

Migration Categorisation

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MIGRATION CATEGORISATION: *A historically and politically situated process through which states, international organisations, expert communities, civil society actors, and migrants produce, circulate, stabilise and contest labels that render mobility legible and governable. Within a polycentric and unequal field, categorisation works across institutional, experiential and epistemic registers, stratifying access to rights and recognition, distributing visibility and invisibility, and authorising some forms of knowledge while marginalising others. It operates at once as a political technology and as a terrain of struggle, constituting differentiated legal, social and political subjectivities. Dominant classifications are enforced, negotiated, reappropriated and challenged in situated ways, exposing their instability even where such contestation rarely displaces the hierarchies they sustain.*

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Categorisation is conventionally understood as a way of ordering the social world, making it intelligible and governable, and producing representations that shape reality itself (Scott 1998). Critical scholarship has demonstrated that categorisation is a historically and politically situated process that actors embed in power relations and mobilise in governance. Specific labels function as political technologies (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012, 2013; De Genova 2013; Tazzioli 2019), stratifying access to rights and recognition while producing differentiated legal and political subjectivities (Zetter 1991, 2007; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). In this way, they establish boundaries of visibility and invisibility and function as mechanisms of social differentiation shaped by political priorities and unequal power relations.

In Latin America, where recurrent displacement converges with entrenched inequalities, states, international organisations and civil society actors deploy categorisation through contested and polycentric regimes (Domenech 2013; Acosta and Freier 2015; Álvarez Velasco 2020b). Labels such as refugee, Mercosur residence permit holder, temporary-permit holder or irregular migrant structure migration governance but are also reinterpreted from below. Migrants reappropriate and invert stigmas, or coin vernacular grammars, generating alternative frameworks for understanding mobility and destabilising

the legibility of state power. An expanding body of scholarship interrogates institutional categories as objects of inquiry, examining how they shape migrant subjectivities while also circulating across institutional, experiential and epistemic registers.

Governing Through Categories

Academic scholarship calls for a reflexive turn (Acosta and Freier 2023; Fernández-Rodríguez and Freier 2024), moving beyond juridical or institutionalist lenses to interrogate categorisation as a core technology of statecraft. Drawing on reflections on the United States, Menjívar (2023) shows how the bureaucracies of displacement institutionalise exclusion and foster 'illegality'. Within the framework of the US-led externalisation agreements and border-surveillance partnerships, several Latin American and Caribbean governments have implemented control mechanisms that reclassify migrants into precarious categories, or into categories deemed undeserving of protection.

State actors design certain legal categories to restrict access to rights and stabilise migrants' conditional presence. Renewal requirements, discretionary enforcement and administrative fragmentation generate precariousness, turning categorisation into a mode of governing rather than a neutral administrative tool. In doing so, they draw on long-standing hierarchies of sovereignty, security, market rationalities and race. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, state elites across the Americas promoted European immigration within "civilising" and whitening projects, while immigration policies increasingly selected and excluded populations along racialised lines (FitzGerald and Cook-Martín 2014). Governments also mobilised the figure of the *exiliado* (political exile) within changing regimes of political protection and exclusion, shaped by domestic transformations, diplomatic relations and ideological alignments (Sznajder and Roniger 2009). In Mexico, Yankelevich (2019) shows how the reception of political exiles remained closely tied to political and diplomatic considerations across the twentieth century, including after the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Although a number of Latin American states broadened refugee protection by adopting or incorporating the expanded definition advanced in the 1984 Cartagena Declaration (Fischel de Andrade 2019), protection across the region remains uneven, fragmented across overlapping legal and institutional regimes (Jubilut, Vera Espinoza and Mezzanotti 2021). Within this fragmented field, international organisations, the Church, NGOs and grassroots associations actively reshape migration categories. They mediate the practical translation of legal categories and migration policies, making migration procedures

legible and particular migrant populations institutionally visible (Russell, Rodríguez-Gómez and Mantilla-Blanco 2026), thereby structuring differentiated access to rights and channelling migrants towards market-oriented livelihoods and hierarchies of deservingness (Laplace 2016; Gómez Martín and Malo 2020). Research on refugee governance in Ecuador further demonstrates how protection regimes institutionalise moral distinctions between “deserving” and “undeserving” refugees. At the same time, the growing recourse to ordinary migration pathways progressively displaces refugee status and weakens the specificity of international protection (Gómez Martín 2025). In this configuration, humanitarian actors participate in forms of differentiated inclusion through languages of protection, vulnerability and deservingness, in ways that resonate with Domenech’s formulation of “control with a human face” (Domenech 2013).

Across these cases, three recurrent logics intersect: diplomatic, through which governments calibrate recognition and admission according to political and interstate relations (Jubilut, Vera Espinoza and Mezzanotti 2021); economic, through which mobilities are valued according to perceived utility and migrants’ capacity for self-sufficiency (FitzGerald and Cook-Martín 2014; Acosta and Freier 2015); and sociocultural, through which racialised classifications differentiate migrant populations (Domenech and Dias 2020; Trabalón 2021). These logics intersect, particularly in the humanitarian framing and criminalisation of Venezuelan migration in Peru (Freier and Pérez 2021), or in the differentiated implementation of regional residence schemes, where the Mercosur Residence Agreement has generated markedly different pathways of regularisation and protection across countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador (Acosta and Freier 2015). They generate shifting figures of admissibility: subjects of protection, security concerns, economically desirable migrants and populations whose presence is tolerated conditionally.

This tension is visible in fragmented visa pathways, such as humanitarian visas or temporary permits, that institutionalise precarity (Herrera and Gómez Martín 2022). Permits require recurrent renewal, exposing migrants to discretionary decisions and costs, while temporary humanitarian statuses may provide legal presence without securing long-term status. Protection is further shaped at the micro level, where street-level bureaucrats exercise discretion over the practical implementation of formal rights (Ramírez Gallegos 2022). Authorities may also govern through strategic inaction. Beyers and Nicholls (2020) conceptualise Ecuador’s response to Venezuelan migration as “government through inaction”, showing how non-intervention can channel migrant trajectories and shift responsibilities away from the state. Administrative delays, inaccessible procedures or failures

to renew status may similarly contribute to the legal production of migrant “illegality” analysed by De Genova (2002).

Moreover, Trabalón’s (2025) analysis of “segmented detention” and “detainability” captures racialised forms of mobility control affecting migrants categorised as “extra-regional” along South-North routes in South America. Police and other state actors interrupt, delay and redirect mobility through detention practices that expose migrants to fear, confinement and forms of value extraction without necessarily preventing movement from continuing afterwards. Legal classifications thus define an architecture of recognition and exclusion, while administrative instruments, reshaped by bureaucracies, NGOs and international organisations, translate these distinctions into programmatic logics and differentiated trajectories. Institutional fragmentation and opaque procedures widen spaces for discretion and sustain unequal exposure to precarisation.

Lived Categories and Situated Resistance

Recent scholarship produced in and on Latin America advances migration studies by examining how individuals experience and respond to the labels imposed on them (Rivera Sánchez, Herrera and Domenech 2023). This perspective foregrounds the lived dimension of categorisation, showing how labels such as refugee, irregular, deportable or *en tránsito* operate as markers of Otherness that structure everyday life. These categories intersect with nationality, race, class, gender and age, producing distinct subjectivities.

Structural constraints deeply affect migrants’ lives. Berg and Herrera (2022) show how detention, deportation and return reshape transnational family relations, care arrangements, gender roles and social expectations. In Ecuador, Pugh’s (2021) concept of the *invisibility bargain* captures how Colombian migrants navigate unwritten expectations that associate acceptance with low political and social visibility and with their perceived contribution to the host society. In Peru, Freier and Pérez (2021) document how Venezuelan forced migrants experience nationality-based criminalisation in everyday life and relate these experiences to broader media and political representations.

At the same time, migrants dispute and rework the categories through which others classify them. Haitian migrants in Chile contest ethnoracial classifications in the labour market and develop forms of resistance to racism articulated, among other elements, around skin colour and Haitian nationality (Amode 2019; Mercado Órdenes and Figueiredo 2023). In Central American transit contexts, collective migrant struggles turn movement, presence and border crossing into forms of political claim-making around mobility and the right to

migrate (Varela Huerta 2016). More broadly, research on *luchas migrantes* (migrant struggles) shows how people on the move challenge the institutional terms through which legitimate mobility and political belonging are defined (Domenech and Boito 2019), embodying improbable yet powerful collective mobilisations.

These studies show that lived categorisations are sites of struggle over meaning and recognition. By reinterpreting, resisting and subverting imposed labels, migrants expose the instability of classificatory regimes and sometimes reshape their institutional effects. Agency nevertheless unfolds within an asymmetrical field of power: contestation may alter categories and their uses without displacing the hierarchies through which migration governance is organised.

Reframing Migration Knowledge

At the epistemic level, the analysis examines the production, circulation and authorisation of migration categories as legitimate forms of knowledge, recognising universities, research centres and expert communities as central sites in this process. By rejecting migration policy and its categories as self-evident objects of analysis, it shifts attention to the epistemic conditions under which certain classifications acquire scientific authority and stabilise as analytical frameworks.

A significant strand of scholarship on Latin American migration policy remains concentrated on legal norms, institutional arrangements and the gaps between regulation and implementation (Fernández-Rodríguez and Freier 2024). Administrative categories consequently often enter research as descriptive tools without their construction and legitimisation becoming central objects of analysis. More reflexive contributions treat these classifications as objects of inquiry in their own right, examining how they stabilise, circulate, accrue authority and are actively denaturalised through critical inquiry. From this perspective, critical researchers approach classificatory labels as political artefacts embedded in unequal regimes of knowledge. They examine research agendas, expert routines, humanitarian metrics, and data practices that confer visibility and authority on certain forms of mobility, thereby marginalising others.

Drawing on critical border studies developed in and on Latin America, researchers analyse the political production of border spaces, corridors and transit zones as classificatory processes that differentiate migrant subjects and organise mobility governance. This line of inquiry has extended to terms such as “origin”, “destination” and particularly “transit” (see “transit fetishism” in this *Lexicon*), showing how these spatial descriptors operate as

classificatory devices that redistribute responsibility, legitimise containment and shape both governance arrangements and migrants' trajectories (Álvarez Velasco 2017, 2020a; Álvarez Velasco, Pedone and Miranda 2021; Álvarez Velasco and Liberona Concha 2025; Gandini 2026).

A first mechanism of epistemic power operates through the stabilisation of governance categories. Reflexive scholarship distinguishes administrative classifications from analytical concepts to prevent state labels from silently structuring scholarly inquiry (Acosta and Freier 2023; Menjívar 2023). Drawing on genealogical approaches that frame migration categories as historically contingent (Akoka 2020; Chimni 1998; Malkki 1995), this work traces how classificatory regimes form and gain authority within unequal global orders. Academic research can consolidate institutional epistemologies by adopting their classifications, or challenge them by reconstructing the conditions under which they acquired authority. This first mechanism concerns the symbolic and epistemic consolidation of categories: the processes through which they acquire authority in scholarly and policy debates.

A second mechanism unfolds through the production of counter-classifications that reshape the intelligibility of mobility and intervene in regimes of knowledge. Drawing on Mbembe (2003), Estévez (2021) develops the notion of migration necropolitics to analyse how humanitarian and legal regimes operate as technologies of death in Venezuela and Honduras. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Ceballos Medina, Clavijo Padilla, and González Gil (2022) introduce *migraciones de preservación* ("migrations of preservation"), reframing movement as an act of autonomy and re-existence. Cintra, Owen and Riggirozzi (2023) draw on the notion of "necessary fleers" to challenge the migrant-refugee binary and foreground the gendered character of forced displacement and the protection gaps generated by existing classifications. In a related vein, Amarela Varela Huerta's work on *luchas migrantes* and epistemic activism (2015, 2016, 2023) conceptualises migrant struggles as interventions in regimes of visibility and knowledge themselves. By foregrounding migrants as producers of meaning alongside their position as subjects of governance, these contributions challenge dominant classificatory frameworks and expose the epistemic power embedded in migration regimes.

A third mechanism interrogates the material and institutional infrastructures involved in the circulation, operationalisation and legitimation of migration knowledge. Álvarez Velasco, Pedone and Miranda (2021) analyse migration corridors as transnational social spaces, rescaling analytical units and challenging methodological nationalism. Domenech,

Basualdo and Pereira (2023) examine techno-humanitarian instruments such as the International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix within an emerging politics of data in South America, showing how humanitarian expertise produces mobility data and cartographic representations that feed directly into migration and border control. By defining what can be counted, mapped, documented and recognised as displacement, vulnerability or crisis, these infrastructures participate directly in the production and governance of migration knowledge.

Conclusion

Latin American scholarship has enriched global debates on migration categorisation by foregrounding its political, racial, experiential and epistemic dimensions. From the legal creativity associated with the Cartagena Declaration to classifications contested and reworked through migrant struggles, the region shows how categorisation operates as a situated practice embedded in unequal relations of power.

Critical reflection on categorisation, however, has not consistently structured the field of Latin American migration studies. The contributions reviewed here demonstrate its potential as a unifying analytical lens. Anchoring categorisation as a central object of inquiry invites us to deepen this orientation within the region while extending its reach into global debates.

Critical, feminist, ethno-racial, community-based and decolonial approaches developed in and through Latin America challenge entrenched hierarchies of knowledge production. They also draw their analytical force from particular histories and institutional configurations: racialised projects of nation-building, regional innovations in refugee protection, overlapping migration and asylum regimes, and struggles over mobility and political belonging. Bringing these traditions into wider conversations makes visible the multiple sites from which migration is already theorised and strengthens exchanges between Latin America and other Souths. The authority to name, classify and theorise mobility remains unevenly distributed. Struggles over that authority form part of migration governance itself.

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