

The Coloniality of Migration

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Erika HERRERA ROSALES

University of Warwick, UK

erika.herrera-rosales@warwick.ac.uk

COLONIALITY OF MIGRATION: *A critical analytical framework developed by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez that examines global migration governance through a colonial lens. Drawing on Aníbal Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power, it argues that migration categories, border regimes, and social hierarchies reproduce colonial structures of race, gender, and class. In the context of Latin America, the concept traces continuities from sixteenth-century racial capitalism through contemporary border externalisation, revealing how so-called "peripheral states"—far from passive recipients of global migration governance—actively perpetuate colonial logics of inclusion and exclusion over racialised migrant bodies.*

Keywords: coloniality; migration; border regime; externalisation of borders; safe third countries; Latin America

The concept of the “coloniality of migration” (or “coloniality of migrations”) has been proposed by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2018a, 2018b, 2024) to understand contemporary global migration governance from a colonial lens. This concept allows us to observe migration policies and border control, to reflect on the broader processes of differentiation, categorisation, and regulation inherent in border regimes (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018a, 2018b). Whilst this concept primarily refers to the constitution of migration management, which reinforces, reproduces, and legitimises the social injustices produced by coloniality, it holds special relevance to the Latin American region due to the colonial past, Eurocentric state policies, and racial hierarchies that systematically exclude vulnerable individuals.

The coloniality of migration is based on the literature of anti-colonial authors such as Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones, Aimé Césaire, Enrique Dussel, and Sylvia Wynter, amongst others. Specifically, it draws from Quijano's (2007, 2014) idea of the “coloniality of power,” which refers to a global pattern of power, also called a “matrix of power,” that arranges dimensions of labour, knowledge, subjectivities, and gender, among others. In other words, Quijano's work suggests that colonial power and domination persist in economic and socio-political systems and in everyday life. Within the matrix of power, “race” emerges as a

colonial principle of stratification of individuals, according to their supposed superiority or inferiority. From this perspective, the coloniality of power is translated in the governance of migrants as a way to organise their unequal mobility and in the production of migration categories and statuses such as “refugees,” “asylum seekers,” and “illegal migrants.” These categories are not necessarily neutral, but rather forms of domination based on colonial structures that racialise migrant people as “undesired” (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018a). This colonial governance reveals that the pattern of power divides the population according to an alleged biological difference, in addition to justifying the marginalisation and exploitation of disadvantaged groups.

Gutiérrez Rodríguez further examined the coloniality of power grounded within sex and gender relations in binary terms. Following Lugones’ (2007) argument, the coloniality of migration suggests that coloniality is not only a racial but also a heteropatriarchal system, constituting a “coloniality of gender normativity” in Western societies. As a result, racialised individuals on the move are also sexualised, objectified, and dehumanised. Through the gendered, racial, and colonial system, the dehumanisation of migrants, as subhuman individuals or with animal characteristics (Fanon 1963), facilitates their control through processes of regulation, extraction, and subordination.

In and outside of Latin America, scholarly reflections on the colonial structures operating within migratory movements have been an early and continued endeavour (Anzaldúa 2007; Grosfoguel 2003; Grosfoguel and Maldonado-Torres 2008; Grosfoguel et al. 2018; Hernández 2018; Herrera Rosales 2018; Herrera Rosales 2025; Lopes Heimer 2024; Mezzadra 2004; Picozza 2022; Prieto Díaz 2016; Trabalón 2024). In conversation, the coloniality of migration focuses, on the one hand, on de-centring the discourse of “refugee crisis” through which international migratory dynamics have been constantly framed, derived from discourses that hyperfocused on racialised bodies. Referring to the 2015 refugee crisis in the Mediterranean Sea, this migration crisis rhetoric supposedly addressed the mass displacement of people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan in search of asylum in Europe, generating media scrutiny and alarming governments. However, the continuation of colonial logics within global migration governance arguably responds to an interconnected and asymmetrical history between former colonised countries and European empires, manifested in restrictive migration policies.

The coloniality of migration is relevant to critically consider Latin America’s migratory movements, as well as those of Caribbean countries, given “presentist” migration policies (Cobarrubias et al. 2023). For instance, as Leisy Abrego (2018) suggests, the idea of

a crisis, in the case of Central American migration in North America, is in fact a crisis of the migration regime. The migration crisis involves the governments in the United States, Mexico, and Northern Central American countries, which cannot protect or recognise the human rights of migrant people. Also, this region has a long history of imperial power that should not go unnoticed.

On the other hand, the coloniality of migration underlines the impact of European imperialisms, which have significantly shaped people's mobilities and, in many cases, led to their forced displacement. In Latin America, Spanish, Portuguese, British, and United States imperialisms have left lasting consequences in terms of the regional migratory system. Moreover, the formation of nation-states and their migration policies reveal a process deeply linked to transnational dynamics, intertwined with the "history of colonialism, slavery, imperialism, settler colonialism, and transatlantic migration" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018a, 18).

In countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Cuba, and Colombia, the racialisation of migrants is the result of coloniality, which entailed the preference for the settlement of European people and the refusal to admit people from China, Armenia, Syria, and other non-European countries. During their transition as independent nation-states, many of the new Latin American states operated under colonial logics, racialising non-white migrants and recruiting new labour under the same parameters of profit, exploitation, and dispossession, which were essential features of racial capitalism (Robinson 2020; Bhattacharyya 2018). The racialisation of migrants was justified by the desire of elite groups to whiten the emerging nations under the supposedly progressive ideology of "*mestizaje*" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018b). Hidden under the idea of mixed heritage, the persistence of the white supremacy project (Cintra and Nabuco Martuscelli 2025) within governments gave way to the systematic exclusion of black and indigenous people, amongst others, who did not fit into the ideal white European immigration. Thus, the coloniality of migration operated, in general terms, by maintaining racial structures through migration policies that attract white labour, relocating indigenous people from their lands, oppressing black people, and ultimately discouraging non-European migration. This has become further evident in asylum policies that, although they do not explicitly refer to "race," still instrumentalise "nationality" as an ethnic and racial code to admit or reject foreign entrants.

In my view, the coloniality of migration is an important conceptual tool to analyse the current geopolitics of countries in the continent, especially those considered "peripheral," "transit," and "returned" migrant countries. Rather than having a tangential position in the

global colonial governance, these countries play a direct role in the border regime by deploying a complex and violent set of technologies to disrupt, curb, interrupt, and dislocate migration within and from the Global South. Operations of increased surveillance, militarised detentions, mass deportation, gender-based violence, and assimilation programmes within emerging integration policies, have been some of the border practices proliferating in Latin America.

In many cases, the externalisation of United States' border in Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, Panama, and El Salvador, through so-called "third countries" and "safe third countries" reinforce forced immobilities, punitive practices, and repression of migrants, that strongly echo the colonial continuum of imperial expansion beyond national sovereignty. In this perspective, governments in Latin America have become proactive in enacting migration control, worsening the structural violence for migrant people, in exchange for political leverage and economic agreements. The diffusion of border externalisation to Global South countries reveals the reification of the colonial distinction "insider/outsider" between states, and, at the same time, their interdependency with countries in the Global North, reinvigorating social hierarchies and inhuman practices over migrants' bodies.

The coloniality of migration adopts a more comprehensive view of global migration governance that is not limited to Europe nor to the last century. Rather, this concept allows us to address unequal migratory dynamics embedded in the production of a racial migratory pattern in Latin American countries since the sixteenth century. This process was further solidified during state formation and the unfolding of global migration governance today. Thus, the coloniality of migration has operated in two ways: firstly, through European empires and the establishment of racial capitalism in Latin American countries; and, secondly, in border externalisation as a form of imperial intervention. Therefore, the coloniality of migration is materialised in the contemporary border regime through oversimplifying migrant discourses, cruel global state policies, and the dehumanisation of migrant people.

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