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Migration and Mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Lexicon

Migración y movilidad en América Latina y el Caribe: Un léxico

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Migration and Mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Lexicon

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Abstract: *This introduction presents the Lexicon on Migration and Mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean as a bilingual and collaborative inquiry into the political, institutional, and epistemic work performed by migration vocabularies. It approaches naming as a situated process through which mobility is rendered legible, classifications acquire material form, and unequal possibilities for movement, protection, and belonging are organised. Drawing on critical migration, refugee, border, and mobility studies, it examines how these processes are embedded in longer histories of racialisation, coloniality, and state formation. The Lexicon approaches Latin America and the Caribbean not merely as empirical settings for established concepts, but as sites of conceptual production where migration vocabularies are generated, contested, translated, and reworked. Translation itself is approached as part of this epistemic politics, shaped by unequal geographies of scholarly circulation.*

Keywords: migration vocabularies; categorisation; mobility regimes; coloniality; knowledge production; Latin America; migration

The *Lexicon on Migration and Mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean* grew out of discussions held during the international symposium New Perspectives on Migration in Latin America, convened in May 2024 at the Department of Geography, Durham University, with support from the Politics-State-Space cluster (UK), the French Collaborative Institute on Migration, and the Triangle Research Centre (France). Starting from a shared assessment of the relative scarcity of spaces devoted to critical scholarship on Latin American migration in Europe, we gradually expanded the project beyond the symposium itself, inviting contributions from

scholars working in and on the region. After almost two years of sustained work, and now hosted by *Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science*, this open-ended bilingual initiative brings together a collaborative, critical, and self-curated compendium of keywords on migration and mobility, grounded in interdisciplinary research conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Why a Lexicon? Scholarly Vocabularies and the Politics of Migration Knowledge

A *lexicon* offers a particularly useful tool to approach migration and mobility studies in Latin America and the Caribbean because the field is structured by terms whose meanings are produced at the intersection of research, management, public debate, and the everyday lives of people on the move. Naming people, trajectories, or places is therefore never a neutral operation: it shapes what can be studied, what becomes a public problem, and what kinds of institutional action or contestation become possible. Critical migration and refugee scholarship has long examined these processes. It has shown how bureaucracies produce labels, how researchers may reproduce policy categories, how bounded groups become fetishised, and how some concepts acquire authority within unequal geopolitical structures of knowledge production (Zetter 1991, 2007; Malkki 1995, 1996; Bakewell 2008; Chimni 1998, 2009; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Building on collective keyword projects in migration and border studies, we approach migration and mobility vocabularies as sites at which knowledge, governance, and lived experience are brought into relation (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; De Genova and Tazzioli 2016; Aradau et al. 2022). The wager of the Lexicon is therefore not to regionalise an established conceptual vocabulary, but to examine how Latin American and Caribbean histories, institutions, and political struggles unsettle, rework, and generate the terms through which migration is understood.

A lexicon also provides a way of attending closely to words as their meanings shift through use, conflict, and translation. Following Raymond Williams' approach to keywords as socially and historically charged terms, we treat each entry as a point of condensation at which academic usage encounters administrative records, activist vocabularies, public debate, and vernacular speech (Williams 1976). Across the contributions gathered here, our aim is to trace words in use, examining the social worlds through which they circulate and the effects they produce. Bringing migration and mobility into a common analytical frame also places the dossier in conversation with the *mobilities turn* in the social sciences, which treats movement as constitutive of social life and as unevenly distributed across infrastructures,

bodies, and regimes of value (Sheller and Urry 2006). Some terms classify statuses and organise access to protection. Others name routes, border practices, moral idioms, racialised memories, or forms of practical knowledge forged along the way. Taken together, these entries invite us to ask who can move, under what designation, and with what consequences.

These questions acquire particular density in Latin America and the Caribbean. Throughout this introduction, "Latin America" is approached as a historically contingent and contested regional category rather than as a homogeneous socio-geographical entity (Mignolo 2005; Jiménez Zunino and Trpin 2021). The explicit inclusion of the Caribbean likewise reflects our intention to recognise the plurality of migration histories, political traditions, and situated forms of knowledge that constitute the region.

Across this heterogeneous space, *migration vocabularies* circulate between international organisations, regional legal frameworks, state bureaucracies, border economies, migrant collectives, and critical scholarly traditions. Recent scholarship has helped clarify what is at stake in this circulation. Domenech's work on "control with a human face" shows how the languages of rights, order, and management have been reconfigured within regional migration governance (Domenech 2013). Acosta and Freier situate policies of protection, regularisation, and naturalisation within a reflexive turn that takes the Global South seriously as a site of theoretical production (2023). Rivera Sánchez, Herrera, and Domenech bring mobilities, border control, and migrant struggles into a regional critical field, while Gutiérrez Rodríguez shows how the coloniality of migration structures racialised hierarchies of visibility and value (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Rivera Sánchez, Herrera and Domenech 2023). In dialogue with these debates, we approach the region as a space in which concepts are themselves produced and reproduced, contested, and resignified through complex political, legal, and social configurations (Jiménez Zunino and Trpin 2021). This perspective shifts the analytical relationship between region and concept: rather than treating Latin America and the Caribbean merely as sites in which concepts are applied or translated, it approaches the region as a source of conceptual production capable of reshaping wider debates on migration and mobility.

Since the mid-2010s, the reconfiguration of migration vocabularies has become increasingly difficult to ignore as Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced a marked increase in the scale, diversity, and political visibility of regional and extra-regional mobilities. Venezuelan displacement, Haitian and other Caribbean mobilities, Andean and Central American border crossings, and the changing role of the Darién corridor, among many other processes, have reshaped the terms through which movement is governed,

debated, and lived across the region. Governments have used visa requirements and regularisation programmes to redraw the thresholds of lawful presence, often narrowing access to recognition and rights while retaining the languages of order and protection. Humanitarian organisations, for their part, have contributed to consolidating new categories of vulnerability and assistance. At the same time, the growing use of data infrastructures and technologies has provided state bureaucracies and international actors with an increasingly technical and ostensibly neutral language through which to track movement and sort cases according to specific legal and political technologies, while administrative arrangements frequently extend periods of waiting and uncertainty for people on the move. Through this collective project, we seek to contribute to this moment of epistemic reconfiguration from a perspective grounded in Latin America and the Caribbean. We ask how vocabularies register and are transformed by political change, how they subsequently help organise social worlds, and how the political dimensions of categories presented as merely technical or self-evident can be brought back into view (Álvarez Velasco 2020; Herrera and Gómez 2022; Domenech, Basualdo and Pereira 2023; Gandini 2026).

Analytical Questions

Read together, the entries in this Lexicon reveal a series of recurring analytical questions that cut across concepts, disciplinary traditions, and empirical objects. By bringing these questions into conversation, this introduction proposes a lens through which to read the *Lexicon* and to situate its contributions within broader debates on migration and mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean. Four questions in particular structure this reading: what naming does; where its effects acquire material form; how classification distributes possibilities for mobility; and how colonial histories give these processes their force. These questions are analytically distinct but mutually constitutive: naming acquires force as classifications become embedded in material arrangements, these arrangements distribute unequal possibilities for movement and protection, and the hierarchies they produce draw upon longer histories of racialisation, state formation, and colonial rule.

Moreover, the act of naming places people within institutional orders. Designating someone as a refugee, a regular migrant, or a "protected" subject constitutes an act of institution in Bourdieu's sense: it confers a status, authorises expectations, and shapes the horizon of possible action (Bourdieu 1991). Hacking's (2007) notion of looping effects further shows how classifications can reshape conduct, self-understanding, and claims through the interactions they generate. Migration scholarship has explored this constitutive

force through studies of immigration control, policy categories, and bureaucratic labelling, while reflexive critiques have examined the circulation of administrative classifications within academic research itself (Anderson 2013; Bakewell 2008; Dahinden 2016; Zetter 1991, 2007). Across Latin America and the Caribbean, these operations acquire a distinctive texture as the languages of rights, humanitarian protection, and "control with a human face" become woven into the routine practices through which states and other institutions recognise, distinguish, and govern populations on the move (Domenech 2013).

The effects of naming acquire institutional durability through documents and devices. Classificatory distinctions circulate through paperwork, databases, visas, registration systems, checkpoints, humanitarian procedures, and everyday encounters between officials and travellers. As Bowker and Star (1999) demonstrate, classification and infrastructure develop together as institutions embed classificatory schemes within the material organisation of administrative life. Vocabularies of protection and regularity therefore intersect with documentation, logistics, externalisation, and border infrastructures. Altogether, these semantic and material arrangements reveal the practical organisation of migration governance: categories matter not only because of what they mean, but because they become embedded in procedures, technologies, and institutional routines.

These classificatory practices, in turn, organise differentiated possibilities for mobility. Within what Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) describe as regimes of mobility, access to movement is structured through unequal, conditional, and revocable arrangements. Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) conceptualise such configurations through differential inclusion, drawing attention to the proliferation of intermediate legal positions, liminal legalities, and calibrated forms of tolerated il/legality (Menjívar 2006; De Genova 2002). These arrangements shape trajectories of circulation, settlement, waiting, return, and protection, while generating practical repertoires through which people negotiate and navigate institutional environments. Vernacular expressions such as *trochero*, *ir en junta*, *pedir cola*, and *mulear*, explored by Bonilla Mena and by Garlin and Sarrut in this issue, illuminate these everyday forms of navigation. They show how mobility is continuously interpreted, negotiated, and enacted alongside the institutional arrangements that govern it.

The contemporary effects of these operations are inseparable from longer historical trajectories. Processes of racialisation, nation-building, colonial rule, humanitarian intervention, and state formation continue to structure who is recognised as a legitimate subject of mobility, who is exposed to suspicion, and whose movement acquires political recognition. Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power provides a powerful framework

for understanding the durability of these hierarchies (Quijano 2000; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Herrera Rosales this issue). A perspective centred on coloniality therefore historicises the entanglement of naming, sorting, mobility, and governing, reconnecting contemporary migration vocabularies with the longer trajectories through which political orders and differentiated forms of belonging have been produced.

Read through these four questions, Latin America and the Caribbean emerge as a space in which global transformations in migration governance are refracted through specific histories of protection, regional rights, racialisation, solidarity, and state formation. From this perspective, migration vocabularies do more than describe changing forms of movement: they provide an empirical and analytical entry point into the processes through which mobility, protection, political membership, and public action are continuously differentiated and remade.

Architecture of the Issue

The *Lexicon* is organised around four axes that trace a progression from acts of naming to the infrastructures of mobility governance, and from situated practices of passage to the longer histories through which mobility becomes racialised, moralised, and governable. Rather than reproducing disciplinary boundaries, this architecture brings legal analysis, geography, history, anthropology, linguistics, and political sociology into dialogue around a shared question: how do migration vocabularies organise relations between movement, authority, and lived experience?

The first axis examines the vocabularies through which mobility is authorised, valued, and rendered administratively recognisable. The entries *Cartagena*, *Regularisation*, *Migration Categorisation*, and *Generosity* approach this question through different kinds of terms: a regional legal instrument, sequences of legal status, classificatory practices, and a moral idiom of reception. Analysing the 1984 regional refugee declaration, Blouin reads *Cartagena* both as an expanded refugee definition and as a South–South framework of protection, while showing how states may also mobilise its language as a discursive façade for containment, deterrence, and selective inclusion. The CAMINAR Collective approaches *regularisation* as a contested process that moves people through unstable legal sequences across spaces of origin, transit, and destination, producing rights while simultaneously stratifying migrant presence. Laplace analyses *migration categorisation* as a polycentric political technology through which states, international organisations, expert communities, civil society actors, and migrants produce and contest the labels that render mobility legible. Palma-Gutiérrez

approaches *generosity* as a moral language that legitimises state reception and performs institutional virtue, but which may also be reworked by migrants and local actors as a resource for collective political action.

The second axis examines the spatial and material arrangements through which mobility is channelled across and beyond territorial borders. The entries *Logistics*, *Externalisation*, *Checkpoints*, and *Transit Fetishism* analyse the infrastructures, data practices, mobile controls, and political economies that organise movement across these spaces. Ceja examines *logistics* as a rationality that presents itself as technical expertise while turning migration into a field for value extraction, the militarisation of routes, and the corporatisation of crisis management. Campos-Delgado analyses *externalisation* as a negotiated and multi-scalar extension of border control, produced through asymmetries of power and shifting judgements about desirability, worthiness, acceptance, and rejection. Fernández de la Reguera approaches *checkpoints* as mobile dispositifs that combine enforcement and care, exposing migrant and non-migrant populations alike to racialised and gendered forms of control. Trabalón's critique of *transit fetishism* shows how the language of transit can make structural violence appear as individual choice, displacing responsibility for illegalised journeys onto the people who endure them. These entries situate the border within wider regional and geopolitical configurations in which people are redirected, delayed, immobilised, or compelled to remain in motion.

The third axis moves closer to the social worlds of passage. The entries *Ir en junta*, *Pedir cola*, *Mulear*, and *Trocheros* give analytical weight to forms of practical knowledge produced along routes and in borderlands. Bonilla Mena centres the collective travel practices of Venezuelan migrants, gendered road literacies, and improvised forms of care, showing how travelling together, asking for rides, or boarding cargo trucks clandestinely can become both survival strategies and forms of political knowledge. Garlin and Sarrut examine *trocheros* through the vernacular world of the *trocha*: improvised border paths along which people and goods move through negotiations with residents, armed actors, and security forces. The *trochero* — someone who makes a living through and along the *trocha* — appears here less as a fixed identity than as a situated role, sometimes temporary and sometimes consolidated into a livelihood, shaped by economic collapse, uneven border enforcement, and state abandonment. These entries approach mobility as an embodied and relational experience, made possible through fragile arrangements, practical skills, and everyday negotiations, while remaining attentive to the forms of exposure and dependence that shape movement under conditions of constraint.

The final axis situates these vocabularies within longer histories of racialisation, coloniality, and national imagination. The entries *The Coloniality of Migration* and *Turcos* show how the words used to name mobility carry older hierarchies into the present, including those attached to origin, religion, class, and belonging. Herrera Rosales develops the *coloniality of migration* as a framework for analysing how categories, border regimes, and social hierarchies reproduce colonial structures, while also demonstrating the active participation of states in the region in these processes. Devis-Amaya examines *turcos* as a derogatory misnomer applied to diverse communities originating in the Middle East and their diasporas, a label that condensed processes of orientalisation, commercial exclusion, political instrumentalisation, and later forms of appropriation. These entries return attention to the *Lexicon*'s central proposition: categories, infrastructures, practices, and subjectivities acquire meaning within histories that continue to organise the politics of mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Translation and Circulation

The contributions gathered here sustain the *Lexicon* as a shared form of collective inquiry, thought, and reflection, written in both Spanish and English and grounded in regional theoretical and conceptual debates. Translation is therefore central to this collective practice. Concepts travel across unequal academic geographies, carrying with them the histories, disputes, and social worlds from which they emerge. Translation, in this sense, is not merely a means of widening circulation: it is itself a site at which conceptual equivalences are negotiated, distinctions are displaced, and the situated histories carried by terms become visible. Scholarly circulation is shaped by the same asymmetries: concepts gain authority more readily when they pass through dominant languages, journals, and institutional locations (Alatas 2003; Beigel 2013). Publishing the dossier in open access format and making every entry available in both English and Spanish responds to these asymmetries. It affirms Latin American and Caribbean debates as a source of conceptual innovation while creating conditions for dialogue in international migration studies and other critical traditions developed across different Southern contexts. Making each entry available in both languages also broadens the range of conversations in which these concepts can circulate, within research, teaching, public debate, and professional practice.

We hope that the *Lexicon* will provide a starting point for wider exchanges around collective and situated ways of understanding migration and mobility. Making concepts developed in and from Latin America and the Caribbean more readily accessible to

international audiences for discussion, translation, and critical engagement is one step in that direction. We also conceive of this dossier as the beginning of a longer conversation. We hope it will encourage new contributions, new keywords, and new collaborations, extending this collective endeavour across languages and disciplines, within Latin America and the Caribbean and beyond the region.

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A Lexicon / Un Léxico

CARTAGENA

A legal and political device that refers both to an expanded definition of refugee and a South-South framework of refugee governance cooperation. By scrutinizing the recent Cartagena +40 process it questions the articulation of Cartagena into the global management of mobilities from a critical perspective of the refugee/migrant dichotomy. This contribution invites to reflect on how Cartagena functions as a discursive facade that obscures states' simultaneous deployment of containment, deterrence, and selective inclusion measures to control mobilites.

CARTAGENA

Un instrumento jurídico y político que alude tanto a una definición ampliada de refugiado como a un marco de cooperación Sur-Sur para la gobernanza de las personas refugiadas. Mediante el análisis del reciente proceso de Cartagena +40, se cuestiona la articulación de Cartagena en la gestión global de las movilidades desde una mirada crítica a la dicotomía persona refugiada/persona migrante. La contribución invita a reflexionar sobre la fachada discursiva de Cartagena que oculta el despliegue simultáneo de medidas de contención, disuasión e inclusión selectiva por parte de los Estados para controlar las movilidades.

CHECKPOINTS

A mobile dispositif of social control that regulates the mobility of migrant and non-migrant populations along migration routes, border areas, highways, and urban entry points. Operating through an entanglement of militarised logics and humanitarian rationales, checkpoints function simultaneously as instruments of enforcement and care, exposing people on the move to racialised and gendered forms of violence and human rights violations. Their flexibility and logistical feasibility make them key mechanisms in the internalisation, individualisation, and spatial expansion of border control.

RETÉN

Dispositivo móvil de control social que regula la movilidad de poblaciones migrantes y no migrantes a lo largo de rutas migratorias, zonas fronterizas, carreteras y espacios urbanos. Como resultado de prácticas militarizadas de control fronterizo articuladas con lógicas humanitarias, los retenes funcionan simultáneamente como instrumentos de vigilancia y protección exponiendo a las personas en movilidad a formas racializadas y generizadas de violencia y a violaciones de derechos humanos. Su flexibilidad y viabilidad logística los convierten en mecanismos clave para la internalización, individualización y expansión espacial del control fronterizo.

COLONIALITY OF MIGRATION

A critical analytical framework developed by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez that examines global migration governance through a colonial lens. Drawing on Aníbal Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power, it argues that migration categories, border regimes, and social hierarchies reproduce colonial structures of race, gender, and class. In the context of Latin America, the concept traces continuities from sixteenth-century racial capitalism through contemporary border externalisation, revealing how so-called "peripheral states"—far from passive recipients of global migration governance—actively perpetuate colonial logics of inclusion and exclusion over racialised migrant bodies.

COLONIALIDAD DE LA MIGRACIÓN

Marco analítico crítico desarrollado por Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez que examina la gobernanza global de la migración desde una perspectiva colonial. A partir del concepto de colonialidad del poder de Aníbal Quijano, sostiene que las categorías migratorias, los regímenes fronterizos y las jerarquías sociales reproducen estructuras coloniales de raza, género y clase. En el contexto de América Latina, el concepto traza las continuidades desde el capitalismo racial del siglo XVI hasta la externalización de fronteras contemporánea, revelando cómo los Estados supuestamente "periféricos"—lejos de ser receptores pasivos de la gobernanza global de la migración—perpetúan activamente lógicas coloniales de inclusión y exclusión sobre los cuerpos de los migrantes racializados.

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.

EXTERNALIZACIÓN

Conjunto de estrategias de gestión y restricción del movimiento de personas mediante las cuales los estados extienden el alcance espacial de su control migratorio más allá de sus fronteras territoriales. La externalización abarca, y está sustentada por, la institucionalización de la (in)deseabilidad y la gestión del merecimiento. Es un proceso coproducido, multiescalar y negociado.

GENEROSITY

A polyfunctional and contested idea operating across three overlapping dimensions in Latin American migration governance. As a nominal device, it invokes moral virtue to legitimise reception policies that exceed minimum expectations while masking their selective and self-interested

GENEROSIDAD

Idea polifuncional y en disputa que opera en tres dimensiones superpuestas dentro de la gobernanza migratoria en América Latina. Como dispositivo nominal, invoca la virtud moral para legitimar políticas de recepción que superan expectativas mínimas de acción, aunque su naturaleza se mantenga

character. As a performative act, it shapes political identities of governments and institutions *vis-à-vis* migrants and the international community. As a transformative force, it empowers migrants and local actors to contest dominant governance schemes from below. Generosity thus sits at the unstable intersection of solidarity, self-interest, and political contestation—never neutral, always appropriated.

selectiva e interesada. Como acto performativo, moldea las identidades políticas de gobiernos e instituciones frente a los migrantes y la comunidad internacional. Como fuerza transformadora, impulsa a migrantes y actores locales para impugnar desde abajo los esquemas dominantes de gobernanza. La generosidad se sitúa así en la inestable intersección entre solidaridad, interés propio y contestación política: nunca neutral, siempre apropiada.

IR EN JUNTA, PEDIR COLA, MULEAR

Three emic concepts drawn from Venezuelan migrant experience along the Andean–Southern Cone corridors. *Ir en junta* (going together) denotes the collective organisation of travel, particularly among women and families, as a situated practice of mutual care and protection against the violence of transit. *Pedir cola* (hitchhiking) names the gendered, embodied knowledge through which migrants negotiate transportation without resources, reading the codes of the road as political and survival strategies. *Mulear* (secretly hitching rides on cargo trucks) captures clandestine mobility sustained by shared migrant knowledge and solidarity. Together, these practices and strategies constitute a vernacular epistemology: forms of resistance and care that reclaim migrants as political subjects.

IR EN JUNTA, PEDIR COLA, MULEAR

Tres conceptos emic derivados de la experiencia migrante venezolana que han transitado por el corredor migratorio sur-sur en el contexto sudamericano. *Ir en junta* denota la organización colectiva del desplazamiento, particularmente entre mujeres y familias, como una práctica situada de cuidado mutuo y protección frente a las violencias del tránsito. *Pedir* cola nombra un saber encarnado y generizado mediante el cual las personas migrantes solicitan transporte a conductores particulares o de carga como un medio para avanzar sin contar con recursos económicos, conociendo los códigos del camino como estrategia política y de supervivencia. *Mulear* consiste en subirse a escondidas a la plataforma de un tráiler, y captura una forma de movilidad clandestina sostenida por el conocimiento migrante compartido y la solidaridad. En conjunto, estas prácticas y estrategias constituyen una epistemología vernácula: formas de resistencia y cuidado que reivindican a las personas migrantes como sujetos políticos.

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 legitimizes the extraction of capital from migration through legal and institutional channels and enables the militarization and corporatization 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.

LOGÍSTICA

Racionalidad dominante de poder en la gobernanza migratoria contemporánea que se presenta como expertise técnico neutral en la administración "eficiente" de recursos, datos, infraestructuras y migrantes. Lejos de ser una mera categoría operativa, la logística es productora de valor: legítima la extracción de capital de la migración a través de canales legales e institucionales y habilita la militarización y corporativización de las fronteras en la administración de la "crisis". Arraigada en la expansión colonial europea y en la trata de personas esclavizadas, la racionalidad logística ha reorganizado continuamente poblaciones, territorios y movilidades al servicio de la acumulación de capital—desde los proyectos de blanqueamiento del siglo XIX hasta la externalización de fronteras, las infraestructuras de deportación y las plataformas de vigilancia digital contemporáneas en América Latina, diseñando geografías que conectan territorios dispares.

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

CATEGORIZACIÓN MIGRATORIA

Proceso histórica y políticamente situado mediante el cual Estados, organizaciones internacionales, comunidades expertas, actores de la sociedad civil y personas migrantes producen, hacen circular, estabilizan y disputan etiquetas que vuelven la movilidad legible y gobernable. En un campo policéntrico y desigual, la categorización opera a través de registros institucionales, experienciales y epistémicos, estratificando el acceso a derechos y reconocimiento, distribuyendo visibilidad e invisibilidad y autorizando determinadas formas de conocimiento mientras margina otras. Funciona simultáneamente como una tecnología política y como un terreno de

classifications are enforced, negotiated, reappropriated and challenged in situated ways, exposing their instability even where such contestation rarely displaces the hierarchies they sustain.

disputa, constituyendo subjetividades jurídicas, sociales y políticas diferenciadas. Las clasificaciones dominantes se imponen, negocian, reapropian y cuestionan de manera situada, poniendo de manifiesto su inestabilidad incluso cuando estas formas de contestación rara vez desplazan las jerarquías que sostienen.

REGULARISATION

A non-linear, complex, and contested process through which a state authorises non-nationals to reside lawfully within its territory, either temporarily or permanently. Encompassing migration policies, refugee status determination (RSD), and naturalisation, regularisation generates sequences of legal statuses that alternate between regularity and irregularity across countries of origin, transit, and destination. As a socio-political process, it produces migrant categories that carry specific social meanings and hierarchies that determine access to rights. Shaped by an asymmetric tension between state control and migrant agency, regularisation constitutes a necessary but insufficient condition for social inclusion.

REGULARIZACIÓN

Proceso no lineal, complejo y disputado mediante el cual un Estado autoriza a la población no nacional a residir legalmente en su territorio, ya sea de forma temporal o permanente. La regularización comprende las políticas migratorias, la determinación del estatuto de refugiado (DER) y la naturalización, y genera estatus jurídicos y trayectorias en las que se alternan situaciones de regularidad e irregularidad a lo largo de los países de origen, tránsito y destino. En tanto proceso sociopolítico, produce categorías migratorias dotadas de significados sociales específicos y jerarquías que determinan el acceso diferencial a derechos. Configurada por una tensión asimétrica entre el control estatal y la agencia migrante, la regularización constituye una condición necesaria, pero insuficiente, para la inclusión social.

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 illegalize migratory journeys in border regimes of the Americas. Taking "south-north"

FETICHISMO DEL TRÁNSITO

Un concepto crítico que expone la reificación de la "migración de tránsito" como mecanismo de legitimación de la gobernanza migratoria. Al destacar al migrante como un sujeto individual que "elige el tránsito", el fetichismo invisibiliza las arquitecturas (geo)políticas, corporativas, morales y financieras que ilegalizan los viajes migratorios en los regímenes fronterizos de las Américas. Al tomar como ejemplo

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.

las migraciones "sur-norte," la categoría resalta los dispositivos de culpa y castigo que responsabilizan a las propias personas de la precariedad que experimentan por ponerse en movimiento. La dimensión "subjetiva" de la migración sólo emerge como necesidad estratégica neoliberal y nada tiene que ver con su carácter autónomo. Al despolitizar la migración, estos dispositivos contribuyen a naturalizar el lenguaje y la práctica de la externalización fronteriza, de la jerarquización de la (in)movilidad y, en general, de las relaciones de poder capitalistas que niegan la libertad de movimiento.

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.

TROCHEROS

Individuos que transportan mercancías o guían personas a través de las trochas y los caminos informales, esquivando los cruces oficiales a lo largo de fronteras, sobre todo entre Venezuela y Colombia. Se trata de un rol situacional más que fijo: los trocheros asumen esta práctica de manera temporal o recurrente como respuesta al colapso económico, la escasez de alimentos y la inconsistencia de los controles fronterizos, convirtiéndola en un medio de vida. El trochero se diferencia de la figura del "contrabandista" desde un punto de vista analítico, ya que el término se refiere a actores que hacen parte de economías morales y relacionales locales, más que en redes criminales. Los trocheros se mantienen en economías de supervivencia transfronterizas, facilitando los flujos humanitarios y poniendo de manifiesto el carácter selectivo y aleatorio de la autoridad estatal, que puede tolerarlos o reprimirlos según las condiciones políticas del momento.

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.

TURCOS

Gentilicio despectivo y erróneo aplicado a inmigrantes árabes, armenios, judíos y de otros orígenes de Oriente Medio que llegaron a América Latina desde la década de 1880, cuyos documentos de viaje otomanos llevaron a las sociedades de acogida a confundir orígenes étnicos, religiosos y nacionales muy diversos bajo una única etiqueta racializante. Lejos de ser un simple error lingüístico, turco codifica una historia de orientalización, exclusión comercial y explotación política dirigida contra las comunidades diaspóricas de la región. Sus significados nunca han sido fijos: insulto, apelativo cariñoso, arma política e indicador de identidad diaspórica a la vez, turco ilumina cómo el etiquetado erróneo funciona como tecnología de diferenciación social—y cómo las comunidades racializadas negocian, se apropian de y disputan las identidades impuestas a lo largo de generaciones.

Cartagena

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CARTAGENA: *A legal and political device that refers both to an expanded definition of refugee and a South-South framework of refugee governance cooperation. By scrutinizing the recent Cartagena +40 process it questions the articulation of Cartagena into the global management of mobilities from a critical perspective of the refugee/migrant dichotomy . This contribution invites to reflect on how Cartagena functions as a discursive facade that obscures states' simultaneous deployment of containment, deterrence, and selective inclusion measures to control mobilities.*

Keywords: forced mobilities governance; protection regional regime; UNHCR; Cartagena +40; Latin America

The 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees—hereafter, simply Cartagena—is one of the most important instruments in Latin American regional refugee governance. Cartagena was aimed at responding to mass forced displacements in Central America in a context where Latin American traditional legal frameworks on political asylum proved to be inadequate to give protection and humanitarian relief to two million displaced people (Fischel De Andrade 2019). Cartagena was the result of several negotiations and initiatives from the Organization of American States, the Inter-American Human Rights System and particularly the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an actor whose influence was growing at the time (Reed-Hurtado 2013). The Declaration has to be understood in a context of decreased interest in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Convention), which was considered a European convention, Eurocentric, and far removed from Latin American context and preoccupations (Franco and Santistevan de Noriega 2005). Moreover, most countries in the region had not yet passed domestic refugee law and neither had put in place refugee status determination (RSD) procedures. In this particular moment, Cartagena appeared as a solution to respond to humanitarian challenges and develop cooperation between states (Reed-Hurtado 2013). This instrument is also an illustration, when considered next to the 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee

Problems in Africa (OAU Convention), that the Global South also produces international law (Hamlin 2021). Cartagena must be scrutinised not as an outdated fixed instrument but rather as a living roadmap constructing a regional regime.

In this short piece, I would like to reflect on the framework of Cartagena understood as a political and legal device, and how it functions as a discursive façade that obscures states' simultaneous deployment of containment, deterrence, and selective inclusion measures to control mobilities. By referring to mobilities, I include both refugees and migrants since these categories are blurred and politically constructed, in part by the same actors pivotal to Cartagena, the states and UNHCR (Hamlin 2021). Although the migration–refugee nexus has been explored in the broader literature (Scheel and Ratfisch 2014), its application to Latin America—and particularly to the Cartagena refugee protection framework—remains comparatively underexamined[1]. The discussion is divided into four parts. First, I will examine the Cartagena definition. Second, I will provide a careful analysis of the Cartagena framework. The third section will be focused on the Cartagena +40 process. Finally, I offer some conclusions.

Cartagena Definition

Cartagena or "the spirit of Cartagena" has been converted into a symbol of Latin America's solidarity and openness for refugees and other people in "need of protection"[2] (Freier 2015). In spite of its multiple contributions, Cartagena is usually mentioned in the literature due to its broader refugee definition, largely inspired by the OAU Convention, which includes those who:

> have fled their country because their lives, safety, or freedom have been threatened by generalised violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, and massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order (Cartagena Declaration 1984: conclusion 3).

Despite the non-binding nature of the Declaration, this regional definition was incorporated, albeit with some modifications in several cases, in the majority of local legislations in Latin America. However, there are differences in granting asylum based on the expanded Cartagena definition of refugee across the various states of the region (Acosta

[1] Here we can mention the recent contribution of Leiza Brumat (2022) for the Brazilian case. The seminal work of Eduardo Domenech (for example, Domenech 2017) on the South American regime and the role of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is also relevant here.

[2] I use quotation marks since I am using a category from the UNHCR. For critical analysis of this question see Clavijo (2025).

Arcarazo and Madrid Sartoretto 2020), thus making the definition more an aspiration than a reality[3]. For instance, between 2016 and 2018 Mexico used the Cartagena definition to grant refugee status to Venezuelans but refused categorically to apply it for Central Americans (Sánchez Nájera and Freier 2022). Thus, the application of the expanded definition is governed by the political will of the states, which further weakens its aspiration to be a regional reference in the protection of refugees.

Cartagena Cooperation Framework

Yet, Cartagena is more than a mere definition; it also refers to a framework of South–South cooperation between Latin American and Caribbean countries (Cantor 2019). This cooperation framework is coordinated by the UNHCR. From a Foucauldian perspective, the UNHCR is "conducting the conduct of countries" (Scheel and Ratfisch 2014, 928) in refugee governance in general and in the Cartagena political space in particular. With its extended presence in the region, the UNHCR plays the role of referent in refugee governance and was indeed a key actor in the drafting of the Cartagena Declaration, a key difference with the OAU Convention (Hamlin 2021).

The aim of the Cartagena +40 framework is to set a protection agenda every ten years, on the anniversary of the Declaration, by bringing together key actors such as governments, international organisations, and civil society. This ongoing regional arena remains alive and brings contemporaneity to the Cartagena Declaration[4]. Since its adoption in 1984, the Cartagena process has developed the following declarations and plans: *San José Declaration* (1994), *Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action* (2004), *Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action* (2014) and finally, in 2024, *Chile Declaration and Plan of Action* (Cartagena +40). These declarations and plans of action had left, as Vera (2021) stated, a "mixed legacy"[5] because of the ambitious project to create new solidarities in the region despite great political limitations. From an empirical point of view, even with this protection framework, asylum seekers, and more broadly people on the move in the region, still face precarity, uncertainty, and lack of protection (for instance, see Blouin 2021 on Peru; Riggirozzi et al. 2023 on Brazil). The survival situation of forced migrants is of course not particular to the region; however, it is

[3] An interesting counter example is the *registro ampliado* implemented by Ecuador between 2009 and 2010. A total of 28,909 Colombians were registered and 27,740 were recognized as refugees with the cooperation of UNHCR. It is one of the best illustrations of the Cartagena spirit (Reed-Hurtado 2013).

[4] This is an important difference from the other regional instrument, the 1969 Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. If this instrument offers an expansive definition of refugee, it does not create a new regional arena to follow up the debates on international protection with posterior declarations and actions plans.

[5] Vera refers to the Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action. However, the idea can be expanded to all of the other processes.

worth questioning the role that Cartagena played in it. Here we need to take distance from exceptionalism and discursive rights and make the analysis progress and ask to what extent the regional framework offers a truly innovative solidarity-based approach to forced mobilities.

To scrutinise the Cartagena framework and its influence, I argue that we have to situate it as part of the global management of mobilities and not an exception from it. A close examination of the Cartagena +40 process and its final result, the *Chile Declaration and Plan of Action*, illustrates well how Cartagena is part of the global management of mobilities.[6]

The Cartagena +40 Process

The Cartagena +40 process was viewed as a top-down project without political and economic support either from the UNHCR, as technical secretariat, or the Chilean government, host to the conference[7]. The methodology for this process was indeed vague, improvised, and defined without discussion with civil society. Civil organisations I followed during the negotiations felt that their voices were not fully listened to by states, whose commitment to the Cartagena +40 process was weak, in a context of complex mobilities and several setbacks in general human rights protection in the region that affect especially people on the move. For instance, the timeline of meetings and the deadline to submit reports or contributions to the Declaration and Plan of Action drafts were short and unplanned. Doors during the negotiations between delegations were also closed to the public and spaces of dialogue between states and civil society were limited. The decision to move official negotiations between states to Geneva was also seen as an obstacle in the construction of a regional refugee regime. Indeed, it was the first time in this regional ongoing effort that negotiations occurred outside the continent. This novelty in the process illustrates, however, how the regional protection framework is connected to global ones (Vera 2021; Cantor 2019; Hamlin 2021) since Geneva is the main bureau of UNHCR. Moving regional discussions to

[6] As part of my PhD fieldwork, I was following the negotiation process of Chile Declaration and Plan of Action (Cartagena +40) online through several activities, including participation in the Grupo Articulador Regional del Plan de Acción Brasil (GARPAB) — a coalition that brings together multiple civil society organisations, established ten years ago within the framework of the Cartagena Process +30. I also took part in the public meetings with States and other actors involved in the process, such as UN agencies.

[7] I had the opportunity to take part in the Cartagena +30 process in 2014, representing a civil society organisation. The methodology and support provided by the Norwegian Refugee Council were indeed key to ensure participation and dialogue with official delegations.

Geneva, where participation of local key actors is by definition harder[8], showed the actual power landscape of refugee protection between North and South.

The process also includes the incorporation of the "voices" of the refugees for the first time. The participation of refugees in Cartagena +40 to find solutions to their own displacement was praised as innovative and exceptional. However, a more critical perspective could, for instance, first ask whether their "voices" were truly listened to, and which voices of refugees were actually heard, given the poor conditions of participation that I mentioned before. Secondly, as Tazzioli notices elsewhere, the participatory turn "by refugees to refugees" is a way of asking refugees to take part in their own governmentality and "to fill in the gaps, to fix the broken system, and not to behave as passive beneficiaries" (Tazzioli 2022, 181).

It seems urgent to question the articulation of Cartagena as part of the global management of mobilities, where refugees are treated as if they were citizens without rights yet in charge of solving their displacement, in a context of increased border closure and xenophobia in the region and beyond. As such, the Cartagena +40 process is getting more closely aligned with global trends in the management of mobilities.

The *Chile Declaration and Plan of Action* were finally adopted in December 2024. These instruments aim to constitute the regional version of the *Global Compact on Refugees* (Cartagena +40, 2024), showing the connection between regional and global refugee governance. The content of the instruments, of course, incorporates some of the region-specific initiatives, such as the Quality Asylum Initiative[9], the Cities of Solidarity, or the Border of Solidarity and Safety (Moulin 2009). However, the text avoids answering crucial questions, such as the actual implementation of the Cartagena definition to protect people on the move in the region, and then respond, in accordance with the spirit of Cartagena, to the displacement of Venezuelans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and others. References to border control and contention are also absent from these texts, despite the ongoing reinforcement of migration control in the region. Both the Declaration and the Plan contain clear references to more global refugee governance mainstream preoccupations, such as the contributions of refugees

[8] The participation of few civil society actors and also refugees were made possible. However, for economic reasons, I argue that had the debates taken place in Latin America, as in the past editions, civil society and refugee participation would have been broader and fairer.

[9] The QAI was created in the Brazil Plan of Action in 2014. The goal is to strengthen the RSD systems in the region. Despite being praised as a good practice, the RSD procedures in the region have several fragilities such as delays, decisions without motivation and more broadly few granted refugee status.

to host countries, the need for self-reliance for refugees and communities, and multi-actor cooperation, including the private sector.

Conclusion

Coddington (2018) points out that the protections offered by the 1951 Convention "have become a facade for arbitrary and harmful treatment of refugees" (337). In our case, I claim that Cartagena as well has become a façade to avoid discussing how states in the region use different tactics and *ad hoc* measures for contention and deterrence. These practices include visas, readmission agreements, violations of the *non-refoulement* principle in border areas, externalisation, detention, and so forth (Hiemstra 2019; Álvarez 2020; Blouin 2021). Cartagena can thus constitute a useful political tool to praise the construction of a specific landscapes of protection whilst avoiding or hiding the discussions regarding actual practices of movement control in Latin America.

To face the complex "landscapes of protection,"[10] it is necessary to look at the strategies that people on the move develop to defy the regional refugee governance. Some Venezuelans for instance, despite being refugees according to the Cartagena definition (Freier, Berganza, and Blouin 2022), have also chosen not to claim asylum and find other legal strategies, such as temporary migration status, to move and work "more easily" than beginning a long RSD procedure with no guaranteed success. Further research might deepen these trajectories and their repercussions on the (forced) mobilities global governance. I also suggest that more work could be done on the perspectives and living experiences of refugees who took part in the consultation process of Cartagena +40 and those who did not, to contribute to a much-needed research programme with critical and robust insights of the Cartagena framework.

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[10] Coddington defines the landscapes of protection as "the landscapes of protection that encompass the range of practices engaged in refugee governance, from signed treaties to soft laws, subcontracted service providers and substandard media coverage" (2018, 327).

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Checkpoints and Militarised Humanitarianism

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CHECKPOINT: *A mobile dispositif of social control that regulates the mobility of migrant and non-migrant populations along migration routes, border areas, highways, and urban entry points. Operating through an entanglement of militarised logics and humanitarian rationales, checkpoints function simultaneously as instruments of enforcement and care, exposing people on the move to racialised and gendered forms of violence and human rights violations. Their flexibility and logistical feasibility make them key mechanisms in the internalisation, individualisation, and spatial expansion of border control.*

Keywords: checkpoints; militarisation; humanitarian governance; border control; migration control; Latin America; dispositif; Venezuela

In Latin America, borders have historically been embedded in territorial spaces characterised by transborder forms of community coexistence, which predate their delimitation by states as zones of control and restriction of mobility (Dilla Alfonso and Contreras Vera 2021). However, many states in the region have long histories of military involvement in social control and public life, including public security, which has significantly shaped contemporary forms of border governance (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021). In recent years, the growing securitization of borders has further transformed both the technologies employed and the very conception of borders. As in the Global North, borders in Latin America are increasingly becoming mobile and extended beyond fixed geographical lines, expanding power dynamics through the embodiment of the border (Popescu 2011).

Changing Mobility Patterns and State Responses

Mobility patterns in the region have undergone significant transformations over the course of the twenty-first century. Migrations are complex and heterogeneous, encompassing not only movements within and between Latin American and Caribbean countries, but also migration flows originating from Asia and Africa (Herrera and Gómez 2022). The region is not merely a site of origin or transit; it has also become a destination for forced mobilities, thereby configuring migratory corridors or "transnational, contingent space of dispute- a product of the tension between mobility and control" (Álvarez Velasco 2022, 52).

State responses to changing mobility dynamics are commonly framed within public discourses of crisis (Blouin and Zamora Gómez 2022), which construct these mobilities as exceptional rather than as part of evolving patterns that arise from structural rather than contingent conditions. This framing legitimizes the simultaneous deployment of both compassionate and repressive measures (Stefoni et al. 2023). Within this context, I argue that checkpoints function as mobile *dispositifs* often operated through militarised logics that combine practices of control with forms of humanitarian assistance, while ultimately privileging enforcement-oriented strategies. A militarised approach thus prevails, subordinating humanitarian actions to security imperatives and, in doing so, exposing people on the move to heightened risks and forms of violence.

Militarisation and Militarism in Latin America

In Latin America, the histories and dynamics of militarisation and militarism as part of wider strategies of social control are particularly complex, and have a significant influence on how we approach checkpoints as mechanisms of border and mobility control and surveillance of people on the move. Governments of all political orientations—whether conservative or progressive—have increasingly turned to the military to carry out domestic law enforcement and public security duties (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021). Across the region armed forces are taking on roles beyond traditional defense, involving them in social and political functions, while also becoming normalized through the legitimisation of force, the military's political influence, and substantial public funding (Lutz 2007; Solar 2021). As a result, the armed forces are politically utilised as an instrument of governance—especially in areas at the margins of state authority—to reinforce and reclaim state sovereignty (Frederic 2020).

In the last decades, the region has witnessed two concurrent developments: the militarisation of police forces and the direct deployment of the Armed Forces in public security operations (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021; Hochmüller et al. 2024). "In the most extreme form of militarization of law enforcement, the armed forces take on public safety tasks themselves, including crime prevention (security patrols); crime fighting (drug crop eradication and interdiction, drug, and arms seizures, searches and arrests, evidence gathering and interrogation); and prison security" (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021, 522). In these operations, checkpoints and inspections of vehicles and individuals inside and outside cities pose high risks to migrants, as these authorities are generally not authorized or trained to

conduct immigration checks and often rely on racial profiling strategies (Campos-Delgado and Yrizar Barbosa 2023).

Moreover, in countries such as Mexico and Chile, migration routes and controls unfold in territories where the Armed Forces are simultaneously engaged in anti-drug operations and strategies to combat organised crime (Fernández de la Reguera and Del Río 2025; Skaar and Malca 2014; Vera Espinoza and Penchaszadeh 2026). This overlap situates border enforcement within broader security agendas, shaping the modalities through which mobility is governed. However, the militarisation of border control does not necessarily stem from an explicit construction of migrants as threats. Rather, it operates through intertwined logics of crisis, care and control that legitimise militarisation as part of humanitarian assistance (Ramos and Tapia Ladino 2024).

The Complexity of Checkpoints

It is difficult to provide a fixed definition of what constitutes a checkpoint in the Latin American context, as its functions as a mechanism of social control are diverse, ranging from the regulation of mobility for both foreigners and nationals to the provision of humanitarian assistance and the control of drug trafficking or organised crime. Given this diversity, when analysed from the perspective of migration control, checkpoints emerge as central *dispositifs*.

Due to their adaptability and flexibility, checkpoints are key mechanisms in the rapid transformation of the definition, management, spatialization, and expansion of borders, enabling their internalisation and individualisation (Bissonnette and Vallet 2022). Checkpoints may be either permanent or tactical, vary in location and infrastructure, and produce differentiated forms of harm, ranging from intimidation to temporary forced disappearance (Fernández de la Reguera and Del Río 2025). Whereas permanent checkpoints confine individuals within a defined space, temporary roadblocks generate fear and uncertainty (Castañeda and Melo 2019).

Checkpoints usually fulfill the security-oriented objectives of the war on drugs and organized crime, while also adopting a military-humanitarian approach that combines oversight and protective functions. In Brazil, Alexander (2023, 525) studies the coexistence of humanitarian practices of containment and registration towards Venezuelans which "[…] operate under the guise of 'let live', while simultaneously enacting 'will not let die' or 'will not make die', through the management of mobility."

Although countries in the region differ in the type of roles and level of control the military holds at the borders—for example, in Uruguay the military has more limited territorial control compared to Mexico and Honduras—the constant is that the Armed Forces and militarised police routinely carry out identification checks on people and vehicles, as well as arrests (Solar 2021). At Argentina's borders with Paraguay and Bolivia, a situation unfolds similar to that of many other borders in the region: as these areas are labeled 'hot' and 'porous' by the media and governments, militarised police forces become overwhelmed, leading to the deployment of the Armed Forces to take control through patrols and checkpoints along access routes and border zones (FJEED et al. 2021; Frederic 2020).

Having the military in charge of these tasks leaves more room for abuse, as they are trained to identify and eradicate the enemy, and not to be the first responders for migrants, commonly in need of international protection (García Alanís 2024). My research focuses on the case of Mexico, where checkpoints are primarily deployed along highways and migration routes and are operated by a range of legal, extralegal, and illegal actors pursuing diverse objectives, including the control of migrant populations, which ultimately expose people on the move to serious human rights violations (Fernández de la Reguera 2025).

Military-Humanitarian Mobility Governance

To better understand recent dynamics of migration control and humanitarianism in the region, it is necessary to examine Venezuelan mobilities (Prieto Rosas et al. forthcoming). Over the past decade, Venezuelan migration has reshaped migration policies across the region. Many states have responded through *ad hoc* measures (Vera Espinoza et al. 2021), combining reception-oriented policies with increasing controls on mobility and, in some cases, the militarisation of borders. These trends were further reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most countries in the region closed their borders; in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru, these closures were accompanied by processes of militarisation (Álvarez Velasco, 2022; Blouin and Zamora Gómez 2022).

One example of military-humanitarian governance (Pallister-Wilkins 2022) is the case of *Operação Acolhida* or 'Operation Welcome' in Brazil. Alexander (2023, 2024) analyses Brazil's federal response to Venezuelan migration, a humanitarian–military operation led by the Armed Forces with civilian and international partners, focusing on border screening, shelter and assistance, and relocation of migrants within the country. He proves that the military-humanitarian approach creates subtle forms of violence reinforcing migrant vulnerabilities and exclusion.

Conclusions

Checkpoints function as components within a broader assemblage of social control and policing that regulate the mobility of criminalized groups—both migrant and non-migrant—shaping everyday movement in border areas and interior regions. Framed within discourses that construct mobility as a product of crisis, rather than as part of evolving regional patterns, these *dispositifs* are increasingly legitimized as necessary responses to exceptional conditions. This framing reinforces the expansion of both militarization and humanitarianism through checkpoints. Due to their flexibility and logistical feasibility, they are deployed as punitive instruments that extend borders and intensify migration controls, contributing to the further criminalization of migrants, who become easy targets for identification and arrest in border areas, along highways, and at urban entry points (Díaz Prieto 2016). As a result, migrants are exposed to racialized and gendered forms of extreme violence and serious human rights violations (Fernández de la Reguera 2025).

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The Coloniality of Migration

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COLONIALITY OF MIGRATION: *A critical analytical framework developed by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez that examines global migration governance through a colonial lens. Drawing on Aníbal Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power, it argues that migration categories, border regimes, and social hierarchies reproduce colonial structures of race, gender, and class. In the context of Latin America, the concept traces continuities from sixteenth-century racial capitalism through contemporary border externalisation, revealing how so-called "peripheral states"—far from passive recipients of global migration governance—actively perpetuate colonial logics of inclusion and exclusion over racialised migrant bodies.*

Keywords: coloniality; migration; border regime; externalisation of borders; safe third countries; Latin America

The concept of the "coloniality of migration" (or "coloniality of migrations") has been proposed by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2018a, 2018b, 2024) to understand contemporary global migration governance from a colonial lens. This concept allows us to observe migration policies and border control, to reflect on the broader processes of differentiation, categorisation, and regulation inherent in border regimes (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018a, 2018b). Whilst this concept primarily refers to the constitution of migration management, which reinforces, reproduces, and legitimises the social injustices produced by coloniality, it holds special relevance to the Latin American region due to the colonial past, Eurocentric state policies, and racial hierarchies that systematically exclude vulnerable individuals.

The coloniality of migration is based on the literature of anti-colonial authors such as Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones, Aimé Césaire, Enrique Dussel, and Sylvia Wynter, amongst others. Specifically, it draws from Quijano's (2007, 2014) idea of the "coloniality of power," which refers to a global pattern of power, also called a "matrix of power," that arranges dimensions of labour, knowledge, subjectivities, and gender, among others. In other words, Quijano's work suggests that colonial power and domination persist in economic and

socio-political systems and in everyday life. Within the matrix of power, "race" emerges as a colonial principle of stratification of individuals, according to their supposed superiority or inferiority. From this perspective, the coloniality of power is translated in the governance of migrants as a way to organise their unequal mobility and in the production of migration categories and statuses such as "refugees," "asylum seekers," and "illegal migrants." These categories are not necessarily neutral, but rather forms of domination based on colonial structures that racialise migrant people as "undesired" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018a). This colonial governance reveals that the pattern of power divides the population according to an alleged biological difference, in addition to justifying the marginalisation and exploitation of disadvantaged groups.

Gutiérrez Rodríguez further examined the coloniality of power grounded within sex and gender relations in binary terms. Following Lugones' (2007) argument, the coloniality of migration suggests that coloniality is not only a racial but also a heteropatriarchal system, constituting a "coloniality of gender normativity" in Western societies. As a result, racialised individuals on the move are also sexualised, objectified, and dehumanised. Through the gendered, racial, and colonial system, the dehumanisation of migrants, as subhuman individuals or with animal characteristics (Fanon 1963), facilitates their control through processes of regulation, extraction, and subordination.

In and outside of Latin America, scholarly reflections on the colonial structures operating within migratory movements have been an early and continued endeavour (Anzaldúa 2007; Grosfoguel 2003; Grosfoguel and Maldonado-Torres 2008; Grosfoguel et al. 2018; Hernández 2018; Herrera Rosales 2018; Herrera Rosales 2025; Lopes Heimer 2024; Mezzadra 2004; Picozza 2022; Prieto Díaz 2016; Trabalón 2024). In conversation, the coloniality of migration focuses, on the one hand, on de-centring the discourse of "refugee crisis" through which international migratory dynamics have been constantly framed, derived from discourses that hyperfocused on racialised bodies. Referring to the 2015 refugee crisis in the Mediterranean Sea, this migration crisis rhetoric supposedly addressed the mass displacement of people from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan in search of asylum in Europe, generating media scrutiny and alarming governments. However, the continuation of colonial logics within global migration governance arguably responds to an interconnected and asymmetrical history between former colonised countries and European empires, manifested in restrictive migration policies.

The coloniality of migration is relevant to critically consider Latin America's migratory movements, as well as those of Caribbean countries, given "presentist" migration

policies (Cobarrubias et al. 2023). For instance, as Leisy Abrego (2018) suggests, the idea of a crisis, in the case of Central American migration in North America, is in fact a crisis of the migration regime. The migration crisis involves the governments in the United States, Mexico, and Northern Central American countries, which cannot protect or recognise the human rights of migrant people. Also, this region has a long history of imperial power that should not go unnoticed.

On the other hand, the coloniality of migration underlines the impact of European imperialisms, which have significantly shaped people's mobilities and, in many cases, led to their forced displacement. In Latin America, Spanish, Portuguese, British, and United States imperialisms have left lasting consequences in terms of the regional migratory system. Moreover, the formation of nation-states and their migration policies reveal a process deeply linked to transnational dynamics, intertwined with the "history of colonialism, slavery, imperialism, settler colonialism, and transatlantic migration" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018a, 18).

In countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Cuba, and Colombia, the racialisation of migrants is the result of coloniality, which entailed the preference for the settlement of European people and the refusal to admit people from China, Armenia, Syria, and other non-European countries. During their transition as independent nation-states, many of the new Latin American states operated under colonial logics, racialising non-white migrants and recruiting new labour under the same parameters of profit, exploitation, and dispossession, which were essential features of racial capitalism (Robinson 2020; Bhattacharyya 2018). The racialisation of migrants was justified by the desire of elite groups to whiten the emerging nations under the supposedly progressive ideology of *"mestizaje"* (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018b). Hidden under the idea of mixed heritage, the persistence of the white supremacy project (Cintra and Nabuco Martuscelli 2025) within governments gave way to the systematic exclusion of black and indigenous people, amongst others, who did not fit into the ideal white European immigration. Thus, the coloniality of migration operated, in general terms, by maintaining racial structures through migration policies that attract white labour, relocating indigenous people from their lands, oppressing black people, and ultimately discouraging non-European migration. This has become further evident in asylum policies that, although they do not explicitly refer to "race," still instrumentalise "nationality" as an ethnic and racial code to admit or reject foreign entrants.

In my view, the coloniality of migration is an important conceptual tool to analyse the current geopolitics of countries in the continent, especially those considered "peripheral,"

"transit," and "returned" migrant countries. Rather than having a tangential position in the global colonial governance, these countries play a direct role in the border regime by deploying a complex and violent set of technologies to disrupt, curb, interrupt, and dislocate migration within and from the Global South. Operations of increased surveillance, militarised detentions, mass deportation, gender-based violence, and assimilation programmes within emerging integration policies, have been some of the border practices proliferating in Latin America.

In many cases, the externalisation of United States' border in Mexico, Ecuador, Peru, Panama, and El Salvador, through so-called "third countries" and "safe third countries" reinforce forced immobilities, punitive practices, and repression of migrants, that strongly echo the colonial continuum of imperial expansion beyond national sovereignty. In this perspective, governments in Latin America have become proactive in enacting migration control, worsening the structural violence for migrant people, in exchange for political leverage and economic agreements. The diffusion of border externalisation to Global South countries reveals the reification of the colonial distinction "insider/outsider" between states, and, at the same time, their interdependency with countries in the Global North, reinvigorating social hierarchies and inhuman practices over migrants' bodies.

The coloniality of migration adopts a more comprehensive view of global migration governance that is not limited to Europe nor to the last century. Rather, this concept allows us to address unequal migratory dynamics embedded in the production of a racial migratory pattern in Latin American countries since the sixteenth century. This process was further solidified during state formation and the unfolding of global migration governance today. Thus, the coloniality of migration has operated in two ways: firstly, through European empires and the establishment of racial capitalism in Latin American countries; and, secondly, in border externalisation as a form of imperial intervention. Therefore, the coloniality of migration is materialised in the contemporary border regime through oversimplifying migrant discourses, cruel global state policies, and the dehumanisation of migrant people.

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Externalisation

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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; Menjívar 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 legitimation.

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 regularizsation 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 (Bermúudez 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 legitimation, 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.

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Generosity

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GENEROSITY: *A polyfunctional and contested idea operating across three overlapping dimensions in Latin American migration governance. As a nominal device, it invokes moral virtue to legitimise reception policies that exceed minimum expectations while masking their selective and self-interested character. As a performative act, it shapes political identities of governments and institutions vis-à-vis migrants and the international community. As a transformative force, it empowers migrants and local actors to contest dominant governance schemes from below. Generosity thus sits at the unstable intersection of solidarity, self-interest, and political contestation—never neutral, always appropriated.*

Keywords: generosity; migration policy; migrants and refugees; migration management; Latin America and the Caribbean

Literature on migration policy in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) highlights the power of ideas as political—and politicised—devices in regional migration management (Brumat and Vera Espinoza 2024; Freier and Luzes 2022; Domenech and Boito 2019). In the midst of recent waves of cross-border mobility and migration across the region, including the cases of precarious groups of Venezuelan, Caribbean, African, and Asian migrants, one of such ideas seems to have gained special attention: generosity. In this text, I approach generosity as a polyfunctional and contested idea, linked to a specific political potential in explaining governmental migration policies amid a constant "discrepancy between Latin American states' routine endorsement of progressive normative frameworks and their domestic under-implementation" (Riggirozzi and Quiliconi 2026, 166). This regional example serves thus as a unique backdrop to assess the politicisation of generosity in Western-liberal (or liberal-like) settings, beyond assumptions that this notion is inherently neutral, unbiased, or irrefutably altruistic.

The Context

In recent years, generosity has often served as a meaning-making device to assess the "reception" policies for refugees and migrants in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, or

Ecuador (Vasconcelos and Machado 2021; Selee and Bolter 2021; Barbieri et al. 2020). Generosity has also been used to articulate social cohesion within "receiving" and "transit" societies, oftentimes in light of scarce resources, governmental in/action, or violent im/mobilisation techniques (Moulin Aguiar and Magalhães 2020). Meanwhile, generosity has also been deployed as a meaningful signifier for the actions of activists, practitioners, and locals who engage with migration and cross-border mobility in the region, from an angle of social justice and productive transformation (Varela Huerta 2020). Notwithstanding, generosity is a term of common use among migrants and refugees in the Americas when asked about their experiences with people and communities across the region. The preference for this term seems to be related to the belief that governments in the region adopted more liberal and progressive migration policies in the early decades of the twenty-first century, in comparison to their Western counterparts (Freier 2015).

In the case of LAC, we can make a key distinction between solidarity—a widely studied concept in migration studies—and generosity, when exploring the latter's potential as a political device. Solidarity seems to be more a general behavioural principle entrenched in humanism and a collective ethos, constituting a minimum social expectation (Vera Espinoza 2018). Generosity, although overlapped and intrinsically connected with solidarity, is not necessarily based on a minimum expectation governing social interaction. Rather, it implies the willingness to, or the action of, giving more than the minimum, particularly in a liberal-like context.

Amid this ambiguity, the meaning of generosity can be fluid for different actors at different times when exploring the contested politics of migration in LAC. Reviewing recent empirical contributions on the politics of migration and seeking to understand such fluidity, I suggest three conceptual dimensions to approach generosity in the context of regional migration management: nominal generosity, performative generosity, and transformative generosity. I argue that these are not exclusive, clear-cut-defined dimensions. Rather, these are often messily entrenched in the complications derived from the beliefs, values, affects, emotions, and perceptions shaping regional migration politics. My aim is to open the conversation on the ambivalences of generosity as an idea for political action and its appropriation as an analytical device within the wider framework of migration and border studies.

Nominal Generosity

A first dimension, that of "nominal" generosity, encapsulates some face-value elements needed for its definition. Mainstream Western philosophers (among others, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant) understand generosity as a virtue—a positive quality of a high moral standing—based on *being open to give*. Yet generosity goes well beyond simple acts of giving. It also comprises the valuation of giving as something intrinsically good, which works to morally encapsulate positive principles, values, and worldviews, in a scenario where giving is usually not expected. Nietzsche, in this line, branded generosity as a strength. Moreover, a rationalistic take on the issue would centre on the ways in which generosity and self-interest can be intertwined, when the idea or act of giving is used to attain specific individual benefits, such as asserting power over those who are the object of generosity (Ellingsen and Johannesson 2011). Yet, generosity may not be necessarily entrenched in acts of sheer interest. Komter (2010), for instance, argues that practising generosity reveals evolutionary traits of our species. Psychologically speaking, individual and collective affects and emotions are also an intrinsic part of how our idea of generosity comes to be (Allen 2018). Broadly speaking, generosity seems to be one of many inherently contested ideas shaping human behaviour.

Within the context of migration management, the meanings *nominally* ascribed to generosity have a power of their own, and their derived acts are substantially impactful. When we reflect on the invocation of generosity as a framework that shapes migration policies, we are following the ways and mechanisms behind the idea of giving *to others*—a commonly perceived positive social practice in Western-like settings—as it is mobilised for the aim of organising people as migrants or non-migrants in the setting of a shared social order. If we follow how leaders, in the name of governments, frame generosity in the context of migration management in a nominally ambivalent and yet highly intelligible manner, we can sense that a political effect is pursued.

One key example dates from 2018, when Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos announced the country's strategy to comply with the "challenge" of Venezuelan migration, which would be based on the principles of "authority, control, and generosity" (Palma-Gutiérrez 2021, 44). Seen from the perspective of nominal generosity, the president's call to Colombians *to give* to Venezuelan *others* was an ambivalent, and yet intelligible, claim. It was not clear what was to be given, but it was sufficiently understood that the sheer act of giving was deemed positive, substantially when those receiving were not part of the national collective. The policy was presented as going beyond the bare minimum, and in so doing, it

mobilised a sense of righteousness. Invoking generosity thus serves to justify political action based on the sense of a morally superior self. It is also helpful to navigate resistance and uncertainty, related to localised migrant-management anxieties. Generosity may therefore activate a sense of social virtuousness that makes possible the implementation of ample migration reception policies, when stringent anti-migration measures are unviable, impractical, or undesired.

Performative Generosity

There are diverse ways to categorise and analyse the political effects of generosity in migration management, beyond what can be seen as sheer conspicuousness. One option has to do with analysing generosity as "performative." I use the term performance departing from dramaturgical sociology, as acts and actions envisioned to "present oneself to others" (Goffman 1959), often including having some control over the impression one makes on others on a socially shared stage. Performances can therefore be mobilised to show aims, worldviews, ideas, and values, imbued with an intrinsic political potential (Rai et al. 2021). Perfected through rehearsal and repetition, performances can lead to shaping social phenomena including everyday naturalised behaviours, beliefs, and regulations through the emergence of a certain "performativity" (Butler 2006). Seen through performance, when migration management policies and actions are shown as "generous" to migrants, non-migrants, governments, collectivities, or the "international community," there is an intrinsic political aim: that of shaping others' beliefs about who the policy actor—or performer—is. Performing generosity has the potential of moulding others' attitudes and behaviours in the broader social stage.

Performative generosity in migration management has behavioural effects in different political settings. Brazil's late 2010s *Operação Acolhida*, envisioned to "welcome" Venezuelans arriving in the country under former President Michel Temer, was not only aimed at attaining a certain type of biolegitimacy useful to govern humanitarian-like situations (Fassin 2010). It was also a demonstration, a "showing of a doing" (Rai et al. 2021, 5), capitalised years later by Jair Bolsonaro's government to portray the impact of "the socialist dictatorship led by Nicolás Maduro" (Bolsonaro 2021) in Venezuela. Colombia's early 2020s Temporary Protection Statute for Venezuelan Migrants was used by elites to demonstrate the country's belonging to an international order advanced by liberal governments, institutions, and organisations, including the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Palma-Gutiérrez and Long 2022).

In a related example, Brazil's humanitarian visa programme for Haitians implemented after the former's involvement in the United Nations (UN) Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) in the 2010s was often presented as an example of liberal commitment at the international stage, even if in practice the programme created a "racialised wall of visas" (Cintra and Nabuco Martuscelli 2025) for Haitians. More recently, after the re-ignition of Donald Trump's violent crackdown on migrants, part of his return to the United States presidency in 2025, Costa Rican and Panamanian authorities provided bus tickets to migrants below market price so that they could "transit" the countries southbound (Araya Adión and Córdoba 2025). This action aided both to regulate migrants' and non-migrants' conduct and to demonstrate commitment to the United States' current idea of regional migration management, including the rebordering of racialised subjects from the Global South who should be "contained" in "their countries." Generosity has served as a performative device with specific political aims in migration management elsewhere across the region, from the actions of some intergovernmental and non-governmental institutions working on providing shelter to people on the move in Mexico (Herrera Rosales 2025), to the initiatives of for-profit economic actors to create value from migrants' precariousness under the guise of generous employment opportunities in Chile (Berríos-Riquelme 2021).

Transformative Generosity

It is reductive to exclusively focus on generosity as sheer performance, when reflecting on the myriad forms of contestation against the unequal politics of migration management in the region. Diverse actors, from communities to activists, officers at governmental and non-governmental institutions, and migrants themselves, engage in everyday acts of generosity which constitute essential steps in transforming dominant forms of migration management. This form of "transformative" generosity, approached from the perspective of the "mobile commons" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013), allows us to think of some everyday acts of giving as challenging dominant il/liberal schemes of migration governance. It is transformative in that giving more than expected (materially, symbolically, and otherwise) allows people on the move and local communities to navigate, oftentimes resist, and at times unsettle formal policy schemes that often look to optimise arbitrary categorisations of some people as desirable (hard-working and law-abiding "regular" migrants) and less-desirable (problematic, in-transit, extra-continental, and prone-to-criminality "irregular" migrants).

To exemplify the latter point, transformative generosity is present in diverse forms of solidarity and resistance active at many different levels across LAC. Transformative generosity is evident in the actions of communities sharing knowledge, food, a place to sleep, or Wi-Fi in Southern Mexico (Gandini et al. 2020), the Andes (Palma-Gutiérrez 2024), or the Darién (Álvarez Velasco and Cielo 2023; Trabalón 2024; Palma-Gutiérrez 2025) amidst collective, large-scale on-foot displacement. Transformative generosity is also visible in the actions of officers and locals in charge of bureaucratic procedures and the provision of services to migrant communities in Chile (Stang Alva 2021) and Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic (Fouillioux Bambach and Bravo Sandoval 2025) who believe in the need for a form of dissident migrant "integration," against processes of differential inclusion entrenched in the neoliberal ethos of our times. Transformative generosity is present in the actions of people who work together with other self-identified or arbitrarily defined "migrants" of "first," "1.5," "second," or "third" generations, in order to contest diverse forms of citizen exclusion across the region, while engaging in productive economic, political, or social projects in cities such as Medellín, Quito, or Lima (Palma-Gutiérrez 2023).

These three approaches to generosity as a political and politicised device shaping migration management in Latin America are by no means conclusive. Rather, these constitute an initial invitation to reflect on the complications of generosity in shaping how we understand migration and politics more widely. Nominal, performative, and transformative generosity often work as overlapping categories, revealing the importance of reflecting on the contexts and genealogies of each situation. Seen as a fluid category, generosity constitutes both a powerful meaning-making device along the continuous expansion of unequal forms of global migration management and a potential tool for change as contestation to such schemes endures.

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Ir en Junta, Pedir Cola, Mulear

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IR EN JUNTA, PEDIR COLA, MULEAR: *Three emic concepts drawn from Venezuelan migrant experience along the Andean–Southern Cone corridors. Ir en junta (going together) denotes the collective organisation of travel, particularly among women and families, as a situated practice of mutual care and protection against the violence of transit. Pedir cola (hitchhiking) names the gendered, embodied knowledge through which migrants negotiate transportation without resources, reading the codes of the road as political and survival strategies. Mulear (secretly hitching rides on cargo trucks) captures clandestine mobility sustained by shared migrant knowledge and solidarity. Together, these practices and strategies constitute a vernacular epistemology: forms of resistance and care that reclaim migrants as political subjects.*

Keywords: Venezuelan migration; migrant epistemologies; embodied knowledge; gendered care practices in transit; vernacular language; Latin America

This text situates itself within the struggles and knowledge produced by migrants, drawing on the narratives of sixty-six Venezuelans [1] who navigated the Andean–Southern Cone corridors. It articulates, in their own terms, their embodied experiences, affects, desires, suffering, networks of solidarity, and practices of care, revealing what it means to be in transit. Particular attention is given to how migrants make sense of and mobilise strategies to sustain life and care for one another, both while traveling and in spaces of waiting. Even as their transit is shaped by increasingly restrictive migration policies[2] and a continuum of violence, their mobility also actively challenges and disrupts borders.

[1] The data derive from my doctoral research based on fieldwork conducted in the Ecuadorian border cities of Tulcán (northern border with Colombia) and Huaquillas (southern border with Peru) between October 2021 and August 2022. The study employed a multi-sited and multi-scalar ethnographic approach that included 66 in-depth interviews with undocumented Venezuelan migrants (40 women and 26 men); participant observation in shelters, public transportation, highways, and parks; and one mapping workshop with migrant women aimed at understanding embodied border experiences. More interviews were conducted with women due to the gendered conditions of the field. Shelters, the primary points of access, functioned as feminised spaces where trust could be established, shaped by my gendered positionality and self-care practices as a researcher. Interviews with men took place mainly at hydration points, communal dining rooms, and outside NGO offices, where long waiting lines for humanitarian assistance allowed for extended conversations.

[2] Migration policies shifted from open to restrictive and deterrent measures, including humanitarian visas, temporary regularisation, border closures, and militarisation. Ecuador introduced a humanitarian visa in August 2019, restricting access for migrants without documentation, following Chile (Democratic Responsibility Visa, 2018) and Peru (June 2019). These

The emic concepts *ir en junta* (going together), *pedir cola* (hitchhiking), and *mulear* (secretly hitching rides in cargo trucks) serve as analytical entry points into the memory of Venezuelan migration and its precarised mobilities. This text contributes by framing these practices and expressions as vernacular language, expanding the vocabulary of mobility and care, accounting for the human impact of migration-control policies in Latin America and the Caribbean, and recognising migrants as political subjects while centring knowledge from migrant *epistemes*.

The literature inspiring this text engages the autonomy of migration (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias 2019) and feminist geopolitics of waiting and care (Conlon 2011; Hyndman 2012; Hyndman and Giles 2011). Combining these perspectives centres migrants' lived experiences and agency beyond border-control constraints. Feminist geopolitics emphasises the body as a site of knowledge, highlighting "embodied epistemologies" (Hyndman 2012). This approach reveals that care, waiting, and movement are not only social and spatial practices but also corporeal experiences, shaping how migrants inhabit, endure, and navigate mobility precarity, differentiated by gender.

These three emic concepts are intricately linked to Venezuelan mobilities, which intensified in 2017 and have resulted in nearly 7.9 million people leaving the country, either voluntarily or by force (UNHCR 2025). Over the last eight years, this migration has been characterised by trajectories marked by chaos, the absence of a fixed destination, and various forms of im/mobility—often accelerated, and at other times marked by waiting—across multiple cities and countries. These are multidirectional movements: leaving, returning, migrating again. Migration has therefore become a strategy of survival, where being on the move is no longer an exception but a way of life.

Ir en Junta

Ir en junta means to be accompanied and derives from the idea of getting together. But getting together with whom, for what, and why? In the context of Venezuela's economic, political, health, and security crises, fleeing has become a collective response. Lacking resources for individual migration, many leave in groups to share the journey. Women often organise themselves in their neighbourhoods to undertake the journey with their children—infants, youth, and teenagers—as well as the elderly, pregnant women, and their nuclear or extended families. *Juntas* are also formed among adolescents, neighbours, or friends.

conditions have pushed many migrants to cross irregular routes, known as *trochas*. In this context, Venezuelans face a regional framework of securitised migration policies that contributes to their criminalisation and dehumanisation.

However, these *juntas* are not only formed at departure but also arise during the social experience of transit, when migrants encounter others, including not only Venezuelans but also migrants from other countries, especially Colombians and Cubans, who are likewise on the move. Several migrant mothers describe how, while crossing Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, or Chile, they meet other women traveling with children and decide to join forces to care for and protect one another, share what little they have, and sustain life in transit. These practices exemplify what some authors have coined as "economies of care on the move" (Álvarez Velasco and Varela Huerta 2022).

Although *ir en junta* is not used exclusively by migrant women who are mothers, it takes on particular significance for them. It represents a situated care strategy: women who leave Venezuela with their children join forces with other women along the route to build networks of mutual protection. These *juntas* involve organising to remain vigilant against dangers along the route—assaults, robberies, and abuse—as well as managing physical exhaustion: taking turns sleeping on the street, keeping watch at night, and collectively sharing caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, *juntas* are formed between nuclear families and others encountered during the journey, a practice that can be understood as part of the process of familiarisation of migrations (Pedone and Varela-Huerta 2025).

Pedir Cola

One of the strategies practised by Venezuelan migrants on the move is *pedir cola*, referring to requesting transportation from private or cargo drivers as a means of advancing without economic resources. *Pedir cola* requires knowledge of the codes of the road: identifying strategic waiting points such as toll booths, gas stations, or traffic lights; knowing how to approach drivers, what to say, and how to behave; and understanding when to insist or when to let an opportunity pass. It is a gender-differentiated practice in that women and men enact distinct bodily performances, risk assessments, and communicative strategies when approaching drivers, shaped by socially produced expectations of vulnerability and trust. Consequently, *juntas* composed mainly of women and children tend to be more successful, while men more often resort to *mulear*. These distinctions are learned through embodied experience, collective intuition, and, often, protection from traveling *en junta*.

Mulear

When *pedir cola* fails, migrants may resort to *mulear*, secretly climbing onto a truck platform, referred to as a mule, without the driver noticing. It becomes an extreme, yet common, recourse, when there are insufficient economic resources to continue the journey.

Mulear, a practice predominantly carried out by men, relies on shared knowledge circulating among migrants along the route: knowing whether a *mula* is empty or already taken, identifying the right moment to climb aboard, and preparing for long journeys with uncertain destinations. When a *mula* is "won" or "full," those already occupying it prevent others from boarding—not only due to limited space but also out of concern about theft or confrontation.

Families and *juntas* engaging in *mulear* take extra precautions: bringing food, ropes, or sheets to hold onto, organising shifts to keep watch, and caring for one another. The *mula*'s platform is a space where both bodies and emotions are exposed to risk. Children play a central role, inventing low-movement games, singing, sharing experiences, and forming their own *juntas*. Valuable items such as backpacks, clothing, or toys are often lost in the rush to disembark, a loss that can be especially painful for children.

In closing, *ir en junta*, *pedir cola*, and *mulear* constitute individual and collective strategies that Venezuelan migrants employ to remain on the move. In migrants' own words, these practices reflect disobedience and resistance while articulating how care, protection, and solidarity are enacted and (re)created during transit.

Use of AI

The author declares limited use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the preparation of this manuscript. The tool was used exclusively to review the linguistic coherence of the English text after translation from Spanish to English by the author. The translation and all substantive content were produced by the author, who reviewed and validated the final manuscript and assumes full responsibility for its content.

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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 legitimizes the extraction of capital from migration through legal and institutional channels and enables the militarization and corporatization 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 Kopczak 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 justification. 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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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.*

Keywords: migration categorisation; political technologies; migrant subjectivities; governance; Latin America; epistemic power; deportability; irregular migration

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 legitimation 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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Regularisation

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REGULARISATION: *A non-linear, complex, and contested process through which a state authorises non-nationals to reside lawfully within its territory, either temporarily or permanently. Encompassing migration policies, refugee status determination (RSD), and naturalisation, regularisation generates sequences of legal statuses that alternate between regularity and irregularity across countries of origin, transit, and destination. As a socio-political process, it produces migrant categories that carry specific social meanings and hierarchies that determine access to rights. Shaped by an asymmetric tension between state control and migrant agency, regularisation constitutes a necessary but insufficient condition for social inclusion.*

Keywords: regularisation; migration governance; legal status; migrant agency; Latin America; Venezuela; irregular migration; social inclusion

Regularisation is broadly understood as the mechanism and/or process through which a state authorises non-nationals to reside lawfully within its territory, either temporarily or permanently (Kraler 2019; IOM 2019). Although regularisation has been widely studied both as a mechanism and as a legal outcome (van der Werf et al. 2025; Bauer 2021), we propose that it can be better understood as a *non-linear, complex and contested process*, a key feature of both migration governance and migrants lived experiences[2]. Within this process, even if the state remains the main producer of legal categories, statuses, and conditions of stay, regularisation cannot be understood solely through this heteronomous dimension. It also involves the autonomy of migrants, who interpret, navigate, combine and sometimes circumvent available pathways under unequal conditions. Regularisation is therefore shaped by an asymmetric but constitutive tension between state control and migrant agency.

As part of our comparative work in Latin America, we have examined the complexities of navigating regularisation mechanisms, focusing on the challenges of policy implementation and the social meanings of the categorisations produced through these processes, from the perspective of both the state and migrants.

We adopt a broad understanding of regularisation that encompasses the various socio-political and legal processes through which regular status is obtained. In doing so, we draw on what Penchaszadeh and Linares (2026) call the "access doors to regularisation", which include mechanisms arising from migration policies, refugee status determination (RSD), and naturalisation. While RSD is linked to norms derived from the international protection regime, our research has shown that some countries in the region – such as Brazil and Uruguay –, have instrumentalised asylum as a mechanism of regularisation (Zapata et al.

[2] We use the word "migrant" to refer to all mobile populations across the region, including migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced populations (Carling 2023).

2023), whereas others have chosen not to rely on refugee protection, giving rise instead to alternative regularisation routes. This illustrates both the synergies and the tensions between different regularisation mechanisms.

Other scholars have also recognised this broad approach to regularisation in Latin America. Acosta and Freier (2023) emphasised that regularisation in the region acquired distinctive connotations in the early 2000s, shaped by concerns over the treatment of Latin American nationals abroad and grounded in the principle of non-criminalisation of irregular migration. Legally, regularisation in the region has taken three main forms:

- Administrative mechanisms embedded in national migration laws (Acosta and Harris 2022), or, in some cases, within refugee protection frameworks (Prieto Rosas et al. forthcoming; Zapata et al. 2023);
- Permanent procedures derived from regional frameworks such as the 2002 MERCOSUR Residence Agreement; and
- Temporary regularisation programmes or amnesties, either open to all or targeted at specific groups, and generally limited in duration.

In this context, however, national migration legislation remains the primary point of departure, since it usually provides the basic legal and administrative mechanisms through which regular status is first accessed and managed. At the same time, other routes, including asylum and naturalisation, may become part of broader regularisation trajectories by consolidating, extending or reconfiguring migrants' legal permanence.

This *Lexicon* entry draws on primary qualitative data collected by the CAMINAR research group across eight Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, and Uruguay)[3]. Interviews with Venezuelan migrants explored migration trajectories, documentation and regularisation processes, settlement and access to rights, and experiences of discrimination and solidarity (see Prieto Rosas et al. forthcoming).

The evidence collected shows that regularisation is a national and transnational and dynamic process shaped by the production of legal categories that generate sequences of legal statuses, varying in duration and marked by alternating periods of regularity and irregularity, involving multiple legal-administrative instruments across countries of origin, transit, and destination (Prieto Rosas et al. forthcoming).

[3] The research involved 143 semi-structured interviews, conducted between March 2023 and December 2024, with Venezuelan adult migrants who had left Venezuela from 2016 onwards and were recruited using an accessibility-based approach. It also entailed an analysis of legal and policy frameworks in response to Venezuelan displacement across the eight country cases.

Our findings also emphasise that regularisation goes beyond bureaucratic procedures or the mere acquisition of documentation. It constitutes a documental classification that produces and reproduces migrant categories which, in turn, carry specific social meanings and hierarchies and determine access to rights (Menjívar 2024). As established in the literature, these migrant categories are not natural but contingent and historically situated (Carens 2013), taking shape through policy change and the shifting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Vera Espinoza et al. 2021). Thus, we understand regularisation not as a specific mechanism or a singular legal outcome, but rather, as a *non-linear*, *complex and contested process* shaped by the proliferation of legal and administrative measures that determine who can stay, for how long, and under what conditions (Prieto Rosas et al. forthcoming), as well as by how is navigated and even circumvented by migrants. We briefly outline these three processual dimensions of regularisation.

The non-linear nature of regularisation manifests in two main ways. First, while both the literature (Robles 2025) and our participants highlighted the material and emotional benefits of obtaining legal status, our analysis shows that this does not necessarily result in greater stability or permanence. This instability stems either from the temporary nature of many legal statuses and the need for subsequent renewals, or from the fact that legal status does not always translate into improved access to rights or better socio-economic conditions, particularly in contexts of high labour informality (Prieto Rosas et al. forthcoming). This instability is interlinked with the second non-linear characteristic of regularisation trajectories, which involve multiple mechanisms, stages, and temporalities, often combining administrative, humanitarian, asylum and naturalisation pathways, as well as periods of irregularity interwoven with periods of regular residence. Regularisation trajectories are therefore better understood as shifting sequences rather than as a one-way ladder.

The second processual dimension of regularisation is the increasing complexity of policy frameworks and the resulting legal stratification. In the last decade, the displacement from Venezuela, as well as other regional mobility dynamics, have generated significant transformations in policy responses to growing extra and intra-regional migration flows across Latin America (Vera Espinoza 2024), showing both the complexity of migrants' regularisation pathways within and across countries (Prieto Rosas et al. forthcoming; see also Masferrer and Navarrete-Suárez 2026). A continuous policy flux in several countries has led to the proliferation of *ad hoc* measures and the multiplication of entry categories and legal statuses (Acosta et al. 2019). These exceptional migration policies are characterised by their

diverse scope, requirements, and temporalities (Jarochinski and Malheiros 2024; Vera Espinoza and Penchaszadeh 2026).

The growing complexity of Venezuelan migrants' documentation trajectories is partly driven by the varied policy responses adopted across the region as well as by difficulties in obtaining, renewing or apostilling Venezuelan identity/legal documents which has hindered access to regular or permanent residence in many Latin American countries (Prieto Rosas et al., forthcoming). The latter reveals the transnational dimension of regularisation processes, as deficiencies in obtaining country-of-origin documentation are central to understanding Venezuelans' mobility decision-making, as well as the regularisation logics associated with it.

Countries such as Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru have relied on *ad hoc*, time-limited legal-administrative measures, often to the detriment of refugee status determination under the expanded refugee definition of the Cartagena Declaration, which has been effectively applied only in Brazil and Mexico (see Pelacani and Moreno 2023). Some countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay have either introduced selective positive measures or adapted citizenship and migration regimes (see Besserer et al., 2024; Vera Espinoza and Penchaszadeh, 2026), and/or created expedited administrative pathways to permanent residence.

This complexity is also evident in the tension between national decisions and regional frameworks in relation to the Venezuelan displacement (Jarochinski and Malheiros, 2024; Zapata et al., 2023). Beyond the limited use of the Cartagena framework, many States have also opted not to rely on established regional instruments such as MERCOSUR (still primarily used by Uruguay and Argentina). While in some countries of the region there are efforts to facilitate processes of regularisation and inclusion (Fernández-Rodríguez and Célleri, 2024), in others we see a gap between state-led regularisation mechanisms and migrants' lived experiences of securing legal status, resulting in legal stratification and fragmented forms of inclusion (see Prieto Rosas et al. forthcoming; Vera Espinoza et al. 2021).

The third characteristic of regularisation emerged from the perspective of Venezuelan migrants themselves, as interviewees highlighted the contested and multi-layered meanings of regularisation processes (see also Del Real 2025), emphasising four interrelated dimensions. First, many of the interviewees underlined the functional dimension of regularisation. Having regular status, even if temporary, was perceived as a gateway to improved access to work, education, and healthcare. As one participant explained: "With the papers, I can get a better job, and my children can access healthcare." In this sense,

regularisation was seen not merely as an individual achievement but as a family project aimed at achieving long-term stability (see also Aranda et al. 2014).

Second, participants expressed the emotional dimension of regularisation, associating it with expectations of permanence, safety, and relief from bureaucratic uncertainty (see also Gil Everaert 2021). Regularisation represented the end of "living in suspense," of waiting indefinitely for appointments, responses, or renewals, and the beginning of a sense of belonging: "When I get my papers, I will finally feel calm."

Third, while migrants' lives are shaped by regularisation processes, they are not passive actors navigating these pathways. The autonomy of migrants also plays a decisive role in shaping these processes and outcomes, as people make pragmatic and strategic decisions about which pathways to take and when, based on the information and resources available to them. While migrants' agency has been well established in the literature (see for instance, Botto and Nicolao 2023), our interviewees offered situated insights into how they make sense of regularisation processes and related policy changes, highlighting the degree of autonomy they exercise within systems largely designed, implemented and overseen by states.

Finally, respondents also underscored the dimension of inequality inherent in regularisation processes. They emphasised how access to legal status is conditioned by factors such as year of arrival, country of residence, financial resources, and digital access. As a result, even within the same family, members may hold different statuses depending on the policy in force at the time of entry (see also Jorgensen 2026).

These narratives reveal the temporal, structural, and documental patterns that shape contemporary experiences of regularisation in Latin America, as well as the meanings that migrants themselves ascribe to these processes. Understanding regularisation as a *non-linear, complex and contested process* allows for a more comprehensive account of both the mechanisms and outcomes involved, as well as the shifting policies that govern it and shape how it is experienced by migrants. Regularisation is therefore a contested process that can be used by states to both facilitate and restrict migration, while simultaneously improving migrants' lives or, conversely, making their quest for permanent regular residence more difficult due to increasingly complex pathways and associated requirements.

From a migrant-centred perspective, regular status appears as a necessary but insufficient condition for inclusion (Cerruti and Penchaszadeh 2023; Vera Espinoza et al., 2021). It may reduce exposure to uncertainty and enable access to work, education, or healthcare, but it does not in itself guarantee social incorporation, labour protection, or equality of treatment. In this sense, regularisation often functions less as an endpoint than as

a necessary platform from which broader struggles for inclusion can begin (see also Penchaszadeh and Linares 2026; Moulin and Zapata 2025; Prieto Rosas et al. forthcoming).

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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 illegalize 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." 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 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, Cobarrubias and Pickles 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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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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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

"Turso"[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 America[2] with travel documents from the Ottoman Empire[3]. 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, Viloria 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 them.[5] 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, 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

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[2] See, for example Klich and Lesser (1996) about Latin America in general; Vargas and Suaza 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*.

[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 Amèrica pelos Turcos*" (published in 1994) about two Arab immigrants in Brazil, Amado briefly notes

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: "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

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.

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 "disgustig 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" 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, 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

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[12] El-Attar (2013) argues that "turcophobia" still exists in Chile.

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

"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 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

[17] Vargas and Suaza (2007) illustrate the discrimination against Turbay, including opponents calling him a "dirty" *turco*.

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 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.

[18] Authors such as Viloria (2004) and Almeida (1996) share this sentiment.

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.

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[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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