

Generosity

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GENEROSITY: *A polyfunctional and contested idea operating across three overlapping dimensions in Latin American migration governance. As a nominal device, it invokes moral virtue to legitimise reception policies that exceed minimum expectations while masking their selective and self-interested character. As a performative act, it shapes political identities of governments and institutions vis-à-vis migrants and the international community. As a transformative force, it empowers migrants and local actors to contest dominant governance schemes from below. Generosity thus sits at the unstable intersection of solidarity, self-interest, and political contestation—never neutral, always appropriated.*

Keywords: generosity; migration policy; migrants and refugees; migration management; Latin America and the Caribbean

Literature on migration policy in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) highlights the power of ideas as political—and politicised—devices in regional migration management (Brumat and Vera Espinoza 2024; Freier and Luzes 2022; Domenech and Boito 2019). In the midst of recent waves of cross-border mobility and migration across the region, including the cases of precarious groups of Venezuelan, Caribbean, African, and Asian migrants, one of such ideas seems to have gained special attention: generosity. In this text, I approach generosity as a polyfunctional and contested idea, linked to a specific political potential in explaining governmental migration policies amid a constant “discrepancy between Latin American states’ routine endorsement of progressive normative frameworks and their domestic under-implementation” (Riggirozzi and Quiliconi 2026, 166). This regional example serves thus as a unique backdrop to assess the politicisation of generosity in Western-liberal (or liberal-like) settings, beyond assumptions that this notion is inherently neutral, unbiased, or irrefutably altruistic.

The Context

In recent years, generosity has often served as a meaning-making device to assess the “reception” policies for refugees and migrants in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, or

Ecuador (Vasconcelos and Machado 2021; Selee and Bolter 2021; Barbieri et al. 2020). Generosity has also been used to articulate social cohesion within “receiving” and “transit” societies, oftentimes in light of scarce resources, governmental in/action, or violent im/mobilisation techniques (Moulin Aguiar and Magalhães 2020). Meanwhile, generosity has also been deployed as a meaningful signifier for the actions of activists, practitioners, and locals who engage with migration and cross-border mobility in the region, from an angle of social justice and productive transformation (Varela Huerta 2020). Notwithstanding, generosity is a term of common use among migrants and refugees in the Americas when asked about their experiences with people and communities across the region. The preference for this term seems to be related to the belief that governments in the region adopted more liberal and progressive migration policies in the early decades of the twenty-first century, in comparison to their Western counterparts (Freier 2015).

In the case of LAC, we can make a key distinction between solidarity—a widely studied concept in migration studies—and generosity, when exploring the latter’s potential as a political device. Solidarity seems to be more a general behavioural principle entrenched in humanism and a collective ethos, constituting a minimum social expectation (Vera Espinoza 2018). Generosity, although overlapped and intrinsically connected with solidarity, is not necessarily based on a minimum expectation governing social interaction. Rather, it implies the willingness to, or the action of, giving more than the minimum, particularly in a liberal-like context.

Amid this ambiguity, the meaning of generosity can be fluid for different actors at different times when exploring the contested politics of migration in LAC. Reviewing recent empirical contributions on the politics of migration and seeking to understand such fluidity, I suggest three conceptual dimensions to approach generosity in the context of regional migration management: nominal generosity, performative generosity, and transformative generosity. I argue that these are not exclusive, clear-cut-defined dimensions. Rather, these are often messily entrenched in the complications derived from the beliefs, values, affects, emotions, and perceptions shaping regional migration politics. My aim is to open the conversation on the ambivalences of generosity as an idea for political action and its appropriation as an analytical device within the wider framework of migration and border studies.

Nominal Generosity

A first dimension, that of “nominal” generosity, encapsulates some face-value elements needed for its definition. Mainstream Western philosophers (among others, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant) understand generosity as a virtue—a positive quality of a high moral standing—based on *being open to give*. Yet generosity goes well beyond simple acts of giving. It also comprises the valuation of giving as something intrinsically good, which works to morally encapsulate positive principles, values, and worldviews, in a scenario where giving is usually not expected. Nietzsche, in this line, branded generosity as a strength. Moreover, a rationalistic take on the issue would centre on the ways in which generosity and self-interest can be intertwined, when the idea or act of giving is used to attain specific individual benefits, such as asserting power over those who are the object of generosity (Ellingsen and Johannesson 2011). Yet, generosity may not be necessarily entrenched in acts of sheer interest. Komter (2010), for instance, argues that practising generosity reveals evolutionary traits of our species. Psychologically speaking, individual and collective affects and emotions are also an intrinsic part of how our idea of generosity comes to be (Allen 2018). Broadly speaking, generosity seems to be one of many inherently contested ideas shaping human behaviour.

Within the context of migration management, the meanings *nominally* ascribed to generosity have a power of their own, and their derived acts are substantially impactful. When we reflect on the invocation of generosity as a framework that shapes migration policies, we are following the ways and mechanisms behind the idea of giving *to others*—a commonly perceived positive social practice in Western-like settings—as it is mobilised for the aim of organising people as migrants or non-migrants in the setting of a shared social order. If we follow how leaders, in the name of governments, frame generosity in the context of migration management in a nominally ambivalent and yet highly intelligible manner, we can sense that a political effect is pursued.

One key example dates from 2018, when Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos announced the country’s strategy to comply with the “challenge” of Venezuelan migration, which would be based on the principles of “authority, control, and generosity” (Palma-Gutiérrez 2021, 44). Seen from the perspective of nominal generosity, the president’s call to Colombians *to give to Venezuelan others* was an ambivalent, and yet intelligible, claim. It was not clear what was to be given, but it was sufficiently understood that the sheer act of giving was deemed positive, substantially when those receiving were not part of the national collective. The policy was presented as going beyond the bare minimum, and in so doing, it

mobilised a sense of righteousness. Invoking generosity thus serves to justify political action based on the sense of a morally superior self. It is also helpful to navigate resistance and uncertainty, related to localised migrant-management anxieties. Generosity may therefore activate a sense of social virtuousness that makes possible the implementation of ample migration reception policies, when stringent anti-migration measures are unviable, impractical, or undesired.

Performative Generosity

There are diverse ways to categorise and analyse the political effects of generosity in migration management, beyond what can be seen as sheer conspicuousness. One option has to do with analysing generosity as “performative.” I use the term performance departing from dramaturgical sociology, as acts and actions envisioned to “present oneself to others” (Goffman 1959), often including having some control over the impression one makes on others on a socially shared stage. Performances can therefore be mobilised to show aims, worldviews, ideas, and values, imbued with an intrinsic political potential (Rai et al. 2021). Perfected through rehearsal and repetition, performances can lead to shaping social phenomena including everyday naturalised behaviours, beliefs, and regulations through the emergence of a certain “performativity” (Butler 2006). Seen through performance, when migration management policies and actions are shown as “generous” to migrants, non-migrants, governments, collectivities, or the “international community,” there is an intrinsic political aim: that of shaping others’ beliefs about who the policy actor—or performer—is. Performing generosity has the potential of moulding others’ attitudes and behaviours in the broader social stage.

Performative generosity in migration management has behavioural effects in different political settings. Brazil’s late 2010s *Operação Acolhida*, envisioned to “welcome” Venezuelans arriving in the country under former President Michel Temer, was not only aimed at attaining a certain type of biopolitical legitimacy useful to govern humanitarian-like situations (Fassin 2010). It was also a demonstration, a “showing of a doing” (Rai et al. 2021, 5), capitalised years later by Jair Bolsonaro’s government to portray the impact of “the socialist dictatorship led by Nicolás Maduro” (Bolsonaro 2021) in Venezuela. Colombia’s early 2020s Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants was used by elites to demonstrate the country’s belonging to an international order advanced by liberal governments, institutions, and organisations, including the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Palma-Gutiérrez and Long 2022).

In a related example, Brazil's humanitarian visa programme for Haitians implemented after the former's involvement in the United Nations (UN) Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) in the 2010s was often presented as an example of liberal commitment at the international stage, even if in practice the programme created a "racialised wall of visas" (Cintra and Nabuco Martuscelli 2025) for Haitians. More recently, after the re-ignition of Donald Trump's violent crackdown on migrants, part of his return to the United States presidency in 2025, Costa Rican and Panamanian authorities provided bus tickets to migrants below market price so that they could "transit" the countries southbound (Araya Adión and Córdoba 2025). This action aided both to regulate migrants' and non-migrants' conduct and to demonstrate commitment to the United States' current idea of regional migration management, including the rebordering of racialised subjects from the Global South who should be "contained" in "their countries." Generosity has served as a performative device with specific political aims in migration management elsewhere across the region, from the actions of some intergovernmental and non-governmental institutions working on providing shelter to people on the move in Mexico (Herrera Rosales 2025), to the initiatives of for-profit economic actors to create value from migrants' precariousness under the guise of generous employment opportunities in Chile (Berrios-Riquelme 2021).

Transformative Generosity

It is reductive to exclusively focus on generosity as sheer performance, when reflecting on the myriad forms of contestation against the unequal politics of migration management in the region. Diverse actors, from communities to activists, officers at governmental and non-governmental institutions, and migrants themselves, engage in everyday acts of generosity which constitute essential steps in transforming dominant forms of migration management. This form of "transformative" generosity, approached from the perspective of the "mobile commons" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013), allows us to think of some everyday acts of giving as challenging dominant il/liberal schemes of migration governance. It is transformative in that giving more than expected (materially, symbolically, and otherwise) allows people on the move and local communities to navigate, oftentimes resist, and at times unsettle formal policy schemes that often look to optimise arbitrary categorisations of some people as desirable (hard-working and law-abiding "regular" migrants) and less-desirable (problematic, in-transit, extra-continental, and prone-to-criminality "irregular" migrants).

To exemplify the latter point, transformative generosity is present in diverse forms of solidarity and resistance active at many different levels across LAC. Transformative generosity is evident in the actions of communities sharing knowledge, food, a place to sleep, or Wi-Fi in Southern Mexico (Gandini et al. 2020), the Andes (Palma-Gutiérrez 2024), or the Darién (Álvarez Velasco and Cielo 2023; Trabalón 2024; Palma-Gutiérrez 2025) amidst collective, large-scale on-foot displacement. Transformative generosity is also visible in the actions of officers and locals in charge of bureaucratic procedures and the provision of services to migrant communities in Chile (Stang Alva 2021) and Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic (Fouillieux Bambach and Bravo Sandoval 2025) who believe in the need for a form of dissident migrant “integration,” against processes of differential inclusion entrenched in the neoliberal ethos of our times. Transformative generosity is present in the actions of people who work together with other self-identified or arbitrarily defined “migrants” of “first,” “1.5,” “second,” or “third” generations, in order to contest diverse forms of citizen exclusion across the region, while engaging in productive economic, political, or social projects in cities such as Medellín, Quito, or Lima (Palma-Gutiérrez 2023).

These three approaches to generosity as a political and politicised device shaping migration management in Latin America are by no means conclusive. Rather, these constitute an initial invitation to reflect on the complications of generosity in shaping how we understand migration and politics more widely. Nominal, performative, and transformative generosity often work as overlapping categories, revealing the importance of reflecting on the contexts and genealogies of each situation. Seen as a fluid category, generosity constitutes both a powerful meaning-making device along the continuous expansion of unequal forms of global migration management and a potential tool for change as contestation to such schemes endures.

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