Trocheros

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***TROCHEROS**: Individuals who guide or carry goods for others across* trochas*, the informal, unregulated paths used to bypass official crossings along borders, most notably between Venezuela and Colombia. The role is situational rather than fixed: people take it up temporarily or recurrently in response to economic collapse, food shortages, and inconsistent border enforcement, and it may or may not become a stable livelihood. Analytically distinct from "smuggler," the term denotes actors embedded in local moral and relational economies rather than criminal networks.* Trocheros *sustain cross-border survival economies, enable humanitarian flows, and expose the selective, situational nature of state authority — tolerated, taxed, or repressed depending on shifting political conditions.*

Keywords: trocheros; borderscape; Venezuela; Colombia; informal economies; migration

The term *trocheros* has its roots in the word *trocha*. A vernacular term used during the border crossing between Venezuela and Colombia, *trocha* refers to improvised, informal pathways designed to bypass the formal infrastructures that regulate passage across the border. These paths are carved out of necessity, maintained by repetition, and informally regulated through negotiations with local residents, armed groups, and security forces. Thus, to be a *trochero* is not to belong to a fixed identity group, but to assume, temporarily or recurrently, the role of someone who carries goods or accompanies people across these trails. Individuals may assume this role intermittently throughout their lives, depending on shifting economic needs, border regulations and personal mobility trajectories. This figure is less a profession than a role assumed under particular social and economic circumstances, although repeated participation may eventually become a stable livelihood for some actors. Indeed, this role is structurally shaped by conditions of economic collapse, food shortages, and uneven enforcement of border controls, which can be interpreted as forms of state abandonment. Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Cúcuta, at the Colombian-Venezuelan

border (2020–2022) and along the Colombia–Panama border surrounding the Darién Gap (2022–2023), this study combines participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews with migrants, *trocheros*, humanitarian workers and local actors, and the longitudinal follow-up of fifteen mobility trajectories between 2020 and 2024. Fieldnotes and interview materials were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns concerning survival strategies, moral economies and selective border enforcement.

While informal crossings have long existed along the Colombia–Venezuela border, the figure of the *trochero* became particularly visible after successive episodes of diplomatic rupture and border closure. The unilateral closure decreed by the Venezuelan government in 2015, followed by renewed restrictions in 2019 amid political confrontation and humanitarian crisis, drastically reduced formal circulation while increasing dependence on *trochas*. Subsequent partial reopenings did not eliminate these informal routes but rather transformed their functions, revealing the cyclical expansion and contraction of trocha-based mobility according to changing border governance.

Trocheros must be analytically disentangled from state categories such as "smugglers", which obscure the situational, non-predatory and often essential labour they provide. Building on the work of Sanchez (2015) and Achilli (2018), which shows that facilitators of mobility operate within moral and relational economies rather than purely criminal logics, *trocheros* can be understood as local actors who temporarily assume the role of guiding or accompanying migrants through informal trails, without constituting a stable occupational or criminal group. In the case of the Venezuela and Colombia border, *trocheros* include small-scale farmers displaced from their land, unemployed youth, former military personnel, and members of Indigenous communities living across border territories. They transport bags of rice, cooking oil, medicines, and gasoline, goods that sustain households and local economies in crisis. In a scene often observed, groups of young men push broken motorcycles loaded with fuel cans through muddy riverbeds, paying informal tolls to armed actors who control access to the *trochas*. Women often make the crossing with sacks of food or diapers, relying on *trocheros* to negotiate with border guards or gangs, who might ask for a bribe or quietly take part of the load. Without these flows, the markets of Cúcuta (Colombia) and San Antonio (Venezuela) would lack the basic supplies that allow daily life for the most precarious to continue. This role is subjected to highly volatile and inconsistent state actions, marked by selective enforcement—one day tolerated, the next repressed, always precarious. Indeed, *trocheros* are deeply entangled with broader economic and political structures. They are not simply opportunists exploiting porous borders; they are the essential human

infrastructure that sustains cross-border survival economies, enabling humanitarian flows, and maintaining family networks stretched across two collapsing states. In Cúcuta's markets, prices of staples fluctuate depending on the volume of goods carried by *trocheros*. Local shopkeepers acknowledge this dependence while authorities publicly ignore it. To dismiss them as smugglers obscures the ways in which their labour reproduces both community life and regional economies.

Similar roles are documented across contexts under different terms, such as *coyotes* in Mexico–United States or *passeurs* across the Mediterranean, highlighting the transnational relevance of this phenomenon. Notably, as shown in Sarrut, Echeverri Zuluaga & Valenzuela Amaya (2023), the Colombia–Panama border of the Darién produces different terms and situational configurations: in the Darién, intermediaries are called *guías,* yet their role is analogous to the *trocheros*, reflecting what they called a "situated regime" in which their labour is essential, morally embedded, and variably tolerated by state authorities. This perspective allows us to analyse the intermediary role as contingent on the dynamics of the border itself rather than as a fixed category of illegality.

Furthermore, what makes *trocheros* significant is not only their role in maintaining flows of goods but also the contradictions they embody. They reveal how states displace responsibility for survival onto individuals. Testimonies collected along the border underscore this tension. One resident, who temporarily worked as a trochero carrying kilos of rice across the river each day, explained that he did so not for profit but "to make sure my family eats at night." Another woman who relied on trocheros emphasised the danger of crossing with children, but also the impossibility of feeding them otherwise. This situation illustrates how vulnerability is rendered politically invisible while the practices through which people survive are selectively criminalised. Rather than recognising these activities as forms of essential labour, state institutions often reduce them to questions of illegality, thereby legitimising abandonment while extending mechanisms of control.

In other words, this volatility is not exceptional but systemic to the border regime, which dichotomises mobility into what is considered by the state as "regular" and "irregular" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This paradox reveals that sovereignty is less about absolute control than about selective recognition, where illegality is instrumentalised as a resource. *Trocheros* reveal not the failure of sovereignty but one of its ordinary modes of operation, where selective enforcement, tolerated informality and strategic illegality coexist.

To define *trocheros* is to examine the blurred nexus between legality and illegality, where survival strategies are dictated by local needs and practices rather than by formal state law or

official categories. Their figure unsettles official narratives of sovereignty and control, exposing the dependence of state borders on the very practices they denounce. In practice, the authority of the border is not reinforced by eliminating *trocheros* but by tolerating, taxing, and occasionally repressing them. States claim closure, yet survival depends on those who open the informal paths.

Ethnographic accounts also reveal the temporal ambiguity of this role. Many *trocheros* regard their activity as temporary, a stopgap in the face of crisis. Yet the repetition of crossings engrains the practice into their biographies. As one former hairdresser put it, "I thought I would do this for a week, but three years later I am still here, still crossing." In this sense, being a *trochero* is less a matter of choice than another imposed trajectory of migration. Trochas embody the dual nature of the border. They reproduce the line of division while simultaneously undermining its exclusivity. Trochas and their actors inhabit what the border-studies literature conceptualises as a "borderscape" (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007; Brambilla, 2015): a relational and contested socio-spatial formation where sovereignty is continuously enacted and renegotiated through everyday practices of mobility, survival and control rather than fixed territorial boundaries. Each crossing therefore reassembles the border in practice, revealing that borders are not static lines but ongoing political processes. In this sense, the figure of *trocheros* functions as living indicators of this unfolding crisis, revealing how informal paths sustain regional circulation when formal crossings shut down. When official crossings were closed, as in 2015 or 2019, when Venezuela unilaterally closed the frontier, their numbers multiplied. When restrictions eased, some disappeared while others adapted their work to new conditions. The figure itself is mobile, reflecting the elasticity of survival strategies in unstable contexts.

Ultimately, the figure of the *trocheros* demonstrates that informality and strategically managed illegality are not deviations, but constitutive elements of contemporary border governance in contexts of structural collapse.

Fernando Garlin Politis and Lucas Molet, "*Trocha* Silhouettes," 2026

In this image, the *trocha* appears as a threshold rather than a path: an improvised little footbridge laid across the stream, a cut in the terrain, a place where presence and disappearance overlap. The two drawn figures—one upright and translucent, the other seated and fading into the soil—evoke these *trocheros* as liminal bodies, people who move in and out of visibility depending on who watches, who asks, who remembers. These silhouettes do not illustrate individuals but the conditions of their existence: provisional, cautious, suspended between territories and temporalities. Trochas are not only border spaces but ways of inhabiting uncertainty, where being alive means learning to remain partially in the shadow.

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