

Externalisation

<https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.6204>

Amalia CAMPOS-DELGADO

Leiden Law School, Leiden University
a.e.campos.delgado@law.leidenuniv.nl

EXTERNALISATION: *A set of strategies through which states extend the spatial reach of migration control beyond their territorial borders, managing and restricting human movement before it reaches their frontiers. Externalisation encompasses, and is underpinned by, the institutionalisation of (un)desirability and the management of worthiness. It is a co-produced, multi-scalar, and negotiated process.*

Keywords: externalisation; migration control; visa regime; humanitarian governance; border externalisation; transit migration; Latin America; United States

The externalisation of migration controls refers to strategies aimed at managing and restricting the movement of people before they arrive at a country's borders (Cobarrubias et al. 2023; Menjivar 2014). It constitutes both a “manipulation of territoriality” (FitzGerald 2020, 4), in which the spatial reach of migration control extends beyond the territorial limits of a single state, and — because its “success” depends largely on states' willingness to implement migration agendas devised outside their own borders — a manifestation of power asymmetries. This domestic enforcement of external agendas responds to a political commodification of migration control, in which states' participation is shaped by a combination of symbolic, political or financial incentives and/or pressures, including direct financial transfers, trade leverage, conditionality of development assistance, security cooperation frameworks, and diplomatic pressures.

While Latin America and the Caribbean have historically been a key locus of the externalisation of U.S. migration control aimed at regulating, managing, and deterring outmigration (Gómez 2023; de la Torre et al. 2025), the securitisation of migration that has characterised the post-NAFTA era, and more broadly the twenty-first century, has expanded the modalities of such externalisation and the populations targeted by them. This expansion has given rise, for example, to the development of transit control regimes (Collyer et al. 2012; Huerta 2015), such as those in Mexico and Ecuador (Campos-Delgado 2021; Álvarez Velasco 2020), and, more recently, in Panama and Costa Rica (Winters and Mora Izaguirre 2019; Baird et al. 2025). This entry examines two additional modalities of externalisation of

U.S. migration control in transit countries in Latin America and the Caribbean: the institutionalisation of (un)desirability in the visa regime and the management of worthiness in humanitarian governance. These modalities are recursive since, as literature has long shown (Brigden and Mainwaring 2016), the reduction of regularised pathways of mobility significantly shapes migration trajectories, which in turn produce multiple realities of precarisation along migrants' journeys, thereby legitimising the expansion of humanitarian governance regimes. Together, these dimensions highlight externalisation as a multifaceted and entangled process, underpinned by power asymmetries, political arrangements, and mechanisms of legitimisation.

Institutionalisation of (Un)Desirability in the Visa Regime

At the core of the externalisation of migration control lies the institutionalisation of (un)desirability, which produces unequal access to global mobility infrastructures. The global mobility infrastructure, as defined by Thomas Spijkerboer (2018, 452), "consists of the physical structures, services and laws that enable some people to move across the globe with high speed, low risk, and at low cost." Access to this infrastructure is mediated through the visa regime, which, under the guise of security as a proxy rationale, discriminates on the bases of nationality, race, religion, perceived cultural compatibility, or economic and intellectual potential.

Visa policies, therefore, do not merely regulate the movement of people across borders, they actively construct categories of welcome or unwelcome, desirable or undesirable. Grounded in, and magnifying, the power of the passport as a technology of mobility (Torpey 1998), visa regimes function as instruments of externalised border control, encoding selective mobility that both reflects and reinforces global inequalities (Salter 2006; Infantino 2016). They conceal discriminatory practices under the rhetoric of security, administrative necessity, and the nation-state's economic and developmental interests, ultimately sustaining transnational hierarchies of legitimacy (Zampagni 2016; van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2020).

The visa regime in Latin America demonstrates clear ties to the U.S. border control agenda, a dimension of the elasticisation of the U.S. southern border, as conceptualised by Nancy Hiemstra (2019). For example, Mexico has historically required visas from citizens of Central American countries with high numbers of irregular entries at the U.S. southern border, and it continuously adapts its visa policies in response to recent migration flows, such as those adopted in 2022 and 2024 in light of intensified irregularised crossings through the

Darién, Panama, and subsequent northward transit, targeting migrants from Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, and Peru. Another materialisation of this relationship can be observed in visa waivers, which act as forms of transferred pre-emptive categorisation: countries such as Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Costa Rica, the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Barbados grant visa-free entry to individuals holding valid U.S. visas, enabling entry without a separate visa and thereby foregoing independent security scrutiny while both symbolically and materially legitimising U.S. authority within their territories. The securitising dimension of the visa regime as a modality of externalisation, along with its implicit asymmetrical geopolitical dimension, is further reflected in the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, launched in 2022 by U.S. President Biden and signed by 21 Latin American and Caribbean heads of state. In the Declaration, states commit to exploring new mechanisms: “While preserving and leveraging existing regional, subregional, hemispheric, and global fora, to strengthen cooperation on border management and apply current mechanisms on visa regimes and regularization processes to combat exploitation by criminal groups” (The White House 2024).

Through a domino-effect implementation, visa policies allow states to institutionalise hierarchies of (un)desirability by requiring certain individuals to obtain visas while exempting others. Since visa regimes are administrated through consulates and embassies, this modality of governance operates within broader processes of externalisation and sovereignty fictions. These spaces, though not legally sovereign, function as extraterritorial extensions of state authority, owing to the protections afforded by diplomatic and consular law.

The Management of Worthiness in Humanitarian Governance

Parallel to the institutionalisation of (un)desirability is the externalisation of humanitarian governance. In this modality, international standards of vulnerability are mobilised as evaluative tools through which worthiness is assessed, ultimately determining access to both care and mobility. Humanitarian interventions invoke vulnerability not as a neutral condition but as a filtering device: a metric for allocating assistance and a rationale for various forms of containment, selection, and expulsion. In this way, humanitarian governance does not merely respond to need; it actively participates in producing hierarchies of care and mobility, reinforcing bordering practices through a moralised logic of inclusion and exclusion (Agier 2011; Fassin 2012; Pallister-Wilkins 2022).

The use of camps as a strategy for the “management of the undesirables” (Agier 2011) has a long story in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, however, in Latin America, its

adoption has occurred only in recent years. Although camps have a historical precedent in the region — for example the refugee camps established in Honduras, Mexico, and Costa Rica to host people fleeing the civil wars and dictatorships of Central America during the 1980s (Hanlon and Lovell 1997; O'Hara 2024) — those more recently established are designed to manage population in transit, functioning as mechanisms of U.S. migration control externalisation. Examples include the camps established in northern Mexico in 2018 in response to the US metering policy (Bermúdez Tapia 2023) as well as the San Vicente camp in Panama, which was initially created in 2020 to shelter migrants in transit to the U.S., but by 2025 had shifted to hosting deportees from the U.S. (Turkewitz et al. 2025). This incorporation reflects the conflicted role of transit states, which, faced with populations moving through or stranded within their territory due to increasingly restrictive U.S. migration politics, instrumentalise humanitarian rationales to establish confinement and containment spaces that combine responsibility avoidance, controlled abandonment, and coercive practices. Crucially, the precarious, punitive, and ephemeral-by-design aspects of these infrastructures should not be interpreted as administrative shortcomings, but rather as constitutive features of this externalised modality of control, functioning as zones of contention and sites of biopolitical governance through which movement is managed and behaviour disciplined.

The implementation of this modality is closely tied to the presence of international organisations involved in migration governance, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Although often perceived as apolitical actors, these organisations play a central role in the institutionalisation and management of (un)worthiness in migration, contributing to what Didier Fassin (2005) terms the “moral economy of suffering”. In recent years, the growing use of “waiting” as a migration governance strategy in Latin America (Ceja Cárdenas and Miranda 2022), along with the instrumentalisation of temporary protections (Angulo-Pasel 2021), has coincided with an increase in the political support for, and presence of, organisations advocating and implementing so-called voluntary assisted return programmes (Trabalón 2024). Far from neutral, the “compassionate repression” (Fassin 2012) ethos of these strategies reinforces the re-production of hierarchies of (un)worthiness, shaping who is considered deserving of protection and assistance and who is rendered subject to removal or exclusion. For instance, in 2023, the IOM reported assisting 2,162 migrants to return from Central and North America and the Caribbean, an increase of 37% compared to the previous year, with Mexico remaining the top country from which these migrants were “returned”

(IOM 2023, 2024). The politics, policies, and economies underpinning the operations of these organisations in transit countries represent a materialisation of externalised migration control, as well as the localised enactment of a global migration regime.

These two modalities reveal the politically contingent and negotiated nature of externalisation, operationalised through *ad hoc* and situational practices that reflect power asymmetries, adaptive formalism, strategic legitimisation, and practical discretion (Adamson and Greenhill 2023; Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022; Casas-Cortés et al. 2016). Border externalisation, therefore, is a co-produced process rather than a passive response to pressure from wealthier states. Mexico, for instance, negotiates its role in the externalisation chain, balancing U.S. demands with domestic political calculations and humanitarian considerations (Campos-Delgado 2024). Similarly, the presence of international organisations involved in migration governance does not emerge in a vacuum; it is vetted by the state and, as part of a subtle legitimacy strategy, these bodies operate in alliance with domestic organisations while still advancing their own hemispheric and global agendas (Dini et al. 2025). This challenges top-down models and underlines externalisation as a multi-scalar, negotiated process. It further illustrates that externalisation is not solely about building impenetrable normative and material infrastructures aimed at obstructing populations on the move, but more often operates through a subtler, yet complex, interplay of mobility and immobility, precarity and safety, acceptance and rejection.

References

- Adamson, Fiona B., and Kelly M. Greenhill. 2023. "Deal-Making, Diplomacy and Transactional Forced Migration." *International Affairs* 99 (2): 707–25. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad017>.
- Agier, Michel. 2011. *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*. Polity.
- Álvarez Velasco, Soledad. 2020. "From Ecuador to Elsewhere: The (Re)Configuration of a Transit Country." *Migration and Society* 3 (1): 34–49. <https://doi.org/10.3167/arms.2020.111403>.
- Angulo-Pasel, Carla. 2021. "The Politics of Temporary Protection Schemes: The Role of Mexico's TVRH in Reproducing Precarity among Central American Migrants." *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 14 (July): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X211027886>.
- Baird, Madeline, K. Michelle Ordaz, and Amanda Gabster. 2025. "Embodied Borders: Navigating Transit Migration Through Darién, Panama." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 30 (4): e70033. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.70033>.

- Bermudez Tapia, Bertha Alicia. 2023. "From Matamoros to Reynosa: Migrant Camps on the U.S.-Mexico Border." *Contexts* 22 (1): 30–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15365042221142833>.
- Brigden, Noelle K., and Cetta Mainwaring. 2016. "Matryoshka Journeys: Im/Mobility During Migration." *Geopolitics* 21 (2): 407–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2015.1122592>.
- Campos-Delgado, Amalia. 2021. "Abnormal Bordering: Control, Punishment and Deterrence in Mexico's Migrant Detention Centres." *The British Journal of Criminology* 61 (2): 476–96. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azaa071>.
- Campos-Delgado, Amalia. 2024. "Euphemistic Rhetoric and Dysphemistic Practices: Governing Migration in Mexico." *Geopolitics* 29 (1): 64–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2185513>.
- Casas-Cortés, Maribel, Sebastian Cobarrubias, and John Pickles. 2016. "'Good Neighbours Make Good Fences': Seahorse Operations, Border Externalization and Extra-Territoriality." *European Urban and Regional Studies* 23 (3): 231–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776414541136>.
- Ceja Cárdenas, Ireri, and Bruno Miranda. 2022. "La espera como técnica de gobierno de las migraciones en las Américas." *Revista Común*. <https://revistacomun.com/blog/category/ireri-ceja-cardenas/>.
- Cobarrubias, Sebastian, Paolo Cuttitta, Maribel Casas-Cortés, et al. 2023. "Interventions on the Concept of Externalisation in Migration and Border Studies." *Political Geography* 105 (August): 102911. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102911>.
- Collyer, Michael, Franck Düvell, and Hein de Haas. 2012. "Critical Approaches to Transit Migration." *Population, Space and Place* 18 (4): 407–14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.630>.
- Dini, Sabine, Shoshana Fine, and Antoine Pécoud. 2025. "Rethinking the International Organization for Migration." *Geopolitics* 30 (4): 1525–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2480316>.
- Fassin, Didier. 2005. "Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France." *Cultural Anthropology* 20 (3): 362–87. <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2005.20.3.362>.
- Fassin, Didier. 2012. *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. University of California Press.
- FitzGerald, David Scott. 2020. "Remote Control of Migration: Theorising Territoriality, Shared Coercion, and Deterrence." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46 (1): 4–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1680115>.
- Gómez, Moisés. 2023. "El desplazamiento forzado en El Salvador y las políticas de externalización de fronteras." *ECA: Estudios Centroamericanos* 78 (772): 41–52. <https://doi.org/10.51378/eca.v78i772.7913>.
- Hanlon, Catherine L. Nolin, and W. George Lovell. 1997. "Huida, exilio, repatriación y retorno: escenarios de los refugiados guatemaltecos, 1981–1997." *Mesoamérica* 18 (34): 559–82.

- Hiemstra, Nancy. 2019. "Pushing the US-Mexico Border South: United States' Immigration Policing throughout the Americas." *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 5 (1/2): 44. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJMBS.2019.099681>.
- Houtum, Henk van, and Rodrigo Bueno Lacy. 2020. "The Autoimmunity of the EU's Deadly B/Ordering Regime; Overcoming Its Paradoxical Paper, Iron and Camp Borders." *Geopolitics* 25 (3): 706–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1728743>.
- Huerta, Amarela Varela. 2015. "La "securitización" de la gubernamentalidad migratoria mediante la "externalización" de las fronteras estadounidenses a Mesoamérica." *Contemporánea*, no. 4 (July). <https://revistas.inah.gob.mx/index.php/contemporanea/article/view/6270>.
- Infantino, Federica. 2016. *Outsourcing Border Control: Politics and Practice of Contracted Visa Policy in Morocco*. Palgrave Pivot.
- IOM. 2023. *Return and Reintegration Key Highlights 2022*. International Organization for Migration. <https://publications.iom.int/books/return-and-reintegration-key-highlights-2022>.
- IOM. 2024. *Return and Reintegration Key Highlights 2023*. International Organization for Migration. <https://publications.iom.int/books/return-and-reintegration-key-highlights-2023>.
- Menjívar, Cecilia. 2014. "Immigration Law Beyond Borders: Externalizing and Internalizing Border Controls in an Era of Securitization." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 10: 353–69. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-110413-030842>.
- O'Hara, Fionntán. 2024. "Refugee Camps as Spaces of the Global Cold War: Cold War Activism and Humanitarian Action within Refugee Camps in Honduras during the 1980s." *Cold War History* 0 (0): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2024.2306394>.
- Pacciardi, Agnese, and Joakim Berndtsson. 2022. "EU Border Externalisation and Security Outsourcing: Exploring the Migration Industry in Libya." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48 (17): 4010–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2061930>.
- Pallister-Wilkins, Polly. 2022. *Humanitarian Borders: Unequal Mobility and Saving Lives*. Verso Books.
- Salter, Mark B. 2006. "The Global Visa Regime and the Political Technologies of the International Self: Borders, Bodies, Biopolitics." *Alternatives* 31 (2): 167–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540603100203>.
- Spijkerboer, Thomas. 2018. "The Global Mobility Infrastructure: Reconceptualising the Externalisation of Migration Control." *European Journal of Migration and Law*. 20 (4): 452–469. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718166-12340038>.
- The White House. 2024. "Fact Sheet: Fourth Ministerial Meeting on the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection." September 26. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/26/fact-sheet-fourth-ministerial-meeting-on-the-los-angeles-declaration-on-migration-and-protection/>.

- Torpey, John. 1998. "Coming and Going: On the State Monopolization of the Legitimate "Means of Movement"." *Sociological Theory* 16 (3): 239–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00055>.
- Torre, Jesús M. de la, Brenda Peralta, and Karla Rivas. 2025. "'Do Not Come': The US Root Causes Strategy and the Co-Optation of the Right to Stay." *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 13 (1): 112–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23315024241306366>.
- Trabalón, Carina. 2024. "La Migración "Extrarregional" Como Categoría Racial. Gobernanza Migratoria y "Tránsitos Sur-Norte" En Sudamérica y Mesoamérica." *Si Somos Americanos* 24. <https://doi.org/10.61303/07190948.v24i.1151>.
- Turkewitz, Julie, Farnaz Fassihi, and Annie Correal. 2025. "Encerrados en un campamento en la jungla, los migrantes deportados a Panamá se enfrentan a un futuro incierto." En Español. *The New York Times*, March 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2025/03/01/espanol/america-latina/migrantes-panama-darien-trump.html>.
- Winters, Nanneke, and Cynthia Mora Izaguirre. 2019. "Es Cosa Suya: Entanglements of Border Externalization and African Transit Migration in Northern Costa Rica." *Comparative Migration Studies* 7 (1): 27. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0131-9>.
- Zampagni, Francesca. 2016. "Unpacking the Schengen Visa Regime. A Study on Bureaucrats and Discretion in an Italian Consulate." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 31 (2): 251–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2016.1174605>.