Shrill, Emotional and Uncivil: Rhetorical Vehemence and the Silencing of Feminist Protest in Mexico City's Glitter Revolution

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Abstract

This article examines how rhetorical vehemence, while often dismissed as 'uncivil,' functions as a resource for counterpublic discourse to intervene in public discussions. Drawing on scholarship in civility, counterpublic theory, and argumentation studies, the article argues that norms of civility, though framed as neutral procedures enhancing deliberation, can function to police rhetorical style and delegitimize dissenting voices. Through analysis of the Glitter Revolution in Mexico City—where feminist collectives inscribed graffiti on the Angel of Independence monument to protest femicides—the article shows how confrontational protest was dismissed based on its rhetorical style rather than on the reasons that motivated the protests. High-ranking officials, media outlets, and public opinion converged in defining the protest as 'uncivil' thereby shifting attention from structural gender-based violence to the way the protests were expressed. The article discusses the consequences of this dismissal in terms of counterpublics and argumentation studies.

Introduction

The Glitter Revolution took place in Mexico City in August 2019. During these events, feminist collectives intervened on the Angel of Independence—one of the most iconic monuments in the city— with graffiti messages demanding justice for gender-based violence. The protests were called in response to the rape of a teenage girl by police officers earlier that month. The demonstrations were met with criticism that focused on the affective dimension of the protests and the perceived misconduct of the protesters rather than on the substance of their claims. Criticism came from both high-ranking officials and civil society. On social media, the hashtags *#As'No* [Yes, but not like that] and *#NoMeRepresentan* [They do not represent me]1 gained popularity and were used to denounce the protest as 'uncivilized' and to appeal to a supposedly correct way of demonstrating, while delegitimizing the act of inscribing protest through graffiti in public space. In the media, coverage centered on the actions of the protesters, while only a few outlets mentioned the structural causes that led to the demonstrations (Salas SigŸenza 2021). High-ranking officials, public opinion, and the media thus converged in defining the Glitter Revolution as an act of uncivil protest. Against these criticisms, feminist collectives responded by redefining the intervention on the Angel, shifting attention from the act of defacing monuments to the ongoing crisis of femicides in the country.

Although social protest is regarded as an essential practice in liberal democratic societies through which people can participate in public discussion, when it becomes too confrontational it is often censored and called into question (Butler 2020). Actions that breach the norms of protest are usually defined by the media and other actors as 'unreasonable' delegitimizing participants on the basis of how the protest is expressed rather than on what it demands. This tension highlights a normative dimension that regulates both protest and public discussion. One such set of norms is civility.

While civility is often said to enhance deliberative public discussion, it can also function as a gatekeeping mechanism (Chick 2020; Thiranagama et al. 2018; Lozano-Reich & Cloud 2009). On the one hand, civility is commonly invoked as an expectation that the public exchange of ideas should remain respectful, peaceful, neutral, and orderly, where the best argument is assumed to be the only valid authority. Though these elements can contribute to public deliberation and opinion formation, they may also prevent some people from participating in public debates. This is particularly the case for marginalized groups who lack the material and symbolic resources—such as access to media, legitimacy, or power—to enter public debate. As an alternative, they may resort to other forms of expressing

political claims that sometimes break norms of civility in order to place issues on the public agenda. Such groups have been theorized as counterpublics (e.g., Asen 2000; Fraser 1992), which constitute parallel arenas of discourse where marginalized actors cultivate practices that contest the dominant publics. Because these practices often disrupt prevailing norms of style and expression, they are frequently labeled as 'uncivil'. Rhetorical vehemence is one such practice.

Scholars in argumentation studies have identified three levels of norms that regulate contributions to public argumentation at a *micro*, *meso*, and *macro* level (Zenker et al. 2024). At the macro level, norms regulate interactions between individuals and institutions, setting expectations such as fairness and openness in public debate. At the meso level, they guide how arguments are advanced and evaluated, emphasizing coherence, persuasiveness, and the attitudes of arguers. At the micro level, they secure intelligibility and communicative effectiveness through linguistic and conversational conventions. Although this framework offers a valuable way of understanding the layered operation of norms in public argumentation, the role of protest and counterpublics remains underexplored. In fact, counterpublics have been mentioned only as a special case of collective opinion formation by marginalized groups who hold, express, or push for a common idea against the prevailing public opinion (Zenker et al. 2020). This contribution highlights this theoretical gap.

This essay argues that rhetorical vehemence, while often dismissed as 'uncivil', functions as a resource for counterpublics to intervene in public discussions. While norms of civility are often framed as neutral procedures that enhance public deliberation, this work shows that those norms are also exploited to police rhetorical style and delegitimize dissenting voices. To defend this thesis, the essay draws on the concept of textual vehemence (Tomlinson 2010, 1998, 1996) to examine how unauthorized and confrontational rhetoric is often rendered as 'uncivil'. Drawing on the case of the Glitter Revolution in Mexico City, the analysis shows how feminist collectives employed rhetorically vehement protest, particularly through graffiti on the Angel of Independence, to force the crisis of femicides onto the public agenda. In doing so, this contribution builds upon the idea of rhetorical vehemence as a legitimate mode of counterpublic discourse that, while breaking civility norms at the meso level, opens spaces for subaltern voices at the macro level.

To develop this argument, the essay first situates rhetorical vehemence within debates on civility and argumentation, highlighting how conventional norms of civility often delegitimize affective forms of expres-

“Because not everyone has the material and symbolic means to access media, alternative political perspectives struggle to be publicized and circulated.”

sion by deeming them 'unreasonable'. Then it turns to the case of the Glitter Revolution and the graffiti on the Angel of Independence, analyzing how inscriptions in symbolic public spaces function rhetorically to raise the tone of political claims. Finally, this work considers the broader implications for public discourse, showing how the censorship of vehement modes of inscribing protest not only veils the structural problems that give rise to demonstrations but also perpetuates the *status quo*.

Civility, Rhetorical Vehemence, and the Ideology of Reasonable Protest

Scholars from different disciplines have shown that standards of civility are historically tied to dominant cultural expectations, which means they often privilege certain communicative styles while marginalizing others (Chick 2020; Thiranagama et al. 2018; Lozano-Reich & Cloud 2009). The concept of civility has many faces, ranging from moral norms that appeal to civic engagement, good manners, courtesy, and etiquette, to norms that regulate public discussion. The latter has been seen as an important component of liberal democracies. Civility, understood as a rational, respectful, and orderly exchange of ideas, is frequently framed as a set of procedural norms that can, in principle, enhance political deliberation. However, civility is also employed to enforce specific racial, gender, and class norms in the public sphere, thereby reaffirming the *status quo* (Thiranagama et al. 2018). In this sense, civility is invoked to block discussions and to keep people in place (Thiranagama et al. 2018; Bone et al. 2008; Lozano-Reich & Cloud 2009). For instance, dominant groups have historically called upon civilizing tropes to silence and discipline marginalized groups such as women, people of color, LGBTQ communities, indigenous peoples, workers, migrants, and, in general, the dispossessed for employing alternative political and rhetorical practices considered confrontational, angry, or illiterate (Lozano-Reich & Cloud 2009). Notions of property and civility were also used as normative ideals to impose legal, political, and physical restrictions on women, confining them to the private sphere (Lozano-Reich & Cloud 2009). Looking at these various connotations, civility touches on two aspects that are central for this essay: civility as an ordered procedure to structure public discussion, and civility as a code of etiquette and style. In both cases, civility can function as an exclusionary norm that privileges dominant groups.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1991) shows how public opinion emerged in bourgeois circles as a normative ideal of rational-critical debate grounded in formal equality, though in practice it was restricted to propertied men. This model aimed at consensus as the democratic potential of public discussion, but it was historically

exclusive and later distorted by commercialization and mass media. Fraser (1992) critiques Habermas for idealizing the bourgeois public sphere on the basis of accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status and hierarchies. For Fraser, Habermas's model overlooks crucial aspects of the relationship between publicity and social status. In particular, it assumes the existence of a single homogeneous public sphere where participants pursue the public good, thereby conflating 'the public good' with bourgeois interests. Because of this blind spot, Fraser argues, Habermas fails to account for other nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing publics that emerged contemporaneously with the bourgeois public sphere. Fraser thus shows that marginalized groups contested their exclusion from official public life and carved access routes to participation in public debate at the same time that the bourgeois public sphere was forming.

From the outset, such counterpublics contested the norms of the bourgeois public sphere and developed their own alternative styles of political behavior and norms of public speech. Counterpublics, understood in this way, are discursive entities that articulate explicit alternatives to dominant publics, which often exclude the interests of potential participants in the public sphere. In this sense, counterpublic theory seeks to disclose the power relations that inform public discourse indirectly, while at the same time revealing how participants engage in potentially emancipatory practices aimed at reconfiguring those relations (Asen 2000). Counterpublics look at collective or individual discourse that emerges through the recognition of exclusions from wider publics, discourse topics, speaking styles, and through the intention of overcoming those exclusions (Asen 2000). These speaking styles could also include more confrontational and affective rhetoric.

Fraser (1992) calls into question four assumptions in Habermas's idea of the bourgeois public sphere, one of which is particularly relevant to this essay. Fraser challenges the assumption that interlocutors in a public sphere can bracket their status differences and argue *as if* they were social equals. One problem that emerges from this is that, even when formal exclusions based on gender, race, or property have been abolished in some places, social inequalities continue to hinder deliberative processes. Fraser argues that the bourgeois expectation of bracketing such differences is not only unrealistic but also works to the advantage of dominant groups and to the disadvantage of subordinate groups. Unequal access to major media outlets is one of many examples. Because not everyone has the material and symbolic means to access media, alternative political perspectives struggle to be publicized and circulated. In the case of actors such as feminist groups, this dynamic plays a crucial role in shaping the way protest events like the Glitter Revolution

are signified. This lack of access to media is reinforced by the fact that media outlets tend to reproduce the bourgeois values that govern the public sphere (see Hall et al. 1978). Instead of assuming equality by bracketing differences, Fraser suggests that a better approach is to highlight them and bring them into public discussion, thereby exposing the mechanisms that exclude people from full participation in the public sphere.

A second problem regarding the assumption of bracketing inequalities is that it presumes the possibility of engaging in discussion in a culture-neutral space. This view, according to Fraser (1992), assumes that the public sphere is, or can be, completely free of any particular cultural *ethos* and capable of accommodating expressions from all cultural backgrounds. However, in class-stratified and unequally empowered societies, groups usually develop distinct cultural styles that can rarely be suspended. As a result, participation understood as speaking in one's own voice and in one's collective cultural identity—through idiom and style—is hindered (Fraser 1992).

From a different perspective than Habermas, argumentation scholars have argued that a dialectical approach to public deliberation—one focused on procedurally testing the acceptability of standpoints—can contribute to democratic practices (e.g. van Eemeren 2015; Zenker et al. 2024). Unlike Habermas's model, which privileges consensus, the dialectical vein of this approach emphasizes managing disagreement through argumentation. Within this tradition, the pragma-dialectical code of conduct for an ideal critical discussion is one of the most influential theories (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004). This model requires that participants possess the skills to reason validly, to weigh competing considerations, and to adopt the right attitude, while also presupposing a sociopolitical context of equality in which freedom of speech and intellectual pluralism are institutionally guaranteed (van Eemeren et al. 1993; van Eemeren 2015). In this sense, the resolution of disagreement is incompatible with privileging a standpoint simply because it is associated with the *status quo* or with a particular social position (van Eemeren 2014). While more open to participatory democracy than Habermas's account, this approach places considerable trust in liberal institutions to secure procedures that counteract the inequalities that characterize real-life argumentative practices.

Like Habermas's ideal model of communication, the pragma-dialectical ideal critical discussion is acknowledged as a theoretical construct for analyzing and evaluating argumentation in real contexts, treating practices *as if* they occur under ideal conditions in order to identify fallacies and procedural flaws (van Eemeren et al. 1993). However, even if never fully realized, these ideal models remain consequential in shaping expectations

of how arguers *should* behave. In effect, they carry a moral dimension whereby, for instance, ordinary people hold one another responsible for adopting certain attitudes (van Eemeren et al. 1993). Much like the norms of civility, the rules that constitute those ideal models prescribe not only how arguments ought to be advanced but also who counts as a good arguer, shaping the *ethos* of a reasonable critic. In this sense, the *ethos* required for the ideal model of a critical discussion resembles the neutral *ethos* of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas describes: an *ethos* that, while potentially beneficial for democracy in theory, can also be mobilized to silence dissent in practice.[2]

Like bracketing social inequalities, the idea of neutrality overlooks the fact that those very inequalities are translated into material capacities such as reading, analyzing, and producing reasons to justify political views. As Tomlinson (1998; 2010) shows, these practices are never neutral but rather saturated with ideologies of legitimacy and propriety. In this sense, civility as a respectful, rational exchange of ideas may already exclude some subaltern counterpublics, since it implies both suspending behaviors that can be considered confrontational and affective and that could be instrumental for counterpublic discourse. In turn, and in connection with the neutralization of cultural differences, Fraser (1992) points out that the protocols of style and decorum governing the bourgeois public sphere were closely bound to markers of status inequality, functioning to informally marginalize women and plebeian classes and thereby foreclose their participation in public life. Such protocols can take on a rhetorical dimension, becoming what Tomlinson (2010) terms an 'ideology of style'.

Both the idea of bracketing social status and of neutralizing cultural differences are embedded in the significations of civility mentioned earlier. As a procedural norm, civility presupposes that participants can enter the same process of reason exchange as equals, or even further, that they can afford to participate from a position of dialogue. Bracketing those differences in order to participate in an ordered exchange of ideas often leads to renouncing the confrontational rhetoric that is part of the cultural and communicative repertoire of some social movements and other subaltern counterpublics.

Della Porta and Diani (2006, 175) point out that one of the dilemmas of social movements and protests in liberal democracies is, on the one hand, to be disruptive enough to attract attention to their claims and demands, while on the other, to avoid stigmatization by public opinion. Similarly, Tomlinson (1996, 110), discussing textual vehemence in two texts denouncing gender-based violence, notes that both in academia and in other contexts,

“Graffiti, as a transgressive and rhetorically vehement mode of inscription, exemplifies this tension by making political claims visible through precisely the styles that civility condemns.”

employing vehemence is often a discursive strategy depending on rhetorical goals and desired effects. She poses a similar dilemma: the problems described may be overlooked if not expressed vehemently, yet if expressed too vehemently, writers risk alienating their audience. The stigmatization of discursive style often takes the form of affective disqualification, whereby vehement expressions of subordinate groups are dismissed as too shrill, too emotional, or too irrational (Tomlinson 1996, 87). The tension between being loud enough and being stigmatized highlights one of the risks that counterpublics, such as feminist protesters during the Glitter Revolution, face when employing confrontational discourse and transgressive protest as alternative political behaviors to enable their participation in the public sphere.

Examining the formation of counterpublic discourse, which cultivates alternative spaces where affective and rhetorical vehemence become resources for making public claims, suggests how such rhetorical practices, while capable of conveying urgency and importance on matters of practical public concern, run the risk of being dismissed in dominant publics as 'uncivil'. This paradox reveals that democratic participation may sometimes depend on precisely the forms of expression that civility norms seek to censor (Chick 2020). Graffiti, as a transgressive and rhetorically vehement mode of inscription, exemplifies this tension by making political claims visible through precisely the styles that civility condemns. With this theoretical framework in mind, I now turn to the case of the Glitter Revolution.

Rhetorical Vehemence in the Glitter Revolution

The Glitter Revolution emerged as a response to gender-based violence in Mexico. According to UN Women Mexico (2019), the country has experienced an alarming increase in femicides, with more than ten women murdered every day. The protests arose from feminists' exhaustion and their urgent demand to confront gender violence. The event that catalyzed the mobilization leading to the Glitter Revolution was the sexual abuse against a teenage girl in August 2019, in which police officers were implicated. Among the slogans that circulated on social media were *No me cuidan, me violan* [They do not protect me, they rape me] and *Me cuidan mis amigas, no la polic'a* [My friends protect me, not the police]. The first march was held in Mexico City on August 12. During this demonstration, protesters showered purple glitter on Security Secretary Jesœs Orta when he was being questioned about gender-based violence in the city. While this act was symbolic and nonviolent, several media outlets quickly referred to the glitter showering as an 'attack' (Salas SigŸenza 2021). The mayor of Mexico City, Claudia Sheinbaum, fueled anger among feminist protesters

by defining their initial demonstration—which included the breaking of the attorney general's office glass entrance—as 'a provocation' (Phillips 2019). With these statements, Mexico City's government legitimized a wave of online abuse and threats against feminists. Sheinbaum also announced that she would open investigations against the protesters for damages caused to public buildings, a move that prompted feminist collectives to organize another demonstration on August 16. It was during this second march that feminist collectives intervened on the Angel of Independence with graffiti denouncing gender-based violence.

Figure 1. *çngel de la Independencia* [Independence Angel] intervened during the demonstration on August 16, 2019. Photograph by EneasMx.

The Angel of Independence is positioned at a roundabout where three major avenues converge in downtown Mexico City. The Monument to Independence plays a central role in the collective representation of national symbols, and it is one of the few places in the capital where members of different social classes gather to celebrate individual, collective, and historical events. For instance, people gather at *El çngel* to celebrate the national football team's victories, *quincea–eras*, and graduations (Islas Weinstein 2024, 313). It is an iconic monument that forms part of the symbolic construction of the Mexican nation-state through foundational myths. Through social use and appropriation, it has remained a site of memory in the city (Salas SigŸenza 2021, 60).

The monument consists of a column set upon a pedestal featuring four statues representing Justice, Peace, War, and Law. Crowning the column is a statue of the Greek victory goddess, NikŽ. The Angel has served to consolidate national identity and has become both a site of celebration and of resistance. Commissioned by Porfirio D'az to architect Antonio Rivas Mercado, engineer Roberto Moreno, and sculptor Enrique Alciati, it was established that the monument would house the remains of the men who gave Mexico its nationhood, with the sole exception of one woman, Leona Vicario. According to Beltr‡n Garc'a (2019), the Angel is a monument that honors men who gave Mexico a homeland identity. In his words,

> *'it is a monument made by and for men. The women depicted in the work are abstractions of values such as victory, the homeland, and history, women who, through their bodies, represent ideas, but not themselves as individuals with agency and participation in the commemorated social struggle'. (Beltrán García 2019).*

This material and symbolic disproportion underscores why the feminist intervention at the Angel carried particular rhetorical force: graffiti inscribed by women on a monument for men by men disrupted not only a physical space but also a masculinist narrative of national memory and identity.

The slogans that feminist collectives wrote on the base of the monument appealed to various themes related to justice, solidarity, mourning, femicides, state violence, resistance, and memory. The following table shows some of these slogans.[3]

Category	Slogans
Condemnation and State Violence	Crimen de Estado [State crime] Estado feminicida [Feminicidal state] Estado feminicida, patrimonio nacional [Feminicidal state, national heritage] La patria me mata [The homeland kills me] La polic'a viola [The police rape] MŽxico es un pa's feminicida [Mexico is a feminicidal country] MŽxico Feminicida [Feminicidal Mexico] No me cuidan me violan [They don't protect me, they rape me] No m‡s Estado feminicida [No more feminicidal State] Patria asesina [Murderous homeland] Polic'a violadores [Police rapists] Quien me cuida de polic'a [Who protects me from the police?] Violadores [Rapists] Violic'a [A blend of 'rapist' and 'police']
Anger and Justice	El piso tiene m‡s derechos. YA BASTA [The floor has more rights (than us). ENOUGH] En silencio no hay justicia [There is no justice in silence] Estamos hartas [We are sick and tired] Fuimos todas [We all did it (referring to the graffiti)] JUSTICIA [Justice] La impunidad se ve peor [Impunity looks worse (than graffiti)] Los maldecimos [We curse you all] ÁMujer ‡rmate! [Woman, arm yourself!] Nunca m‡s tendr‡n la comodidad de silenciarnos [They will never again have the comfort of silencing us] Queremos JUSTICIA no venganza [We want JUSTICE, not vengeance] Ya no tenemos miedo [We are no longer afraid]
Mourning and Memory	Ni una m‡s [Not one woman more] Ni una menos [Not one women less] Por las que no volvieron [For the women who never came back] Viva que te quiero viva [Alive, because I love you alive] Vivas nos queremos [We want ourselves alive]

Table 1: Some slogans painted on the base of the monument.

The slogans painted on *El çngel* can be read as part of a multi-modal text. In combination with the march itself and other expressive acts of the Glitter Revolution, the graffiti forms a composite rhetorical event that can be reconstructed as an argument demanding justice and an end to gender-based violence. The slogans inscribed in the monument express rhetorical vehemence on two levels: through the medium or form of inscription used to convey the political message and through the tone employed in the text. Regarding the first, rhetorical vehemence as a form of textual tempering that produces rhetorical effect by adapting pitch, intensity, tone, or volume is relative to the space in which it is employed (Tomlinson 2010, 22). In the same way that the same sound will be louder in a quiet room than in a noisy one, the rhetorical vehemence of the textual inscription on the Angel can be compared to banners carried during the demonstration that conveyed similar messages. The textual vehemence of those banners is not equivalent to the rhetorical force conveyed when the same message is inscribed through graffiti on a space that enshrines a patriarchal national identity. Likewise, these graffiti statements can be contrasted with similar ones in other public spaces. For instance, the rhetorical effect of graffiti

“*No me cuidan, me violan* [They do not protect me, they rape me].”

with the same text painted on a random wall in the city is not the same as when it is inscribed on a symbolically loaded monument. Thus rhetorical vehemence is produced by the transgressive performance of inscribing a text in that specific public space.

Graffiti as a form of inscription is generally regarded as unauthorized, disruptive, and outside the bounds of what is textually considered civilized and neutral in public discourse. Restauradoras con Glitter [Glitter Restorers], a collective of approximately 50 professional conservators that emerged shortly after the intervention at el çngel, responded to the poor media coverage and stated in a communiquŽ that while they did not promote graffiti on cultural heritage sites, they recognized the social and transgressive importance of those inscriptions. Recognizing this transgressive value, the collective called on Mexican authorities to leave the graffiti intact, asserting that 'due to their wide-ranging social, historic, and symbolic relevance, the paintings should be meticulously documented by professionals in order to emphasize and maintain the collective memory of this event and its causes' (Restauradoras con Glitter 2019, 2). They further argued that the graffiti should not be removed until the federal government had taken concrete steps to guarantee the safety of women in Mexico.

The second level of rhetorical vehemence is evident in the tone employed at the textual level. The way the slogans are articulated produces a confrontational effect that contrasts with the idea of civility as a peaceful, neutral, and orderly exchange of ideas in the public sphere. An epideictic blaming rhetoric is employed to impute responsibility to the state and to Mexican society at large for acquiescing to gender-based violence. The accusation is backed by unexpressed premises regarding the high rates of femicides and gender-based violence in the country, making it unnecessary to state those reasons explicitly and giving the slogans a direct, bold, and defiant tone, contributing to this rhetorical force. The readers of those slogans are positioned as knowing about gender violence in the country and therefore complicit through inaction or silence. Evoking the police as rapists, the text portrays an image of the state and its institutions as responsible for committing those same crimes, which further enhances the boldly confrontational tone of the slogans. Furthermore, the enthymematic nature of those unexpressed premises overrides a deliberative civil process where typically evidence would be presented and then debated to reach a decision. The bold statements then bypass that process and call directly for urgent action to stop femicides and for justice.

Additionally, an affective tone is expressed by enunciating the anger that leads them to break the silence and put an end to the impunity. By

evoking a fearless voice, the slogans call to break with the complicity that allows gender-based violence. These expressions dislocate the idea of neutrality in the deliberative sense of entertaining competing claims (which here would mean considering whether a femicide crisis exists at all), as well as neutrality as in the sense of having a calm voice tone. Furthermore, slogans that call for action on behalf of those women who did not return home, increase the rhetorical force that seeks to build up urgency around the ongoing and accumulating violence against women. The same slogans also invoke a sense of solidarity and call to resist a patriarchal state that not only has failed to protect women but is also responsible for the crisis of violence in the country. Together, the vehemence expressed in the text of the slogans and their unauthorized inscription on the monument build a performative voice that breaks with the idea of the 'civilized' ethos.
The vehemence in both levels had a disqualifying effect in public discussion. When high-ranking officials and mainstream public disqualified the feminists' discourse based on its performance rather than its content, they effectively shifted the debate to a meta-level concerning proper modes of public engagement. This displacement prevents counterpublic arguments from even being considered, thereby disenfranchising them for refusing rhetorical norms of neutrality in the public sphere. In what follows, I will deal with this point.

Policing Vehemence in the Glitter Revolution

The graffiti on the Angel of Independence sparked reactions from both society and the state. From the state, the Head of Government of Mexico City, Claudia Sheinbaum (2019), characterized the first protest in a press conference as a provocation against the government, asserting that the forms of protest were designed to provoke a violent response from the authorities. At his morning press conference, the president of Mexico, AndrŽs Manuel L—pez Obrador (AMLO), clarified that although the government would not repress the protests, it would seek to persuade and convince people to avoid the use of violence. Quoting former president Benito Ju‡rez, who in Mexican history personifies liberalism and the rule of law, AMLO emphasized that nothing should be done by force, but rather '*everything through reason and law*' (AMLO 2019). Aligning his stance with that of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, AMLO asserted that violence should be met with justice and dialogue, not further violence. He urged protesters to act peacefully and responsibly, to respect public heritage, and to avoid vandalism, arguing that the feminist cause should not involve the destruction of monuments. While he acknowledged the struggle

"*Me cuidan mis amigas, no la policía* [My friends protect me, not the police]."

'*in defense of women*', he clarified that '*the right to protest is guaranteed, as is the freedom of expression and the right to dissent.*' Furthermore, using an inclusive we, he called on feminist collectives to '*avoid violence, refrain from aggression, exercise self-restraint, and behave properly*' (AMLO 2019).
Both AMLO and Sheinbaum framed the protests by focusing not on the demands but on the way they were expressed. By invoking binaries such as 'violence/nonviolence', 'good/evil', 'reason/emotion', and 'legal/illegal', and by aligning legitimate social change with figures who personify nonviolent protest such as Gandhi, King Jr., and Mandela, AMLO positioned the feminist protest in opposition to those nonviolent, reasonable, 'well-behaved' men and on the negative side of those binaries. By emphasizing the alleged wrongdoing of the feminists, attention was redirected to the affective style of the protests and the medium of dissent, labeled as 'violent', 'vandalistic', and 'destructive'. In doing so, the protests were defined as uncivilized expression rather than as legitimate political claims.

In the media, the protests sparked both support and opposition. Those who opposed them framed the intervention at the monument as expressions of rage without justification, as mere explosions of anger that emphasized an element of random causality (Salas SigŸenza 2021, 65). Both national and international press defined the event primarily in terms of the way the claims were expressed, with only occasional references to gender-based violence in the country. As Salas SigŸenza (2021) notes, Mexican newspapers presented testimonies only from male public officials and thus the very subjects of feminist denunciations and demands.

On social media, the protest was widely discredited as irrational. As Signa_Lab (2019) points out in their report El Color de la Rabia [The Color of Rage], although the event included various forms of expressing anger and social demands against systemic gender violence, 'some of the arguments that gained traction on social networks were the persistent disqualification of the march and the suggestion of other, 'non-violent' forms of participation' (Signa_Lab 2019). As a result, the public debate largely shifted away from the root causes of the protest to focus instead on its form and tone. Hashtags such as #EllasNoMeRepresentan [They do not represent me], #As'No [Yes, but not like that], and #As'NoMujeres [Not like this, women] gathered tweets from users who disapproved of the demonstration, many of which included misogynistic and violent rhetoric aimed at vilifying feminists. Other hashtags used to delegitimize the protest included #FemiTerroristas [FemiTerrorists], #MarchaFeminazi [Feminazi march], #TrapoVerdeEsBasura [The Green Scarf is Trash]4, and *#TrapoVerdeEsViolencia* [The Green Scarf is Violence]. According to Signa_

Lab, these hashtags '*reflect the prevailing tendency to disregard the women's movement, prioritizing monuments and painted walls over the reasons behind the marches*' (Signa_Lab 2019). An example of such reactions can be found in the following tweets:

> **J - @jorgegaratevj - Aug 17, 2019**
> *#YesButNotLikeThis It's fine that they want to be heard by raising their voices and marching, but this is a lack of respect for their country. Our cultural heritage should not be affected by their movement. We must prioritize values and education. #FeministMarch.*
>
> **LaGenerala - @MexArzate - Aug 17, 2019**
> *I agree with the reason behind the protest and I applaud it, but I reject the violence and condemn the destruction of our monuments. I am saddened by the inability to maintain calm. #NotOurBuildings #TheyDoNotRepresentMe.*
>
> **El rey azul - @javipons - Aug 18, 2019**
> *#TheyDoNotRepresentMe! Freedom is one thing, but libertinism is something entirely different, ladies. #Feminazis, respect our historical monuments. Respected @Claudiashein, please take action and proceed against these CRIMINALS.*

These examples help illustrate that one of the implicit rules governing public discussion is shaped by a remnant idea of a bourgeois public sphere. They reveal how critics of the intervention at *El çngel* recognized dissent only insofar as it was expressed within conventionally accepted norms of civility. The hashtags gather messages that acknowledge protest as long as it is non-disruptive. A direct consequence of this is that the feminist counterpublic discourse in the Glitter Revolution is dismissed on the basis of performing alternative political behavior that is expressed by inscribing their message into the public space with confrontational rhetoric through unauthorized means.

Alongside the disqualifications issued by officials such as AMLO and Sheinbaum, messages in both traditional media and online platforms reveal how technologies of power function to exclude women's voices from the public sphere. As Tomlinson (2010, 54) observes, these technologies '*operate by reducing to personal improprieties what are manifestly political arguments; this move then allows ideologically authorized moral condemnations*

to replace considerations of arguments about social injustice'. Moreover, such technologies '*serve to deny intersectional knowledge of injury and to dismiss the challenges by and on behalf of those damaged through the mythology of the liberal-citizen-subject*'. In the case of the Glitter Revolution, the vehement tone and graffiti become the personal impropriety that allows critics to dismiss the demands for justice and accountability regarding femicides. What the reactions of these critics reflect is the belief that individuals are entitled to voice their concerns, provided that such expressions adhere to an ordered, respectful, and civilized procedure. However, as mentioned earlier, whether subaltern counterpublics can enter into a public discussion from a position of dialogue by pretending equal status is precisely what is at issue. In response to the tropes deployed to police vehemence, various expressions emerged in defense of the Glitter Revolution aimed at reclaiming the conversation by redefining the problem at hand. If the issue was initially framed around the unauthorized means of expressing demands, feminist collectives sought to redefine it as a problem of structural violence and justice. For example, the hashtag *#PrimeroLasMujeresLuegoLasParedes* [First women, then walls] aimed to define the terms of the discussion by shifting the focus from the means of protest to Mexico's crisis of gender-based violence. The communiquŽ of Restauradoras con Glitter (2019, 3) captures the spirit of this response with clarity: '*Cultural heritage can be restored; however, women who have been violated, sexually abused, and tortured will never be the same, the disappeared will continue to be awaited by their grieving loved ones, and the murdered will never return home. Lost lives cannot be restored—social fabric can*'. Social media messages reinforced this discursive move:

> **Pauli de tu coraz—n - @paulidetucora - Aug 17, 2019**
> *#TheyDoRepresentMe because if I am ever raped, beaten, or killed, I want people to make a scandal about it. Because all women deserve to be heard, and because rape should never be ignored. If the government won't defend us, then we must defend each other.*

In the context of the Glitter Revolution, the attempt to police vehemence functioned precisely to inhibit the reading of claims against gender-based violence by shifting attention to the style in which those claims and reasons were inscribed. In this sense, Tomlinson (2010, 45) points out that '*in some ways what is unfortunate (even 'unreasonable') is for readers to shift attention away from the content of arguments to unconventionalities of rhetorical form*

or to the purported character failings of agonists'. Indeed, shifting attention from the crisis of femicides in Mexico to the norms of public discussion misses the reasons behind the feminists' decision to inscribe their claims in that specific public space. In fact, such critics can be evaluated as unreasonable for requiring protesters to submit to the neutral *ethos* of the public sphere in a situation that demands urgency.

A few days after the protests and while discussion on social media was still heated, the mayor of Mexico City met with representatives of feminist collectives and promised a month of discussions to address the problem of gender-based violence (Phillips 2019). Likewise, she also met with the collective Restauradoras con Glitter to document the inscriptions on the monument (Mu–iz 2019). Despite the widespread condemnation and civilizing remarks made by critics of the Glitter Revolution, the transgressive and confrontational rhetoric managed to open a space to discuss gender-based violence and to bring counterpublic discourse into the discussion.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to show how rhetorical vehemence, while often dismissed as 'uncivil', can function as a resource of counterpublic discourse to intervene and participate in public discussions. Drawing on scholarship in civility, counterpublic theory, and argumentation studies, this essay has argued that counterpublic discourse plays an important role in opening discussions about problems of public interest that are often relegated to the private sphere. The essay has shown how the idea of civility operates both as a cultural and unspoken norm for conducting public discussion. In both cases, neutrality is deeply rooted in the notion of civility and in a bourgeois idea of the public sphere, which assumes that people can engage in discussions as if they were equals and as long as they comply with procedural norms. While civility in contexts of equality could foster better discussions, in contexts of inequality it may be disarming for the subalterns. By looking at the case of the Glitter Revolution, the essay has shown how unauthorized and confrontational rhetoric, while dismissed as 'uncivil' and 'unreasonable', nonetheless managed to open a public debate about femicides in Mexico. What this case further demonstrates is that the policing of vehemence not only silences dissent but also restricts participation in public discussion. For argumentation studies, this raises the question of the extent to which models that privilege a strict procedural approach and neutrality in liberal democracies can take counterpublics seriously, given their alternative forms of political expression. This research could be

expanded by examining how the exclusion of rhetorical vehemence from marginalized counterpublics constitutes a form of argumentative exclusion (e.g. Anttila & Dom'nguez-Armas 2025). A separate but related question concerns distinguishing between vehemence that challenges oppression and vehemence that reinforces it.

For democratic practices, this essay highlights the paradox that public opinion sometimes advances not through orderly consensus but through disruptive acts that break with norms of civility. Counterpublics, in this sense, remind us that democracy cannot be sustained by reason alone, but also requires discursive expressions of affect and rhetorical vehemence. Following Tomlinson's (2010) call, we need to question our ways of reading vehemence and recognize that when counterpublics resort to vehement forms of dissent, they often have very good reasons for doing so. When counterpublics employ vehement rhetoric—whether feminist movements challenging gender violence, anti-racist movements confronting systemic oppression, or campus protesters addressing the ongoing genocide in Gaza—it usually calls attention to the structural causes that give people reasons to perform rhetorical vehemence. Counterpublics often resort to vehemence precisely because other forms of engagement have been foreclosed.

“In fact, such critics can be evaluated as unreasonable for requiring protesters to submit to the neutral ethos of the public sphere in a situation that demands urgency.”

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Endnotes

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish to English are my own.

2 Van Eemeren and others (1993, 35, n. 9) recognize that although the ideal model of critical discussion is, to a certain extent, similar to Habermas's ideal of consensus, the pragma-dialectical model adopts a Popperian conception of intellectual doubt and criticism as 'the driving forces of progress.' The two approaches differ in that the former aims at consensus, while the latter aims at a continual flow of improved opinions.

3 For an extended list, see Gieling (2023). A three-dimensional model of the base of the Angel is also available in Restauradoras con Glitter (2020). This model documents the protest graffiti from the feminist demonstration of August 16, 2019, which formed part of the #NoMeCuidanMeViolan movement. It was produced through collaborative photographic documentation along with other recording techniques.

4 The green scarf became a symbol of the feminist struggle for the right to abortion in Argentina in 2003 and later was popularized in 2018 in Latin America and other parts of the world.