

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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