoque etnográfico para complementar este acercamiento teórico.

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Palabras clave: víctimas, performance, etnografía, movimientos sociales, Veracruz.

Introduction

The mobilization of collectives of families of disappeared persons in Veracruz has exposed various problems: the persistence of disappearances, the lack of comprehensive victim support despite new laws and institutions specifically created for this purpose, and the indifference and disinterest of different state administrations. Since 2011, various collectives across the state have maintained their protests, achieving different results. They have pushed for creating a legal and institutional framework to support victims, along with institutional mechanisms to follow up on disappearance cases and ensure accountability. However, despite their mobilization and its significance in state public life, they have faced authorities from different political parties who have consistently considered them opponents, breaking dialogue channels and having little impact on the exponential increase of disappearance cases in the state.

The mobilization of families of disappeared persons in Veracruz has gone through different phases: from the dialogue blockade and the absence of an institutional framework for victim support during Javier Duarte's term (Zavaleta, 2017), to attempts at governmental control of the collectives through the creation of search and victim support entities during the political alternation that brought PAN to power in Veracruz, and a victim support policy under Morena governments that avoids dialogue with "pernicious intermediaries"—in this case, the collectives themselves—alternating with unilaterally defined pacification policies. Thus, the mobilization of families of disappeared persons in Veracruz has explored the mobilizing and legitimizing potential of expressing pain and loss, facing governments publicly unable to question their demands, yet also failing to substantially control the escalating violence manifested in disappearances.

Academic interest in the mobilization of collectives of families of disappeared persons has led to various approaches (Villarreal, 2014 and 2016; Del Palacio and Torres, 2021; Torres, 2022; Gallagher, 2023; López, 2023). However, the in-depth symbolic and cultural study of the protest dynamics of these collectives has received little attention, despite offering valuable insights into the effectiveness of

victims' discourse in making their condition a public and binding issue (Gatti, 2011). Based on these considerations, I posed the following question: How has the mobilization of collectives of families of disappeared persons in Veracruz become a space for publicly interpellating various political interlocutors?

Some authors have approached the topic from the perspective of protest as a political process and collective action. We can understand the mobilization of collectives from the balance between collective mobilization, political opportunities, and protest outcomes. The methods used have primarily been qualitative, reconstructing short- and medium-term socio-historical processes, and comparing protest repertoires, conjunctures, and institutional achievements (Villarreal, 2014 and 2016; Zavaleta, 2016 and 2017; Aguilar, 2018; Hevia and Treviño, 2019; Ansolabehere and Vázquez, 2017; Ríos, 2020; Gallagher, 2023). Others have emphasized the link between emotions and social mobilization. Ethnographic approaches, which recover the actors' perspectives, have yielded different results: they highlight the importance of the emotional dimension for the collective subjectivation of families of disappeared persons (Robledo, 2017; Querales, 2018; Gordillo-García, 2023), and the use of emotionally charged phrases and expressions as a protest repertoire (Del Palacio and Torres, 2021; Torres, 2022).

The social performance approach has proven a useful tool for understanding mobilization. By analyzing press coverage, videos, or even social media, researchers seek to understand the construction of binary confrontation narratives between groups with opposing demands, which derive their legitimacy from the logic of the "civil sphere" and use symbolic resources to establish a connection with specific audiences (Arteaga and Arzuaga, 2014, 2017, and 2018; Cardona and Arteaga, 2021). Specialists also identify the development of a "social drama" in the mobilization of families of disappeared persons, understanding it as a conflict in which group interests and attitudes clash, staging symbolic elements to highlight this conflict, with multiple consequences in terms of institutional change and social role shifts (Turner, 1974). Through an ethnographic approach, researchers reconstruct how four developmental moments of these symbolic conflicts emerge: "breach", "crisis", "redressive action", and "reintegration". In the case of collectives of families of disappeared persons, these phases, plus the concepts of "liminality" and "communitas",

are key to understanding the emergence of a particular form of protest based on grief, which generates emotional communities and an identity based on the trauma of disappearance (Panizo, 2010; Regueiro, 2010; Gatti, 2011; Robledo, 2017).

The theoretical framework for understanding the symbolic functioning of the mobilization of families of disappeared persons in Veracruz lies in analyzing it as “cultural performance”. That is, it is a social process where individual or collective actors display the meaning of their social situation to others, with varying effects on objectives of structural change (Alexander, 2005; Turner, 1988). This process, operating like a dramaturgical interaction, stages itself to achieve a symbolic connection (or “re-fusion”, from the perspective of cultural pragmatics) with audiences, thereby producing political and social results from this “re-fusion”. But it can also work to re-establish and assert social bonds and the normative-symbolic structures that sustain them, especially when those bonds are in crisis (Turner, 1988). We propose a socio-anthropological interpretive model of social protest as cultural performance, alternating with a normative approach focused on the performative agency’s effectiveness and its normative evaluation defined by the reproduction of a “civil sphere”, from which many Latin American social movements emerge, generating symbolic and narrative mutations towards forms that more directly challenge this sphere (Alexander and Tognato, 2018).

In the following sections, I will outline the theoretical discussion supporting the analytical categories used, then describe the methodology. Next, I will present the empirical analysis by reconstructing the performative process, the discourses emerging from the performance itself, and analyzing the implicit and explicit levels of the performance to understand its subjectifying and desubjectifying aspects. Finally, I will offer some conclusions.

Theoretical Framework: Between Sociological and Anthropological Analysis of Performance (A Discussion Between Alexander and Turner)

Theoretical proposals for cultural performance converge on the need to analyze how the symbolic manifests in social conflict processes (see Table 1¹). They argue that classical theoretical approaches in their

1 This figure and all tables are located in the Appendix at the end of this article (Editor’s note).

respective disciplines focused too much on the ontological separation between “culture” and “the social”, or “theory” and “praxis” (Turner, 1988: 72; Alexander, 2005: 9). Both agree that social actors are subjects immersed in a symbolic world, whose horizon of meaning is historically constructed. These actors “stage” meanings by putting them into practice in specific situations, and different recipients (adversaries or other “audiences”) can interpret discursively held positions within a conflict, without a single interpretation of the message—a confusion that can be leveraged for various objectives— (Turner, 1988: 82; Alexander, 2006: 73). They also share a critique of structural-functional theoretical approaches, arguing that culture is not only a pre-existing construction of meanings for social actors, but also an element used, “staged”, and experienced within social tensions. While Alexander characterizes these approaches as a nostalgic, conservationist stance on culture, seeking to rescue meaning rather than understanding it within concrete social practices (Alexander, 2006: 9), Turner criticizes classical culturalist anthropology as a dehumanizing approach, from whose conceptual shackles he seeks to free anthropology with a performative focus (Turner, 1988: 72).

Analyzing the symbolic requires a process enacted through phases of dramatic expression. Turner asserted that ritual was the prototypical expression of social drama, staging the tension between the sacred and the profane, the everyday and the liminal (Turner, 1988). Similarly, Alexander contends that Turner’s study of ritual as social drama can be applied to understand social tensions in complex societies, including political processes, social mobilizations, or international conflicts (Alexander, 2006).

However, elements distinguish their positions. I will evaluate four aspects particularly important for understanding the protests of collectives in Xalapa: their analytical focus on performance, the empirical referent for their analyses, the phases through which they analyze performance, and the visibility of interactions between participants and what occurs at each level of that visibility.²

Alexander recognizes that analyzing performance involves evaluating its success or failure, as performances aim to display the meaning of social situations to others (Alexander, 2005: 19). This proves a difficult process, given that modern societies feature a high degree of differentiation that prevents a single interpretation of symbols

2 A summary of this section can be seen in table 1.

used in actors' staging of disputes. However, considering that a central concept in Alexander's work is the "civil sphere", which encompasses meanings and narratives defining binary oppositions related to ideas like solidarity, individual rights, and collective obligations³ (Alexander, 2018: 79) , and that many social mobilizations in Latin America with significant public impact have necessarily started from the "civil sphere" as a necessary foundation for their success (Alexander and Tognato, 2018: 2), Alexander's performance analysis approach tends to normatively evaluate the effectiveness of performances in relation to the degree of message fusion between sender and receiver (Alexander, 2006: 79). More specifically, it assesses the symbolic penetration of the civil sphere itself as a liberal-democratic narrative within each context⁴.

3 Alexander (2018) differentiates his concept from Cohen and Arato's (2000) civil society. He notes that Cohen and Arato do not distinguish between the civil sphere and the realms of family, culture, religion, or race, but rather encompass them within the same sphere of meaning. Alexander considers the civil sphere autonomous from these, as it establishes symbolic distinctions based on the notion of citizenship, which are discursively and ideologically specific (Alexander, 2018: 48-49). In other words, his definition of the civil sphere reaffirms his theoretical commitment to a strong program of cultural sociology, where culture maintains relative autonomy from other social realms (Alexander, 2019).

4 Although Alexander's theoretical proposal explicitly criticized Habermas's theory of civil society, specifically its normative condition that sharply defines what one considers "civil" and what not (Alexander, 2018: 34), the ongoing critique regarding the normative nature of the "civil sphere" concept in Alexander's work is neither isolated nor recent. We can identify three sources for this criticism: perspectives from a political economy approach, which attribute the concept's normativity to its eminently culturalist nature and its detachment from institutional and material processes (Olvera, 2019); others, from more critically oriented approaches, which argue that Alexander's liberal project renders the civil sphere an unattainable abstraction and fails to account for the structuring of power in realms outside the civil sphere, such as family or traditions (Morris, 2007); and finally, criticisms originating from the strong program of cultural sociology itself. This latter perspective acknowledges its own liberal normative biases. While it distances itself from other even more normative "civilist" positions that dismiss the possibility of illiberalism as a structuring order of politics, it identifies a lack of understanding regarding the situated conditions of meaning emergence due to methodological limitations. Specifically, it points to the reliance on finding performances through written documents, videos, or press notes, rather than through ethnographic approaches (Alexander, 2009; Alexander and Smith, 2010; Stack, 2018). I specifically advocate for this last position, proposing that an ethnography focused on capturing the situated nature of symbolic dispute would allow us to understand

In contrast, Turner emphasizes that performance, as “social drama”, reproduces and renews meanings and symbols constituted in specific contexts⁵. We cannot evaluate its effectiveness in terms of a homogeneous symbolic normativity; instead, it reflects social tensions and transcends the play of normative roles (Turner, 1988: 90). Performance as social drama represents the eruption on the surface of continuous social life, with its interactions, reciprocities, and customs seeking to promote regulated and orderly behavior sequences (Turner, 1988: 90). To understand the mobilization of collectives in Veracruz, we must consider both arguments: it is a social struggle emerging from the civil sphere, but it also reproduces expectations and meanings that morally sustain the cultural horizon of the society they belong to. Thus, performance balances the recursive use of culture for achieving struggle objectives and the reproduction of a historically and socially situated moral and symbolic order.

The second aspect concerns the empirical referent from which the authors develop their theoretical proposals. Alexander bases his analysis on newspaper articles, videos, editorials, and other suitable materials that allows for understanding specific events interpreted as performances, or which themselves become resources within a public dispute between social actors⁶ (Alexander, 2006 and 2011). In this sense, Alexander focuses on reconstructing specific events to show how

how political dispute, from a symbolic perspective, structures itself within the civil sphere and also beyond it.

5 This stance on the situated nature of performance does not mean separating social drama from symbolic or cultural referents configured beyond the regional or local. Works analyzing the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro (Turner, 1988) or Miguel Hidalgo’s insurrection during Mexico’s independence revolution (Turner, 1974) broadly discuss the construction of symbolic referents from modernity and other national and global processes. They do so without evaluating the performance’s effectiveness (e.g., discourses the Enlightenment, the modernization of the state in 20th-century Brazil). Turner’s anthropological approach to understand its intrinsic complexity, placing Western symbolic and cultural referents on the same level of meaning as .

6 Alexander and other authors within the strong program of cultural sociology acknowledge that cultural performance and civil sphere formation, relying on secondary documents. This happened because researchers of performance reception and narratives involved in symbolic disputes. However, recent works have a broader, more open dimension and discuss the practical effects of performances on audiences (McCormick, 2017; Broch, 2015).

they become an expression of social agency through cultural means and in the use of meaningful materials within these conflicts⁷. Turner, however, while occasionally using referents such as historical archives or literary and theatrical productions, favors ethnography as a way of approaching social dramas, especially for its ability to rescue social drama as a process emerging from everyday life and originating from situated contexts (Turner, 1974). For the social protest of disappeared persons' collectives of relatives, ethnographic observation, press notes, social media publications, and semi-structured interviews allowed us to capture this dual link of performance: agentic action and the structural reproduction of the cultural horizon of meaning that protest conveys.

Both authors agree that performance should be analyzed as a process consisting of phases. However, each positions themselves differently concerning its disaggregation as integrating elements of a dramaturgical "script". Turner speaks of phases like breach, crisis, redressive action, and the final or reintegration phase, showing that social drama does not necessarily have a resolution at its end; instead, it can lead to the continuity of conflict and the accumulation of meanings put into action at later moments (Turner, 1988). Alexander interprets this distinction of performance staging phases differently, arguing that: 1) Turner "naturalizes" these concepts (i.e., makes them intrinsic to the performance itself) and 2) although each performance develops differently, it generally presents a beginning, a critical phase, and a close that can end in success or failure, depending on the objectives of each involved actor (Alexander, 2006: 62-63). In this way, considering that the protest of the collectives in Veracruz is a recurring, unresolved staging, yet constituting the expression of differentiated messages according to different moments, I find it important to account for moments such as the "beginning" where they prepare and construct symbolic protest resources, the "staging" moment where narratives and symbolic resources express publicly to audiences and the counterparts of disappeared persons' families, the "crisis" moment where the conflict's expression gains greater emotional and expressive intensity, and the

⁷ Tavera and Johnston call these objects *cultural artifacts*. They describe them as symbolic products individuals or groups create, which gain importance because their audiences always interpret them socially. They also become part of an ongoing cultural creation through subsequent interpretation, even after their initial materialization (Tavera and Johnston, 2017: 116).

“symbolic reordering” moment where, although the conflict remains unresolved, emotions and the conflict’s expression temper, awaiting responses or reactions from counterparts.

We can analyze performance through the visibility of what takes place within it, and this also forms a subject of debate between both authors. While Alexander argues that two levels of performance visibility exist (the “staging” itself and the “mis-en-scene”, or lost scene), in which elements generating social agency can appear that, though not explicitly manifested, contribute to amplifying and legitimizing a position in the conflict (Alexander, 2006: 36), Turner, assuming that these levels of visibility exist as “implicit” and “explicit” performance, considers them not necessarily congruent forms of staging. Part of this incongruence lies in the reproductive nature of cultural meanings and the asymmetries generating conflict at one level of performance staging (the implicit), and the manifest staging of conflict to generate changes through social drama (the explicit) (Turner, 1982: 73). For the present study, analyzing the existing duality in the structure-agency relationship through the mismatches between levels of visibility within the protest will prove important. That is, we assume with Turner that while explicit staging gains effectiveness from the manifest expression of conflict, an implicit level of it tends to reproduce values and moral conditioning that prevent an agentic overflow that could jeopardize the social bond between protesters and their counterparts.

Finally, another important aspect involves message communication and the analytical approach to studying it. Alexander provides some ideas in his proposal for analyzing the “civil sphere”, considering that discourse and performance meaning can be analytically separated to understand positions in dispute within a staging. He suggests three analytical categories: “motives” (mobilizing characteristics that should mobilize actors), “relations” (moral evaluation of actors’ performance), and “institutions” (organizations that should form based on the described relations), which define binary codes of what actors deem “positive” or “negative” (Alexander, 2018: 85). While Turner does not offer such a meticulous analytical development for understanding emergent discourses among performative actors, he notes that, as in ritual, myth acquires materiality and presence in performance development. Analytically isolating myth from ritual risks essentializing symbolic production, so one should not lose sight of the creative and pragmatic nature of myth staging (Turner, 1988). Thus, two

important movements are necessary within the analysis of narratives communicated by actors in my study: reconstructing positions within the conflict, how they construct binary oppositions to make sense of differences between actors, and understanding the value of these narratives in performance staging.

Methodology

This study is qualitative, employing a pragmatic ethnographic approach. This means its unit of analysis is the public protest of collectives of families of disappeared persons as: 1) a “performance”, but not just an isolated event that by itself generates transformative results, but as: 2) a “process” that also involves meanings, moral and symbolic horizons, and structures that delimit the performance’s agentic character. Therefore, I define a pragmatic ethnographic approach as one that allows for prolonged, continuous, or fragmented observation of situations in public spaces, requiring skill in fieldwork entry, observation recording, and a situated and embodied analysis of action (Cefaï, 2013).

This involved approaching the study object using various information gathering tools. First, I tracked journalistic reports from February to December 2023, which simultaneously provided specific data on particular protest events and public statements from actors involved in the performance (families of disappeared persons, accompanying activists, government actors, and unmobilized citizen actors). At the same time, I conducted field immersions during the same period (February-December 2023), recorded in ethnographic observation reports, where I accompanied in situ the protests of the collectives “María Herrera-Xalapa,” “Buscando a Nuestrxs Desaparecidxs Xalapa”, and “Familiares Enlaces Xalapa”, within the same date range. The ethnographic reports allowed for in-depth understanding of both the protest development and the viewpoints of various actors, as well as recurrences in the protest’s staging. I conducted unstructured interviews with actors involved in the performance during ethnographic observation, and also analyzed social media publications (particularly Facebook) to understand public responses to the protest development. I analyzed all this accumulated information using MAXQDA 2020 software, which helped identify emergent condensations, differences in performance development at different visibility levels, and information organization

to allow for a critical interpretation of the collected information. Tables 2 and 3, constructed from the abductive coding performed with the mentioned software, are presented at the end of the document.

This implies ethical management, where safeguarding the identities of involved actors, particularly those with whom I dialogued in the field, is important. While I may mention some names of public figures from publicly accessible journalistic notes (especially in cases of high-level state officials and collective leaders who spoke publicly in the observed protests), this will not apply to actors who shared their testimony at non-explicit performance levels.

The Mobilization of Collectives as Performance: Development, Discourses, and Levels of Visibility

Performative Phases of Protests

Following Turner (1988), and based on the categorization by Arteaga and Arzuaga (2014) using his performative approach, I will briefly describe some identifiable persistent elements in protest acts (marches, rallies, public documentary screenings). This will allow us to identify elements found in the analysis of public protests by the collectives as a political performance, which we will discuss later (see Table 2).

Initiation Phase

Before the event, accompanying activists and family members arrive at the agreed meeting point. These are usually spaces with some significance related to the protest (Panteón Palo Verde⁸, Plaza Regina⁹, the Memorial

8 Panteón Palo Verde, a cemetery in southern Xalapa, revealed a series of mass graves containing at least 300 unidentified bodies. This discovery implied irregularities in the State Prosecutor's forensic data regarding the number of bodies in mass graves. Collectives in Xalapa denounced the situation and have since used this cemetery as a rallying point for marches and large-scale protests.

9 Human rights and journalist defense activists named the city's main Plaza de Armas "Plaza Regina". Formerly known as Plaza Lerdo (commemorating Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, a former Mexican president born in Xalapa), it received a new name after someone murdered journalist Regina Martínez, a correspondent for Proceso magazine (Derbez and Illescas, 2020).

de Desaparecidos¹⁰). Upon arrival, they begin preparing the contingents, distributing objects useful for the protest, such as distinctive signs, banners with photos of the disappeared, star-shaped balloons, umbrellas with protest slogans, etc. Journalists from various media outlets and people who are part of the collectives, whether companions or public representatives, arrive and offer interviews and statements. They generally try to ensure that family members of the disappeared are interviewed to highlight their particular cases. Once they agree on slogans, contingent order, and other logistical details, the marches and rallies begin. At another scenic level, officials from different institutions accompany the collectives, such as employees from the State Search Commission and the State Human Rights Commission, members of the State Citizen Council, who wear distinctive items like vests or shirts with their institution's images. They offer water, logistical support, supplies for light and sound, and other services that the mobilized actors might need. Traffic officers also join, ensuring the event's road safety.

Staging

Once the protest begins, slogans are expressed against the government and other actors they seek to interpellate: "They took them alive, we want them alive!" "We are not one, we are not a hundred, damn government, count us (find them) well" (chanted with special force and emotion upon reaching the protest's culmination point, especially when saying "damn government"); "Son/Daughter, listen, your mother is in the fight", "They are not absent, they are disappeared, shout loudly, shout loudly", "Now, now, it becomes indispensable, living presentation and punishment for the guilty", "Join, join, your child could be next", "Sir, madam, don't be indifferent, they kidnap our children, in front of people", among others. They prominently display banners with images of disappeared family members and objects made for the protest. The reaction of people witnessing the protest varies: from signs of support

10 This initiative, a collaboration between some Xalapa collectives (including *Buscando a Nuestrxs Desaparecidxs* and *Colectivo Enlaces Xalapa*), the Xalapa City Council, and several business chambers, took over five years to build, from design to inauguration. Changes in municipal administration and a lack of funding presented obstacles. Finally, after its inauguration in 2022, it has served as a space preserving the memory of certain disappearance cases, particularly those *Colectivo Enlaces Xalapa* has highlighted.

and solidarity for the protest, to gestures of disapproval for road closures, shouts of interpellation in disagreement with the protest, and even passersby's non-reaction to the acts performed. In the course of events, either on social media or through public statements, high-level public officials may express their disagreement or understanding of the protest motives, giving the impression that the staging is clearly being received. Meanwhile, officials accompanying the protest remain attentive to both the protesters' safety and any physical needs they might have along the way. They offer bottles of water and, as part of the contingent, bring a vehicle (sometimes an ambulance or an official institutional unit) which they offer to anyone showing symptoms of sunstroke or fatigue. Some officials present at the protest can be seen with mobile phones in hand, trying to coordinate among themselves, or mediating to be received by a state authority who can address the demands of the mobilized families.

Crisis

In this phase, the boundaries between the performance's visibility levels blur. All actors unite through the manifest expression of conflict, and the social drama reaches its climax (Turner, 1988). This happens when the initially interpellated authority appears, either by arriving at the protest event or by symbolically locating them at a space symbolically designated as where that authority "should be present": government buildings, public squares, monuments, memorials, etc. The previously mentioned slogans are chanted with greater force; protesters express their pain through crying and speeches that interpellate both the requested governmental authority and passers-by. They use cultural protest artifacts, in this case, objects made for this performative phase: star-shaped balloons launched into the sky in memory of the disappeared, a red cloth (symbolizing victims' blood) placed on a monument dedicated to justice to stage impunity, photos of the disappeared displayed in front of government offices to remind people that their cases remain unanswered, and so on. Journalists and protest companions remain silent or only take photographs of the events. At times, everyone remains silent after these emotionally intense acts, and active participation from everyone is sought, regardless of hierarchies or victim experience. In some cases, even lower-level or less visible officials would cry, infected by the emotional display of the moment. Turner

defines these conditions of communion and solidarity as “*communitas*”, a moment recognizing a generalized social bond that has ceased to exist but must still be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural bonds (Turner, 1969: 96). However, the sacredness of the victim experience is not the only value generating bonding evident at this moment; instead, it also includes both the affirmation of the State’s symbolic power as the sole entity capable of resolving victims’ demands, and the legitimacy of their demands.

Symbolic Reordering

After the crisis, the mobilization pauses and the contingent withdraws. Various groups form where they can discuss what happened, continue giving statements to the press, or engage in activities like eating or continuing to embroider red textiles. At this moment, high-level officials may come to try and initiate dialogue or reach agreements for meetings where they can address the demands of the protesters. Off-stage, officials and institutional employees continue assisting and collaborating with protesters. Depending on the moment, they may continue providing water and road protection, or attend concentrations of protesters to provide blankets, coffee, bread, and food if they are conducting night protests. It is not uncommon to see protesters and officials talking or socializing at these times. While the conditions for this apparent truce do not generate a final solution to the explicit conflict, it does mark the end of the critical phase. Social drama does not necessarily resolve conflicts, but it serves to make them evident, deploy a series of symbolic and emotional resources, and add experiences to a collective memory marked by the shared trauma of disappeared family members (Alexander, 2012).

Contrary to Alexander’s proposals on the success or failure of the performative act (2006), which evaluate stagings in terms of their ability to expose a situation or achieve the objectives of a struggle, the symbolic reordering of the collectives’ protests shows, in their persistence, that although emotional force and the intensity of pain and suffering expressions decrease, this does not in itself signify success, as they rarely fully achieve their struggle objectives, and public perception of the disappearance problem remains fragmented. Possibly, approaching performance as an isolated event allows for evaluative statements, but an ethnographic approach, oriented towards reconstructing

performance as a process, prevents definitive assertions about a performative act's success or failure. I agree with Robledo (2017) that the tragedy of the social drama of the collectives' protest lies in it being an unresolved problem, neither in its widespread occurrence nor in obtaining justice for the protesters, due to historical, political, and structural conditions that allow the persistence of impunity and opacity in handling disappearance cases.

The Discourses at Play

Alexander argues that discourses hold significant value in performance, as they express opinions, establish boundaries, and can organize what “is” or “is not” social (Alexander, 2018). Following the dramaturgical metaphor, they function as “script” that are staged, guiding distinctions between what one can and cannot do, what is good and what is bad. Within social mobilization, discourse elements can be divided into three characteristics: “motives”, which define moral and practical characteristics for achieving political objectives; “relations”, which account for the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the bond between political actors ; and “institutions”, which describe the moral characteristics of political organization forms developed by actors with those types of relations (Alexander, 2018: 85). We found that the explicit and implicit expressions of the performance reveal three types of narratives, each establishing distinct expectations and values regarding disappearance and the public intervention of collectives (see Table 3).

The narrative held by the collectives entails a pure/impure valuation oriented toward solidarity and understanding for the suffering of mothers and children who lose their family members under such a liminal condition that it becomes impossible to determine whether these are cases of live search or death. Thus, “pure” defines itself in relation to seeking empathy and moral support for families, building trust and sincerity with victims, and adhering to a normative framework that guarantees efficiency and humane attention to families of disappeared persons¹¹. In contrast, “impure” manifests itself through

11 Regarding this, a family member of a disappeared person belonging to collectives stated the following in an interview with local media: “Above all, we no longer want simulations. We no longer want public servants who only serve themselves from our country and do absolutely nothing for its people. We want genuinely committed, capable, sensitive people with values, and most importantly, people who possess the

the lack of solidarity and empathy shown by government actors and an insensitive society; in the electoral use of dialogue that the government occasionally develops with the collectives; and in institutions that foster impunity, lack of respect for legality, and exclusionary attention to victims¹². In short, this constitutes a cultural construction of trauma that breaks family bonds, primarily victimizing mothers and women who lose their loved ones. It seeks to persuade a broad audience (the government, society) that these events can affect anyone, therefore each disappearance must be evaluated as a collective matter (Alexander, 2012).

Another emergent discourse comes from government actors and the political class in power, who face interpellation by the collectives' protests. This discourse, oriented towards constructing a collective identity based on the idea of "the people" as a unifying element of society's demands and political aspirations, builds a notion of purity rooted in attending to victims as subjects affected by a prior process of social decomposition attributed to the "neoliberal regime". They believe these individuals must receive individualized attention, addressing "the social causes of violence" (poverty, lack of access to education and employment). "Impurity", then, is attributed to the reproduction of the "old regime", deemed corrupt, criminal, and an enemy of the people: either through the "politicization" of public interventions, the "irrationality" of criticisms against government performance, and direct or indirect links to "neoliberal" politicians¹³. Paraphrasing Alexander real knowledge to actively implement not only this protocol but also execute them as they should" (Eureka Medios, 2020).

12 In an interview with another local media outlet, another searching mother of a disappeared family member declared: "But it also changes your life because your family hardly supports you; they distance themselves. They think this is leprosy, right? That it will spread. The friends you thought you had, who would stay with you until death, distance themselves. At first, it hurts, and it hurts a lot, but you understand them, and you pray to God they never find themselves in your shoes, right?" (En Abierto Mx, 2021).

13 In an interview with the state government's television station, the state governor discussed the old regime, its approach to violence, and how his administration handles the problem: "We already tried the other way, tolerating them, making deals with them, and look, look at the levels of entrenchment they achieved in the state. So, security did not improve. That governor who said he would achieve it in six months [grimace] proved a fiasco. So, we have no other path than to confront, contain, and initiate what the President of the Republic now proposes: address the root of the problem, stop abandoning the countryside, stop abandoning young people, create opportunities, create

and Tognato (2018), these actors, having come from a trajectory of civil mobilization, point out their liberal component as a limitation in a closer bond between governors and governed.

Finally, a discourse emerges from citizen actors who, not being directly involved in the issue of disappearance and perceiving themselves as interpellated by the collectives as an “insensitive” social sector, emotionally and politically distance themselves from the collectives’ discourse and from protests deemed “radical”. However, they uphold within their parameters of moral purity the free manifestation of ideas and citizen behavior guided by a valid rule of law. That is, the only legitimate form of public influence, political engagement, and interaction with the State is through non-contentious demand management with institutions and avoiding harm to third parties¹⁴. Emphasis is placed on a discourse based on assigning meaning to citizenship as an “integrating” element, in opposition to a sense of citizenship as a form of social fragmentation, very similar to criticisms some social sectors have made of various feminist mobilizations like the #MeToo movement (Arteaga and Cardona, 2020).

In summary, we observe a series of narratives proposing different forms of social change, differing in terms of the relationship between transformation and order. Collectives argue for the necessity of crisis in a model of social relations that has lost the moral value of empathy and support for neighbors, expressed in the social and political abandonment of victims, appealing to a meaning structure based on the moral value of maternal love and family bonds. The state government advocates for “growth” (TVMAS, 2019). This quote exemplifies the governmental position on purity and impurity within the discourse surrounding the issue.

14 In a public statement, the president of the Xalapa Metropolitan Business Council indicated that state authorities should address the demands of collectives of families of disappeared persons. He asserted that “[...] it is the authorities’ responsibility to receive their petitions and act for a prompt solution, but they must not violate the rights of the rest of the population”. He said the latter, referring to marches and road closures near businesses, which people viewed as an act that “puts the assets of many citizens at risk,” noting that “many families’ finances are complicated” (diariodexalapa.com.mx, 2023). On social media platforms like Facebook, some users voiced similar complaints: “Yes, that’s why the collectives have the center closed now, causing a vehicular chaos of a thousand devils” (García, 2023), or “Address the families of disappeared persons, provide a solution to their requests and to the situation Xalapa is experiencing; the entire population is affected, and you are out strolling... Do your job! Attend to your people!” (García, 2023).

a new established order where all social needs (including victim care) must be met individually, without intermediaries, and institutionally. A sector of citizens not affiliated with political parties considers free expression and citizen oversight of government important, but rejects responsibility for the victim status of disappeared persons' families, and differentiates between "good" protest (without harming other citizens, or damaging buildings or monuments) and "bad" protest (detriment to citizens and businesses, damage to heritage).

Levels of Performance Visibility and Structure-Agency Relationship

According to the analysis, we can affirm with Turner the existence of two distinct levels of visibility in the collectives' protest performance: an "explicit" level, where clearly opposing positions manifest between a collective actor seeking to publicize a social condition to generate concrete actions, and a counterpart who disqualifies and questions their actions and narratives, actively seeking public visibility and expression in public spaces (areas of high traffic, mass media, social media publications). A "non-explicit" level, intentionally developed outside the scene and in the most hidden part of the performance, where solidarities and emotions contain the protest, generating moral nuances and preventing an agentic overflow that would break a basic social bond (Turner, 1988).

At the "explicit" level, staging implies an intentionality to clearly express each actor's positions. Collectives overtly criticize the government for its inefficiency in searching for the disappeared and a society they denounce as unsupportive and insensitive, highlighting a critique of a societal model that avoids addressing and intervening in disappearance and violence. High-profile government actors publicly defend their actions, minimizing protest expressions through "informing the people" and "not politicizing" public issues¹⁵. Citizen actors express themselves by rejecting protests when they perceive their interests, their "right to

15 In response to one of the collective's protest events in Xalapa, on November 7, 2023, the state governor posted a Facebook message stating: "We inform society: ATTENTION TO VICTIMS OF DISAPPEARANCES IN VERACRUZ HAS BEEN UNPRECEDENTED" (García, 2023). Similarly, when state government officials initially met with protestors, they primarily aimed to "inform" about progress rather than address petitions or reach agreements. Mothers of the disappeared noted this during the protest, perceiving it as a way to refuse dialogue and impose an agenda on the protestors.

free movement,” are affected, and by criticizing what they call “the correct ways” to protest. In this sense, Alexander (2005) explains this relationship between performance and agency by stating that performance, at its explicit level, operates as a form of cultural pragmatics where individual or collective actors seek to generate actions by displaying their social situation to others.

Conversely, at a “non-explicit” level of performance, personal and affective bonds function as a social mechanism of solidarity and containment, where the moral, logistical, and affective closeness of some state actors prevents a total rupture between the collectives and the political and social spheres. At this level, “street-level” government officials accompany families of disappeared persons, using their institutional functions and attributes to provide support, or even more personally by providing food, shelter, water, communication, among other goods, without this necessarily being a state or institutional directive. What sustains this solidarity is the reproduction of values like empathy towards a suffering “other” (“the pain of a mother without her children”, a worker from the State Search Commission told me), regardless of state or institutional mediations, and the moral value of family ties for Xalapa families. That is, the non-explicit, unlike what James Scott (1988) proposes regarding hidden discourses and spaces in a subaltern relationship, does not operate as a space of resistance in this case. Not for the victims, at least. Here, affective and solidarity bonds develop, leading to nuanced public discourse from families of disappeared persons regarding their criticism of the government and society. Not all society is insensitive, nor is all government ineffective or unempathetic: some supportive actors offer hope to protesters.

Performance operates as a staging that goes beyond expressing subjectivities that push social boundaries ; in fact, interpellating the government as an actor that can solve the problem of searching for the disappeared and assisting victims continues to give political power to the State. Similarly, the symbolic resource of taking streets and public squares as an act of public space appropriation, or the re-signification of buildings and monuments during performance, and even maintaining personal solidarity with low-level government officials, updates the affective and solidarity bond of protesters with society. According to Durkheim, these moral and solidarity manifestations, carried out by actors’ own desire with a sense of self-sacrifice, vindicate the social bond and structure, rather than breaking them (Durkheim, 2006 and 2016).

As anticipated in the performance description section, we must highlight in the analysis that the protest's crisis phase, as in other ritual or political performances, blurs what is implicit and explicit, rendering everything fully explicit in the public protest performance of the collectives. The "sacralization of disappeared persons"—a symbolic status in which questioning each disappearance is deemed immoral and subject to sanction—becomes evident at this protest moment. This confrontation of sacrality occurs at the performance's most liminal moment, and at this same moment, all participants actively seek to blur their differences. High and low-level officials become liminal beings who lack status, properties, or distinctions, or if they have them, the protesters do not recognize them (Turner, 1969: 95). The staging of "communitas"—the homogeneous and undifferentiated bond among actors participating in the performance (Turner, 1969: 96)—allows for effective interpellation of authorities who, at other times, are seen as detached from the daily lives of the governed, thus reinforcing the protesters' message regarding the urgency of addressing disappearance cases. It is also important to note that this liminal phase has practical effects on constituting a common identity among collective members, strengthening the emotional, affective, and political ties inherent in the experience of protesting together; that is, it generates a political-affective community and an experience of collective political socialization (Robledo, 2017; Gordillo-García, 2023).

Conclusions

Studying the public protests of collectives of families of disappeared persons allows us to understand social mobilization not only as a subjectifying and agentic mechanism, but also as a reproduction of social relationship structures, meanings, and political power bonds. Although Alexander's cultural sociology strongly emphasizes the transformative character of performance, it's crucial to recognize that structural conditions, both in terms of meaning and political-economic relations, limit the scope of such symbolic action. Therefore, its transformative potential is determined by situated structural conditions. In this sense, the great paradox of performative cultural action is that despite the persistent mobilization of families of disappeared persons, forced and private disappearances continue to rise, as do deficiencies in state victim

support and stigmatization from everyday environments toward the disappeared and their families (González-Villarreal, 2022).

The protests of collectives of families of disappeared persons, as cultural products, are not solely explained by a liberal-democratic narrative that divides the world into positive and negative terms for achieving a democratic society. While Alexander's proposal helps understand how trauma can be a mechanism for motivating actions and narratives oriented towards social action in general and the vindication of certain social liberal banners, it is also important to recognize that pain, loss, helplessness, and frustration coexist with solidarity and the construction of affective bonds that do not necessarily anchor in state control or other characteristics of civil discourse. The affective, emotional, and symbolic bonds expressed within the protest also acquire meaning in situated conditions, where the game of constructing democracy is one of several language games put into practice in public debate.

The study of performances, at least within Alexander's proposed logic, has favored analyzing specific, clearly identifiable stagings, methodologically accessible through materials such as videos, press notes, editorials, etc. This approach tends to place a stronger analytical emphasis on the effectiveness and success of performance as an expression of social agency in the public sphere. However, combining this approach with ethnographic methods and a theoretical discussion close to anthropological theory allows for a more complex understanding of performances as expressions of both social agency and the structural conditions that bind human beings in social relationships, as other studies developed from the "strong program of cultural sociology" have already shown (McCormick, 2017; Broch, 2015). Therefore, we must not abandon ethnographic analysis of performances, as it provides a more complex view of cultural pragmatics and the locally situated anchors of performative action.

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Appendix

Table 1

Dimensions of Theoretical Dialogue between Alexander's and Turner's Theories of Performance

Theoretical Proposal Characteristics	Cultural Pragmatics (Jeffrey Alexander)	Social Drama (Victor Turner)
Analytical Interest	Success-failure of performance evaluated by “defusion” or “refusion”. Normative tendency towards a concept of liberal democracy (civil sphere).	Action through symbols and updating of social and structural bonds. We cannot normatively evaluate the emergence of meaningful narratives, nor do they necessarily produce structural or role transformative action.
Empirical Referent	Primarily documentary (public discourses, press, videos, editorials).	Ethnography, interviews with actors, historical documentation.
Performance Phases	No established a priori phases (scripts). It has a beginning, a crisis, and the search for its solution. Performance as open staging.	-Breach, -Crisis, -Redressive Action, -Final Phase (Reintegration)
Visibility	-Staging, -Mis-en-scene	-Explicit Performance, -Implicit Performance
Symbolic Expression of Conflicting Parties	Discourse as a way of defining positions that acquire meaning from the conflict between performative actors.	The underlying texts or narratives acquire materiality and resolution to their internal contradictions in the performance's development. Little interest in meaning “condensation”.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Alexander (2005, 2006, 2011, 2012, 2018) and Turner (1969, 1974, 1982, 1988).

Table 2

Staging of the Performance of Disappeared Persons' Families' Protest

Levels of Visibility Phases	Explicit	Non-Explicit
Initiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Preparation of symbolic protest resources. -Communication with the media. -Demonstrations of affection and solidarity within the protesting group. -Initiation of protest actions (marches, sit-ins). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Arrival of street-level officials (traffic, CEDH, Search Commission). -Agreements for carrying out the protest and logistical coordination with officials. -Installation of logistical resources (tents, power sources, food table, etc.).
Staging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Chanting slogans against the government. -Societal interpellation. -Use of symbolic protest artifacts. -Reaction of citizens not allied with protesters. -Reaction of high-level government officials (silence or criticism). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Logistical management by officials. -Distribution of supplies (bottled water, offering food or blankets, offering vehicles and assistance to exhausted protesters). -Political intermediation with high-level government actors.
Crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Blurring of the explicit and non-explicit boundary. -Sacralization of disappearance (liminality). -Explicit interpellation to government and society. -Use of symbolic and emotional resources (symbolic artifacts, re-signification of spaces, slogans) at their highest intensity. 	
Symbolic Reordering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Opening of dialogue spaces with high-level government actors. -Discussion of viewpoints and agreements. -Withdrawal of protesters. -Attention to the media. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Offering food, blankets, or other logistical supplies by low-level officials. -Emotional accompaniment to protesters. Logistics agreements with non-victim protesters (NGOs, allied citizens).

Source: Author's own elaboration based on ethnographic data, press notes, and interviews.

Table 3

Narratives on the Legitimacy of the Protest

Narrative Levels	Collectives	Government	Citizens Not Allied with Victims
Motives	<p>Pure: Experimentation with the condition of a victim and impunity. Solidarity with the victims. The figure of the suffering mother as a legitimizing framework.</p> <p>Impure: Lack of solidarity with the victims. Insensitive government and un-empathetic society.</p>	<p>Pure: Victims as “the people”, who have the right to free expression within legal channels and respect for their office.</p> <p>Impure: Irrationality, “politicization”, and misinformation regarding government actions.</p>	<p>Pure: Manifestation is respectable, as long as it appeals to dialogue and agreements that benefit everyone.</p> <p>Impure: Protest demonstration that affects third parties and the economy of other citizens. Insensitive government.</p>
Relations	<p>Pure: Altruism, trust, and sincerity with victims.</p> <p>Impure: Electoral use of dialogue with collectives by the government.</p>	<p>Pure: Autonomous manifestation without intermediaries.</p> <p>Impure: Links with previous governments or “the power mafia”. “Politicization” of demands.</p>	<p>Pure: Open attitude to deliberation and the common good.</p> <p>Impure: Conspiracy, deceitful links of protesters with political actors.</p>
Institutions	<p>Pure: Adherence to the legal framework for victim assistance, agreed upon with collectives.</p> <p>Impure: Illegality, impunity, exclusionary attention to victims.</p>	<p>Pure: Adherence to the legal framework for victim assistance, “case by case.”</p> <p>Impure: Attention to “pernicious intermediaries”.</p>	<p>Pure: The legal framework must be applied equally to all citizens.</p> <p>Impure: The guarantee of rights for one group cannot override the rights of the majority.</p>

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on ethnographic data, press notes, and interviews.

Erick Alfonso Galán Castro. Researcher for Mexico at the Secretariat of Science, Humanities, Technology, and Innovation (SECIHTI), assigned to the Institute of Historical-Social Research at Veracruz University. Member of the National System of Researchers, Level 1. Holds a Doctorate in Social Sciences, with a specialization in sociology from FLACSO Mexico (2015). Research areas: social movements, peacebuilding, attention to victims of disappearance, and security policies. Recent publications: 1) Galán Castro, Erick Alfonso and Zavaleta Betancourt, José Alfredo (2025), “Las emociones de las víctimas en la publicitación de la construcción de paz en Veracruz”, in *Espiral. Estudios Sobre Estado y Sociedad*, vol. 32, núm. 92, México: Universidad de Guadalajara. 2) Galán Castro, Erick Alfonso (2023), “Los colectivos de familiares de desaparecidos en el proceso de construcción de paz en Veracruz”, in *Eirene Estudios de Paz y Conflictos*, vol. 6, núm. 11, México: Eirene Estudios de Paz y Conflictos A. C.. 3) Galán Castro, Erick Alfonso (2020), “Disputar los derechos de las víctimas: Estructura de oportunidades y performance político en Veracruz”, in Aguilar Sánchez, Martín, Moreno Andrade, Saúl y González Molohua, Yolanda (coords.), *Protestas y movilizaciones sociales en el Golfo de México*, México: Universidad Veracruzana.