

Logistics

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LOGISTICS: *A dominant rationality of power in contemporary migration governance that presents itself as neutral technical expertise in the "efficient" administration of resources, data, infrastructures, and migrants. Far from being a mere operational category, logistics is a producer of value: it legitimises the extraction of capital from migration through legal and institutional channels and enables the militarisation and corporatisation of borders in "crisis" management. Rooted in European colonial expansion and the trafficking of enslaved peoples, logistical rationality has continuously reorganised populations, territories, and mobilities in service of capital accumulation—from nineteenth-century whitening projects to contemporary border externalisation, deportation infrastructures, and digital surveillance platforms across Latin America, designing geographies that connect disparate territories.*

Keywords: logistics; migration governance; militarisation; humanitarianism; Latin America

Over the course of the first three decades of the twenty-first century in Latin America, there has been a sophistication of migration control, especially stemming from the neoliberalisation of migration governance under precepts such as governance and humanitarianism—more evident since the so-called “Venezuelan exodus” and the “Venezuelan humanitarian crisis,” to which other conjunctures understood within the framework of crises are added (Herrera and Berg 2019; Domenech and Dias 2020; Ceja 2024; Domenech 2025). In this context, logistics has become a dominant rationality in the control of migrants, territories, resources, and information, increasingly organised in a transnational, continental, and global manner. Critically studying logistics allows us to understand diverse forms of capital extraction with great expansive potential, through the rationality of spatio-temporal efficiency; the new corporate, business, and military configurations of migration governance; and the design of geographies that connect very dissimilar territories in Latin America, through the installation of infrastructures and the implementation of technologies, facilitating the containment, circulation, detention, and deportation of migrants.

Definition

Logistics is an apparatus of power (Neilson 2012) that presents itself as a central technical asset in the field of migration governance in the “efficient” administration of resources, data, infrastructures, and migrants. It legitimises a specific rationality regarding problem-solution and loss-gain calculations in migration administration. Therefore, logistics is a producer of value, including within migrations (Mezzadra 2020; Andersson 2015). And although the illegal and illegalised forms in which value is extracted from migrants and migrations are much more frequently noted, viewing logistics as a legitimised operation of governance allows us to look at legal forms of capital extraction, or beyond the legal/illegal binary.

If in productive capitalism capital accumulation was concentrated in production, today, the centrality of the process is found in circulation, governed by logistics and the financialisation of the economy (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). Within this framework, and in the web of unequal economic and ecological exchanges, logistics imposes itself as a rationality of calculation and spatial practice that reorganises capitalism on a planetary scale through the reconfiguration of relations and the movement of information, goods, and people (Chua et al. 2018; Mezzadra and Neilson 2012; Tsing 2009). This has led major logistics companies and platform economies, such as *UPS*, *DHL*, Amazon, Mercado Libre, Walmart, and Uber, to play a central role in the global political economy. Evidence supporting the prominence of logistics is that the workers of these companies, such as delivery drivers, became essential workers during the *COVID-19* pandemic. Indeed, many of them were migrants (Souto de Andrade 2022; Álvarez Velasco 2021).

A Brief Genealogy

And while logistics underwent a “revolution” in the commercial field starting in the 1960s and 1970s, its origins trace back not only to commercial knowledge but also to military expertise linked to European colonial expansion. This is evident in the massive trafficking of enslaved people to the Americas (Harney and Moten 2013), the extermination of Native populations in the Americas, Asia, and Africa, and the massive expropriation of natural resources such as timber, gold, and silver, as well as the production of other commodities like sugar cane (Mintz 1996) and coffee (Trouillot 1982).

In the process of the formation and consolidation of nation-states in the Americas, logistical rationality has enabled the colonisation, extermination, and ethnocide (Souza Lima 2010) of Native populations in borderlands and potentially productive territories, giving

continuity to colonial and imperial forms of European expansion. It has also facilitated the distribution of national and non-national populations to convert “empty” territories into productive spaces for capital. Examples of this include the various settlement campaigns in different national Amazonian territories, the Chilean and Argentine Patagonia, the Sonora and Chihuahua deserts in Mexico, and the “Far West” (the Frontier) in the United States.

Logistics has also been present in historical processes of migration administration, allowing us to trace a genealogy in the formats of migration governance. For example, in the installation of infrastructures for the reception of European migrants in cities such as Buenos Aires, São Paulo, and New York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for their subsequent distribution to regions of Argentina, Brazil, and the United States as part of high-profit and national whitening projects (Seyferth 1997).

Logistics constitutes one of the central tasks in organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as humanitarian organisations with leading roles in “humanitarian crisis” and “migration crisis” situations, such as the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). In fact, the IOM emerged as a logistical organisation tasked with the transfer and resettlement of “uprooted” persons after World War Two (Pécoud 2017). Although it has refined its identity discourse in recent years as it expands its prominence in global migration governance and across the American continent, its work in administering migrants through transport remains one of its founding myths.

The So-Called Crisis, Infrastructures, and Technologies

Within the framework of so-called “humanitarian crises” and “migration crises”—which we understand not as mere conjunctures but as formats for governing subalternised populations (Ceja 2024)—logistics is mobilised by humanitarian actors as a central task to “alleviate suffering.” First, it enables effectiveness and speed in the distribution of goods and services related to health, shelter, food, water, and sanitation for those framed as “vulnerable.” Second, it encompasses two of the costliest aspects of interventions: the procurement of supplies and transportation. Third, since logistics manages the tracking of goods across the supply chain, it possesses the capacity to extract and store data that allow for the readjustment of interventions or learning for future operations (Thomas and Kopcak 2005). However, it is worth highlighting that more than just the administration of goods and resources to “alleviate suffering,” logistics facilitates the administration of

migrants and migration, transforming them into a highly profitable commodity for diverse sectors such as the military, security, humanitarianism, and transportation.

Through the installation of infrastructures in dissimilar geographies across various countries (Moulin Aguiar and Magalhães 2020; Vasconcelos 2021; López Reyes and París Pombo 2023; Ceja 2024; Alvites 2025; Bonilla Mena 2025), as well as the implementation of certain logics of migration governance and United States border externalisation within existing institutional infrastructures (Fernandes and Pachi 2021; Yépez Arroyo 2021), the use of digital technologies (Domenech et al. 2022; Cogo and Camargo 2025), and the contracting of transport companies for the transfer of migrants (Campos-Delgado 2025b), logistics enables the administration and datafication of migrant populations. This allows not only for control but also for speculation. This configuration shapes national, regional, and continental American territories as hierarchical and networked spaces through corridors (Álvarez Velasco et al. 2021; Domenech 2025), where various intermediate cities beyond national borders become “border” spaces (Balibar 2005; Mezzadra and Neilson 2016)—territories of waiting, “transit” zones, detention, or deportation—as well as transnational border and aerial spaces (Del Monte Madrigal 2025). To cite just a few examples, we can consider Mexico City and Guadalajara as border territories of waiting via the *CBP One* platform (Vargas León et al. 2025; Kocher 2023); the Belo Horizonte International Airport in Confins, Brazil, as a key site of deportation (Santos and Fernandes 2024); and Tecoluca, El Salvador, with the Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT) as a site for the incarceration of migrants. Added to this are various programmes for the distribution and “integration” of migrant populations into the “interior” of national territories, such as Operation Shelter (*Operação Acolhida*) in Brazil for Venezuelan migrants (Facundo 2020; Ceja 2024) or the Local Integration Programme for Refugees (PIL) in Mexico (Betancourt 2025).

Recent research on migration infrastructures, such as those cited here, has brought important critiques to migration governance and humanitarianism. The notion of logistics complicates this phenomenon by examining the rationality that legitimises the installation of such infrastructures and the relationality between national administrative traditions and transnational governance formats, subsumed under the logic of capital extraction. A focus on logistics also allows us to observe the way in which migrants actively apply logistical rationality and negotiate with infrastructures and technologies for their own ends (Staničić and Montoya Galvis 2023; Chan 2024; Chan 2025). Various studies have shown that infrastructures, camps, and occupations become spaces of migrant resistance and collective

care (for example, Correa 2019; Palma-Gutiérrez 2021; Cogo et al. 2023; Campos-Delgado 2025a; Cavalcanti, Lyra, and Tavares 2025).

Conclusions

From a critical perspective, far from naturalising logistics as a technical operation, it is vital to understand how logistical rationality enables the presence of highly diverse actors in migration management based on their supposed logistical expertise (Ceja 2025), which is presented as part of a “logistical solution” to “crises,” thus renewing the mechanisms of migration control (Domenech 2025). This alleged know-how enables the military, business, and corporate management of borders and migrations. Today, we see major transnational companies and corporations providing transportation, logistics, and information technology (IT) services. This also allows—as seen in some cases in Latin America—for the militarisation of borders and migration control under a logistical justification¹³. Finally, logistical rationality and its extractive goals enable the transformation of migration—understood as a “problem” (Sayad 2010)—into a highly profitable commodity from which many sectors benefit.

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¹³ A paradigmatic case is that of the Brazilian Army, constituted as a Humanitarian Logistics Task Force since 2018 for the administration of Venezuelan migrants on Brazil’s Amazonian border through Operation Shelter (*Operação Acolhida*) (Ceja, 2025).

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Transit Fetishism

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TRANSIT FETISHISM: *A critical concept that exposes the reification of “transit migration” as a mechanism of legitimation within migration governance. By foregrounding the migrant as an individual subject who “chooses transit,” fetishism renders invisible the (geo)political, corporate, moral, and financial architectures that illegalise migratory journeys in border regimes of the Americas. Taking “south-north” migrations as an example, the category highlights the devices of guilt and punishment that hold migrants responsible for the precariousness they experience on the move. The “subjective” dimension of migration emerges only as a neoliberal strategic necessity and has nothing to do with its autonomous character. Depoliticising migration by displacing structural responsibility onto individual “choice,” these devices contribute to naturalising the language and practice of border externalisation, hierarchisation of (im)mobility, and, in general, capitalist power relations that deny freedom of movement.*

Keywords: transit migration; geopolitics; border externalisation; migration governance; Americas

This entry addresses the “politicisation of transit migration” (Düvell 2012) in contexts of “illegalisation” (De Genova 2002). In dialogue with different Latin American approaches that rework the meaning of “migratory transit” (Basok 2019; Álvarez Velasco 2022; Liberona 2020; Campos-Delgado 2023), I propose the category of “transit fetishism.”¹⁴ This concept describes the reification of “transit migration” in a neoliberal matrix that, as part of a more complex regime of naturalisation and normalisation of structural inequalities in access to mobility, shows the diversification of the forms of legitimising migratory and border control through practices of individualisation that seek to redefine the political act of migrating. The fetishism of transit exposes the prominence given to political narratives that portray migrants as individuals who relate independently to “transit” (“choosing”—or not—to be “migrants in transit”), while simultaneously obscuring the responsibility of the institutional actors that reproduce and normatively justify the illegalisation of migratory journeys. “Transit

¹⁴ In allusion to “commodity fetishism” (Marx 1987).

migration” functions as an illusion that renders invisible the power/knowledge relations that produce migration and, in contrast, makes hypervisible the individual action of migrants. This inversion between political action and individual action shapes practices and imaginaries that highlight the instrumental nature of “transit migration,” demonstrating the need to deepen the debate on its geopolitical, corporate, moral, and financial functionality in migration governance agendas.

Indeed, as the critical literature has often pointed out, migration is a commodity constructed as an object/problem to be intervened in and “transit migration” is one of its possible tools for action and legitimation. By concentrating on specific border regimes (Domenech 2021), I focus the discussion on the designs of containment and deterrence of south–north migrations based on border externalisation (Casas-Cortés et al. 2015). I argue that recognising the compartmentalised nature of migration governance exposes an architecture that breaks the binary logic of victims or threats to openly include other types of individualistic rationalities. These rationalities conceal the structural political historicity that produces the hierarchisation of (im)mobility, while attributing (and differentially distributing) blame to the people-in-movement themselves. Under these parameters, the “fetishism of transit” calls for de-ontologising “transit migration,” to rethink the (geo)political implications of its epistemic production in a situated way, and to shift the analytical focus (from mobility) toward the sphere of migratory and border control.

Border Externalisation

In certain historical moments and geographical spaces, the deployment of border externalisation within the framework of migration governance not only enables, but is also grounded in and dependent upon the fetishisation of “transit” in order to intervene legitimately in migration. In the critical literature, “transit migration” is understood based on the multiplicity of actors, political practices, and resistances that reconfigure contemporary border regimes (Collyer et al. 2012). The conceptualisation proposed by Hess (2012) questions efforts to qualitatively define “transit migration” and, instead, proposes approaching it as a discursive figure and a fundamentally epistemological problem arising from the discussion about the political and scientific act of naming and categorising human mobility as migration (2012, 428). This author addresses the construction (or invention) of the “transit migration management *dispositif*” associated with “illegal” or “irregular” migration (Hess 2010, 130–35), highlighting the central role of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as

well as the strategies among “governmental authorities, academics, and civil society” (Hess 2012, 431–32). In this regard, “transit migration” is not assumed as an ontological reality. Rather, it is a political categorisation that serves to reinforce border externalisation through comprehensive politics of control that seek to contain migration (Düvell 2012, 416). Returning to some of these points, in recent years “transit migration” in Latin America has become a disputed and polysemic category within the political, social, and academic fields that is giving rise to enriching debates, genealogies, and problematisations.

Within this framework, one of the contemporary spatial phenomena that stands out the most in the Americas was the increase and acceleration of south–north migration in “the Darién” through the Colombia–Panama border, with more than 1,000,000 border crossings between 2021 and 2024 (DAP–Datos Abiertos Panamá n.d.). In these processes, practices of border externalisation from the United States to the south became increasingly important through updated migration governance strategies (Domenech 2025). In June 2022, twenty countries signed the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, under the leadership of the United States. The new mechanism of asymmetrical cooperation was inscribed in the “Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration” and had support from the IOM and UNHCR, among other actors and subregional platforms. This declaration summarises how dominant geopolitical dynamics were taking shape to address the “hemispheric challenge of irregular migration” (The White House 2022), offering a productive lens through which to reflect on “transit migration” and the spatial deployment of containment strategies by land, sea, air, and river in the Americas (Trabalón 2026).

The Migrant as an Individual Subject

To illustrate the fetishism of transit, I will take one of the many possible articulations of containment as an example. Within the framework of the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, multilateral cooperation actively promoted the imposition of consular “entry visas” and “airport transit visas,” applied to migrants from the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, and South America (Trabalón 2026). These measures exacerbated inequality of access to mobility and further restricted the possibility of making sections of the journey northward in safer or less risky conditions. In addition, land-based deterrence took shape in numerous IOM information campaigns deployed in Mexico, Central America, and South America. In some South American “transit countries,” for example, these campaigns alerted “potential migrants” about the “risks of irregular migration” supposedly to enable “informed decisions” about whether or not to continue their migratory journeys to the North,

emphasising their status as deportable, detainable, and ineligible for asylum (Trabalón 2025a, 137–45; 2025b). By distinguishing between migrants and “migrants in transit” and categorising those who are already migrating as “potential migrants,” these campaigns reveal an additional dimension of border externalisation. At the same time, and despite the campaigns’ ability to adapt to different “audiences,” “problems,” and “realities” (Ruiz Muriel 2024), their implementation on the ground as a deterrent technology operating through fear (Trabalón 2024, 13; 2025b) demonstrates the deployment of strategies typical of migration governance (Pécoud 2010).

By selecting this small fragment of more complex containment schemes, I aim to highlight how regional and global geopolitics materialise as subordinate forms of (im)mobility in concrete geographies. Within the hegemonic model of migration governance, legal, economic, and racial inequality is not presented discursively as the determining factor that modulates access to international mobility and produces precariousness, deaths, and disappearances in migratory journeys. The production of these political realities would be based, instead, on “migratory transit” itself, as a reified agent that produces violence. This reification enables the establishment of a false narrative—both individualistic and de-historicised—of interaction between “migrant” and “transit” that conceals the political nature of migration and, in more general terms, distorts our understanding of the (organic) relationship between capitalism, migration governance, and border regimes. The fetishism of transit, thus, like other migration categories and institutional operations, manages to invert the terms of the debate and political practice: from the geopolitical conditions to acts of “individual choice” by migrants, which, in general, are unilaterally and exclusively connected to the conditions of the countries of “origin” that would have forced people to migrate.

Following this line of argument, the victimisation devices (the production of migrants as passive objects) and securitisation devices (the production of migrants as threatening objects) coexist with blame devices (the production of migrants as guilty subjects) as modes of depoliticisation and punishment for becoming “migrants in transit.” The creation of these imaginaries foments a dangerous “moral turn” in which blame and responsibility are shifted onto the migrants themselves. Therefore, the reification of “transit migration” is also a reflection of the individualist neoliberal precept. Under this technocratic rationality, the collective dimension of migration disappears from the narrative and the act of migrating is depoliticised: it holds migrants responsible for their decision to cross borders and blameworthy for the injustice, precarity, and risks experienced in their (im)mobility. This performative matrix enables multilateralism and border externalisation to be easily translated

into the political language of individual action. Thus, in contexts of “transit migration,” this standardised language usually includes the “misuse” of the asylum system, the improper use of “illegal” or “irregular” modes of movement across borders, the “bad decision” to expose themselves to violence despite having “information” about the “risks” of migratory journeys, and, in more general terms, the disobedience of the geopolitical mandate of immobility that seeks to confine them to their countries of “origin” through visas established by asymmetrical inter-state relations.

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Turcos

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TURCOS: *A derogatory misnomer applied to Arab, Armenian, Jewish, and other Middle Eastern immigrants arriving in Latin America from the 1880s onward, whose Ottoman travel documents led host societies to conflate vastly different ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds under a single racialising label. Far from a mere linguistic error, turco encodes a history of orientalisation, commercial exclusion, and political weaponisation directed at diasporic communities across the region. Its meanings have never been fixed: simultaneously an insult, a term of endearment, a political slur, and a marker of diasporic identity, turco illuminates how mislabelling functions as a form of social differentiation—and how racialised communities negotiate, appropriate, and contest imposed identities across generations.*

Keywords: migration; *turcos*; Arabs; Middle East; integration; Latin America

“Turco”¹ is a term that encompasses a range of meanings and interpretations. It has historical links to the Ottoman Empire; has appeared in literature, as well as in political and social contexts; and it can conjure a variety of feelings, including connections to both discrimination and belonging for Arab and Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants in Latin America. This entry provides a brief historical explanation of the use of the term, its connection to discourses of discrimination from the host societies, its varied usage both within host societies and within diasporic communities, and its overall role in creating a sense of belonging or rejection for individuals.

Historical Origins and Labels

The most common argument about the origin of the term is that it comes from the 1880s and 1890s, when migrants from the Middle East, mostly Christians, started arriving in

¹ The literal translation of “*turco*” would be Turk or Turkish, and it can be used both formally and informally depending on the context.

Latin America² with travel documents from the Ottoman Empire³. The reasons for migrating were varied. The most common reasons cited by authors include fear of forced military service (often seen as a form of Ottoman oppression by the migrants), the influence of foreign religious missionaries, visits by political leaders from abroad, and an economic crisis affecting the region, among others (Khater 2001; Moore and Mathewson 2013; Devis-Amaya 2014).⁴

These individuals were lumped into groups with labels such as “turcos,” Ottomans, or Syrian-Lebanese (for example, Vilorio de la Hoz 2003; Karam 2007; Gualtieri 2009). For many years, the “turco” term was the most popular amongst them, and was used to label ethnic Arabs, Turks, Armenians, Persians, and even Jewish people—and no real differentiation was made between them⁵. As Klich and Lesser (1996, 4) argue, the term “turco” is “a reflection of an irritating Latin American penchant to oversimplify by way of grouping together under a single rubric immigrants from various, even conflicting, regional, national, and/or ethnoreligious backgrounds.” This generic term, and others such as “chino,”⁶ encompassed different groups of people and were imposed by the local societies, rather than self-constructed by the migrant communities.

The term has been widely used in society and popular culture. Several literary texts used the term “turco,” most of them as a negative qualifier of difference.⁷ These occurrences,

² See, for example Klich and Lesser (1996) about Latin America in general; Vargas and Souza 2007 about Colombia; Alfaro-Velcamp 2007 and Taboada 2023 about Mexico; Karam 2007 about Brazil; El-Attar 2013 about Chile; Petit 2022 about Mexico/Argentina.

³ It is important to note that many texts claim these migrants carried Ottoman passports, which is unlikely as the modern passport came into existence during World War One (Dias-Abey 2025) and it was not widely used until the 1920s. Moreover, the Ottoman Empire did not have the resources to produce such documents. Still, other forms of travel documents are likely to have been produced by either the local authorities or the boat companies taking them across the Atlantic. Klich (1993) also places importance on the role of the Ottoman Empire wanting to claim these migrants during the early 20th century, and this may have also played a part for the increased use of the “turco” label.

⁴ Some authors, such as Naff (1985) and Khater (2001) have demonstrated that economic hardship is likely to have been the most significant reason for the migration. Nevertheless, other factors probably also contributed, even if to a lesser degree.

⁵ Khater (2005), Karam (2007) and Gualtieri (2009) also offer discussions of the racial connotations of the term ‘turco’.

⁶ “Chino” is an all-encompassing term to refer to Asians in Latin America, including Chinese, Japanese, and other East Asians migrants (Hu-DeHart 2009). In a way, it emulates the generic imposition of Turco, however, the ‘turco’ label also carries, without the colonial sentiments connected to the Ottoman Empire, but perhaps with an even greater sense of ignorance.

⁷ See, for example, “*Los Turcos*” by Roberto Sarah published in 1961 about Arab descendants in Chile; or Santiago Nasar in “*Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada*”, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez published in 1981, and Nomar Mahid in “*Los parientes de Ester*” by Luis Fayad published in 1978—both set in Colombia and the characters referred to as *turcos*.

whether constant or sporadic, focused on its use as a dismissive differentiator to discriminate against particular characters.⁸ At the same time, other texts took a more comprehensive approach, discussing the term or showing the characters' positioning toward it. Its use was so widespread that even the *Real Academia Española* (RAE)⁹ has one entry in its dictionary that reads "Arab of any origin."¹⁰

Over time, this widespread use of the term began to fade. First, after the different European powers occupied these territories, following the end of World War One, the travel documents changed and no longer included references to the Ottoman Empire. Then, in the 1930s several Latin American governments began to differentiate these migrants by individual ethnicity/region, including the terms Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian, among others (Vargas and Suaza 2007). Finally, there was a drive from authors as early as the 1940s that highlighted the importance of separating the term "turco" from the Arab communities (Pastor de Maria 2014) and, more recently, several others who have criticised its use (Moore and Mathewson 2013; Balloffet 2019). For example, Fahrenthold (2019) critiques the label as superficial and contradictory to the agency of many migrants who, at the time, actively promoted Syrian or Lebanese nationalism against the Ottoman "Turk" rule.¹¹

However, the term remains present in local Latin American societies, and continues to be used in different ways, for a variety of reasons.

Discrimination

The most common explanation in academic texts of the use of the term is discrimination. For example, Vallejo (2009) argues that the term carries an "immigrant shadow" and that "turcos" are seen differently from the rest of the population. Alfaro-Velcamp (2007, 25) states that, in Mexico, the term "carries negative connotations." Hernández (1994, 250) argues that the term "turco" was used purposely to discriminate:

⁸ For example, one of Jorge Amado's characters in "*Gabriela, Cravo e Canela*" (published in 1958) is a Middle Eastern migrant in Brazil who despises being called "turco" and has a lively exchange explaining why he does not like it. Similarly, in Amado's book "*A descoberta da América pelos Turcos*" (published in 1994) about two Arab immigrants in Brazil, Amado briefly notes the irony of the use of the term, stressing the characters were in fact not Turks. This is also present in Luis Fayad "*La caída de los puntos cardinales*" (published in 2000), about the history of migration to Colombia, and it includes an interesting dialogue in which one Arab character seems confused when being referred to as 'turco', so another must explain that "here, we are 'turcos'".

⁹ The Real Academia Española is an institution based in Spain whose goal is to ensure the stability of the Spanish language, and its consistency across the different Spanish speaking countries.

¹⁰ "*Árabe de cualquier procedencia*". The dictionary notes its use applies to the Americas.

¹¹ Fahrenthold (2014, 15) also discusses the interplay between these labels and their socioeconomic significance, noting that a "common joke" in Brazil—"Turks are poor, Syrians middling, and Lebanese rich"—links the terms to socioeconomic status.

“being a ‘Turk’ was enough of a ‘record’ to be automatically rejected, without any further consideration—as if it meant an incurable disease.” Some scholars have even described the discrimination received by these migrants in Latin America as “turcophobia (orientalisation and vilification of Arab communities) and turcophilia (exoticisation and fetishisation of Arab communities)” (El-Attar 2013, 253; see also Hernández 1994; Taboada 2023).¹²

Examples from newspapers, public speeches, and graffiti are given in these accounts. For example, Díaz Rico (2025, 30) found several archived newspaper articles in Colombia which referred to “turcos” negatively, with the earliest entry in 1904 from *El Colombiano*: “The Turk Abraham Fayad and his mischievousness.”¹³ Racism was most noticeable in political rhetoric and the press in the 1920s and 1930s. Newspapers such as *El Diario* and *La Nación* in Argentina (Klich 1993), and *El Espectador* and *El Periscopio* in Colombia, sometimes carried xenophobic remarks against Arabs with insults such as “disgusting turcos” (*asquerosos turcos*) (Vargas and Suaza 2007), although it rarely escalated beyond words (Devis-Amaya 2014).

This negativity was also found more recently, for example in Honduras where graffiti appeared during the 2009 anti-coup protests calling for “slavedriver turcos” (*turcos esclavistas*) to leave Honduras (Pastor de Maria 2014, 29).¹⁴ At the same time, these attacks have not gone unnoticed, and some newspapers and politicians complained about them, refuted them, and defended the Arab communities. Such is the case of Senator González of Argentina and of the Lebanese-Argentinean newspaper *Assalam* (Klich 1993), and of Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* (Vargas and Suaza 2007), which published articles and editorials defending the community.¹⁵

As might be expected, this perceived negativity was also felt by many Arab immigrants themselves and passed down to their descendants. This was found during my research in Bogotá, Colombia, between 2007 and 2013 (Devis-Amaya 2014).¹⁶ For example,

¹² El-Attar (2013) argues that “turcophobia” still exists in Chile.

¹³ Díaz (2025) found many other articles, including at least eight publications in the early 1930s with phrases such as “...when [the ‘turcos’] don’t burn it up, they scam”, or “the ‘turcos’ are the enemies of national businesses and the cause of so much tuberculosis in our women” both from the newspaper *Fuego* in 1932.

¹⁴ This graffiti, written in Spanish, demands the departure from Honduras of “*árabes, palestinos y judíos*” (“Arabs, Palestinians and Jews”) (Pastor de Maria 2014, 29). In doing so, it conflates several distinct ethnic groups, revealing both the confusion and the all-encompassing reach of the term.

¹⁵ It must be noted that Fawcett de Posada and Posada-Carbo (1992) argue that the attacks against the Lebanese were not widespread and that many “antiturco” newspapers had low circulation.

¹⁶ I interviewed more than 50 Arab immigrants and their descendants, from different generations, of a variety of ages, genders, and backgrounds, as well as extensive participant observation at events and activities. I used semi-structured ethnographic interviewing and snowballing techniques as part of the methodology. The words

one of my participants during this study, “Ana,” stressed that she was taught as a child that being called “turco” was offensive, as their ancestors had migrated “fleeing the Ottoman Empire.” Similarly, “Cristina,” another one of my participants, told me that her grandmother “always insisted that we should never let anyone call us ‘turcos’... it was hammered into us: ‘we are not Turks.’” This rejection of the “turco” label was socialised within family groups, conditioning the younger children to distance themselves from it.

There were also negative stories of labelling within my research. My participant “Lucia” argued that her father and uncle were denied entry to a party at a local social club because they were “turcos,” so they decided to create their own social club. She believed her parents did not teach her Arabic to minimise the chances of discrimination (a point also noted by Vargas and Suaza 2007). This negativity towards the term is explained by Bahajin (2008, 755) as follows:

What hurt the dignity of the immigrants the most, and what most hurt their reputation, was calling them “turcos”—something that haunted them for many years, just because they migrated from areas controlled by them—a connection to that persecution some seem to have felt prior to their departure.

The discriminatory use of the term was also present in other areas of society, including education and politics. Karam (2007) recounts how several of his older participants recalled memories of being taunted at school with the “turco” label by schoolmates and sometimes even teachers. Karam states that “enrolled in elite schools, Middle Eastern youths were made aware of the alleged inferiority of their ethnic difference in the mid-twentieth century” (2007, 78). This same sentiment was expressed by several of my participants, such as “Jaqueline,” who stated that she was mockingly called “turca” at the private school she attended when she had hummus or kibbeh in her lunchbox—echoing Karam’s findings.

Politics and Belonging

The term “turco” also played a part in Latin American politics. For example, my participant “Monica” stressed that she felt the negative use of the term when she tried going into politics and the “turca” label was used against her. She argued that political opponents “used it as an insult... even though I was born here in Colombia, to Colombian parents...” Indeed, some of my participants allege that the use of the term *turco* as a discriminatory label was mostly used as a political tool against opponents of Middle Eastern descent. For

and opinions of eight of these participants are included in this text. All the names are pseudonyms (see Devis-Amaya 2014).

example, my participant “Edgar” mentioned politician Gabriel Turbay, a second-generation Arab immigrant who rose to politics in the 1930s and ran for Colombia’s presidency.¹⁷ He acknowledged the discrimination Turbay received, being labelled as *turco*, but believed this was “merely political” instead of a “hatred” against the politician or against Arab immigrants in general.¹⁸ At the same time, a number of authors argue that most of the discrimination against “turcos” was based on commercial reasons and competition (see Rodríguez and Restrepo 1982; Fawcett de Posada and Posada Carbó 1992; Vargas and Suaza 2007).

Moreover, there were different, even contradictory, representations of the “turco” label. Whilst it was associated with stinginess, greediness, and wanting to cheat the customer into paying more money, it was also connected to generosity, friendliness, and even regarded as a “term of endearment” (Vargas and Suaza 2007; Morrison 2005, 423). Indeed, Karam (2007, 12) argues that even though the term “turco” was used derogatively when it was coined, “today, Middle Easterners claim that ‘turco’ is not discriminatory but a ‘joking’ or ‘caring’ term of reference....” The interpretation of the term has been fluid rather than static, with shifting significance attached to it and a balance of rejection and tolerance among the diasporic community (Moore and Mathewson 2013).

Most of my participants argued that neither they themselves nor their children had ever felt discriminated against because of their ancestry. My participant “Gabriel” told me the story of when he was around ten years old, he told his classmates that his grandfather was Lebanese. He said that from that day on he became “el turco,” that it lasted for the remainder of his school years, and that he always found the nickname “entertaining.” He said the nickname disappeared for a while whilst he attended university and reappeared again when he started working as a journalist. He stressed that the nickname helped him develop a “sense of identity” connected to his Middle Eastern ancestry. As such, he believed that “turco” was a “normal” nickname: “it’s the nickname for all the Lebanese,” he stated. Similarly, my participant “Juanita” stated that her friends lovingly call her “turqui,” whilst “Monica” stated that whenever she is called “turca” (outside of politics) she takes it as a “loving” nickname: “Many people call me ‘turquita’ and I do not bother to explain anymore, I let them call me that without any issues.”

Finally, there was also an argument that the “turco” label was not discriminatory but rather “ignorance” or a “lack of understanding,” as my interviewee “Maria” put it. For

¹⁷ Vargas and Suaza (2007) illustrate the discrimination against Turbay, including opponents calling him a “dirty turco.”

¹⁸ Authors such as Vilorio (2004) and Almeida (1996) share this sentiment.

example, my participant “Jaqueline,” a descendant of a Lebanese migrant, analysed the different labels and their accuracy. She stated:

The Syrian-Lebanese don’t exist, either one or the other [Syrian or Lebanese]... it’s not a nationality. “Turcos” is worse, as it’s ethnically incorrect. Arab is like Latin American [too general], and Lebanese is a community within the Arab one.

She felt a strong connection to her Lebanese background, and all the other labels seem erroneous to her—though not necessarily negative.

Conclusion

All these accounts demonstrate the different uses and interpretations the term has had, as well as the diversity of experiences within the Arab diasporas. Some individuals and scholars have analysed the inaccuracy of the term “turco” and how it has evoked negative connotations, whilst others emphasise the camaraderie it brings with it. The differences in connotations showcase both the variety of experiences that these migrants and descendants of migrants have had, as well as the extent to which some of them have been able to appropriate the term and its symbolic associations for their own benefit—be it economic, political, social, or cultural. Indeed, these identifiers have become important for some as an aspect of their identity and sense of belonging, whilst others have rejected them, seeing them as discriminatory or as a form of “othering” (Devis-Amaya 2014).¹⁹

The use of the term “turco” can be seen as an example that illustrates how the historical mislabelling of groups can continue to influence contemporary social, cultural, and political dynamics. This term is far more than an incorrect linguistic footnote: it is a representation of historical national, ethnic, and socio-economic prejudices in the region; of the boundaries of national identity and sense of belonging within these societies; and of how the local context can have significant implications for the assessment of the label, from differentiation and discrimination to appropriation and integration. Today these descendants of Middle Eastern migrants have become part of the socio-cultural, political, and economic histories of their Latin American nations; and as such, the labels attached to them have also done so.

¹⁹ I argue that many in the communities saw the labels as a hierarchy within a “desirability” rank, some seeing ‘turco’ and Arab as undesirable and Lebanese more desirable; others also seeing Arab as desirable and as an opportunity to create links with the Middle East (Devis-Amaya 2014).

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