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**The Central American migrants' caravans: Contesting  
borders and their governmentalities**

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## **The Central American migrants' caravans: Contesting borders and their governmentalities**

Between October 2018 and April 2019, several dozen Central American migrant caravans crossed Mexico towards the United States. On October 12, 2018, hundreds of people gathered at the San Pedro Sula bus station in Honduras to form what has since been called the 'Central American migrant caravan' or the 'migrant exodus'. Within a few weeks, thousands joined its ranks or formed new caravans.

This unexpected massive new way of migration has openly challenged the whole regional migratory regime dominated by the United States policies that see migration through the lens of security and criminality. This presentation will try to give an overview of the dynamics that shape this until then unseen social movement. Secondly, I will put into question the reactions that these caravans have produced at a political level in Mexico but also among the civil society. Moreover, if the migrant caravans can be seen as a radical challenge of the border regime, it seems important to also investigate the current increasing trend of outsourcing policies in Central America under the US government threats.

This analysis is based on fieldwork conducted on the one hand in Mexico City, when the first migrants' caravan arrived in the capital at the beginning of November 2018 and, on the other hand, in the town of Tapachula, close to the border with Guatemala.

### **A caravan can hide another: drawing on the genealogy of migrants' struggles**

First, I would like to present and consider this movement within a broader genealogy of the struggles of migrants: if caravans can be considered as a common repertoire of collective action, it refers to a plurality of claims and actors. Indeed, in Central American history, the notion of « caravan » refers to a plurality of mobilisations. Some of them are more specifically linked with migration issues, such as those organised each year by the mothers of migrants who have disappeared [*Caravana de madres de migrantes desaparecidos*] in their journey to the USA. This transnational mobilisation is not driven by political demands; it also constitutes a pragmatic network for searching their children. This kind of mobilisation is not specific to Central America. In November 2018, the Central American mothers joined those from Spain, Italy, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and the United States to form a global network of mothers of missing migrants<sup>1</sup>.

Another type of caravan is the one called *Viacrucis del Migrante*, or 'Migrants Stations of the Cross'. Since 2010 it gathers every year, hundreds of Central Americans migrants and various organisations of human rights in

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<sup>1</sup> Link to the «Manifiesto de la Cumbre Mundial de Madres de Migrantes Desaparecidos » : <https://movimientomigrantemesoamericano.org/2018/11/05/manifiesto-de-la-cumbre-mundial-de-madres-de-migrantes-desaparecidos/>

order to demand the prosecutions of the perpetrators of violations of the rights of migrants in transit in Mexico (whether it is about kidnapping, racketing, murder, rape, femicide or all other abuses that migrants have faced while travelling across Mexico).



Viacrucis migrante, 2011. Credit: Bren | CC BY NC SA

Those *Viacrucis del Migrante* have the specificity of using the religious register to present their political claims. However, this political goal mixes with a practical accompaniment: human rights defenders literally walk alongside migrants so as to try to keep them safe.

Their routes change every year depending on the issues the organisers want to highlight. In 2015, the *Viacrucis Migrante* focused its actions in the

southern part of Mexico to emphasise the dramatic consequences of the ‘Southern Border Programme’ [Programa Frontera Sur] implemented by the Mexican government since 2014. This policy participates in the criminalisation of migration, makes migration routes more dangerous and increase in the numbers of human tragedies due to the strengthening of control mechanisms on Mexico's southern border. Since the implementation of this programme, the detention and deportation of migrants have strongly increased, notably in the southern Mexican States of Chiapas and Tabasco.



Map of the migration control policy in the Southern part of Mexico (2012-2018); Source: Angelica Zambrano - El Colef, [‘Controles migratorios en el sur de México: 2012-2018, 21 March 2019.](#)

This map shows the various control belts, fixed or mobile, implemented since the adoption of the Southern Border Programme. This control apparatus is focused on the Southern part of the Mexican territory and more specifically in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. This policy forces the migrants to remain in hiding and thus to become easy prey for various criminal networks. To some extent, these migration control mechanisms are so systematic that some researchers refer to the Mexican migration corridor as a 'vertical border'<sup>2</sup>.

*Pueblo Sin Fronteras*, is one of the organisations participating in this mobilisation since 2010. This NGO implements its activity especially in the US and in Mexico. Regarding its participation in the *Viacrucis*, its action aims in particular to provide logistical and legal support to migrants throughout the caravans' journey. In April 2018, Pueblo Sin Fronteras directly organized a migrant caravan. Thus, this *viacrucis* differed from the previous ones, as it was not organised in cooperation with Mexican organisations. Many of them did not support this mobilisation and have considered that Pueblo Sin Fronteras was endangering the lives of migrants because of the lack of a prior inter-institutional cooperation in order to organise a proper reception for hundreds of people.

Another distinctive feature of the *Viacrucis* organised by Pueblo Sin Fronteras was the new attention paid by the American authorities to this caravan and its integration in the US political agenda to put Mexico under pressure. Indeed, the American President Donald Trump has threatened to break off the ongoing negotiation of the free trade agreement and expressed his wish to convert Mexico into a 'safe third country of asylum', in other words, to legitimise the rejection of asylum seekers who have transited through Mexico. US army troops were deployed along the border and the Mexican government also sent more security forces at the border with Guatemala.

Those few examples show that there is therefore behind this common repertoire of collective action a plurality of uses, political demands but also of actors. Indeed, the first 'caravan of migrants' that left Honduras on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2018 and the following ones belong to another kind of movement and rest on other rationale, dynamics.

### **From the call for a 'Caminata del Migrante' to the 'Central Americans Exodus'**

In the first days of October 2018, a call for a *Caminata del Migrante*, or 'March of the migrant' spread on the social networks in Honduras. A group of political opponents made the call to the President of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernandez. The objective was to demonstrate the dramatic consequences of his policies, socially and

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<sup>2</sup> David Fitzgerald et Areli Palomo-Contreras, «México entre el Sur y el Norte», *Cuadernos del CEMCA*, Serie Anthropología, n° 3, November 2018.

politically. The slogan of the call clearly emphasises the political crisis and insecurity that prevails in this country and more broadly in the region, and goes as follows:

‘We do not leave because we want to, we are expelled by violence and poverty’

*‘No nos vamos porque queremos, nos expulsa la violencia y la pobreza’*

Conceived in political circles, this mobilisation quickly spread beyond this initial framework, notably due to its great mediatization. The day before it set off, The United States Vice President Mike Pence urged the presidents of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala to persuade their citizens to stay home. These deterring messages seem to have had a counterproductive effect: on 20<sup>th</sup> October, the authorities registered more than 1,500 persons waiting on the Guatemala-Mexico international bridge to enter Mexico and more than 5,000 crossed the river Suchiate that serves as a border between Mexico and Guatemala.

In the brief time I have, I cannot precisely detail the experience of some migrants I have met, their route, the ways the migrant caravans collectively managed to cross borders and territories. However, to put it briefly and in a very literal way, I can say that massive migration is a very powerful form of civil disobedience against the border regime and global order. For many persons, crossing border was considered as a new possibility.

These marchers have found, in the self-organisation of their collective movement, a way to break away from underground status imposed by policies of migration control as well as a form of protection against the dangers of the journey. They also found, sometimes based on previous experiences of migration or *Viacrucis*, that there is safety in numbers and in press attention. This collective action was also a way to reduce the cost of migration, to avoid using the expensive services of a smuggler and thus to create a new way of migration more accessible. Within this broad movement, large numbers of families, notably women with children, have seen in these caravans a new possibility for crossing borders.

Indeed, their numbers have created a new balance of power in challenging borders. Between October 2018 and February 2019, more than 30,000 people in caravans were registered on Mexico's southern border, but thousands of them enter illegally every day. These caravans have also revealed a phenomenon that has not yet been very visible: the Central American exodus. Since the early 2000s, nearly 400,000 persons from Honduras, Salvador and Guatemala have migrated to the United States every year. Fleeing corrupt and authoritarian states, endemic and multifaceted violence, including that of *maras* (gangs) and drug cartels, as well as the deleterious effects of the neoliberal extractivist model, they leave countries that they believe have nothing to offer them. However, these collective migrations must not be viewed in a monolithic way: caravans constitute a juxtaposition of diverse situations; groups were formed and transformed all along the journey, according to individual expectations and affinities. It was quite common among the participants to hear: ‘We all have our own plan’. Some have chosen to regularise their status as soon as they enter Mexican territory, while others

have chosen to push as far as the northern border, from where they have started regularisation procedures with Mexican or American authorities, or both.

There were a lot of discussions and debates about who was in charge of this movement, who organised this caravan, who funded it, and so on. Most of these controversies attempted to manipulate and discredit this social movement and the marchers. However, no one persuaded people to leave their country with false promises or ideas about an easy journey or being welcomed with open arms. All the people in the caravan I spoke with knew perfectly well that it would be difficult, just as arduous as dangerous but also there was no guarantee of getting into the United States at the end of it. Their claims reflected a collective survival instinct as for many of them, leaving was the only way to stay alive.

### **The ‘humanitarian government’ as a practice of bordering**

In response to these various caravans, Mexico and the United States deployed their armies. Mexican authorities wavered between ad hoc humanitarian reception, practices of detention and expulsion, or facilitation of accelerated crossings of the territory to the US border. The measures adopted by both the United States and Mexico have contributed to the borders’ bottleneck from south to north, thus creating the situation of ‘migration crisis’ that they claimed to prevent.

Requested by the Mexican government even before the arrival of the first caravan on its territory, the UNHCR obtained funds from the US to facilitate access to the Mexican asylum procedure. The United States has also mobilised the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to implement awareness campaigns on the risks of crossing and to encourage return. IOM has therefore organised a monitoring of the migrant caravans and created a new network of the relevant borders (Guatemala/Honduras; Guatemala/Salvador, Guatemala/Mexico, Mexico/US). In particular, the organisation has deployed its staff at the border crossing points and marchers’ stopping places. The distribution of food and clothing served its purpose of deterring and regulating border crossings; the option of voluntary return was even promoted as soon as the migrant left Honduras and Salvador, at the border crossing points in Guatemala, even if they are all parties to the Central American Agreement on Free Movement. The attention paid to the vulnerability of bodies exhausted by the march went hand in hand with a strong warning to those exposed to trafficking, abuse, and disappearances. However, the only alternative presented was to apply for asylum in Mexico or return to the countries of origin. IOM's proposals thus took for granted the impossibility of entering the United States, undermining a political movement based on the claim to collective asylum.

Putting aside from the outset the claim of the marchers to be able to collectively seek asylum at the US border, UNHCR officials stressed the complexity of the procedures and the low probability of obtaining asylum in the United States, thus reinforcing IOM’s rhetoric on return. Mexican foreigners’ rights organisations have not taken the law as a political tool to support the call of the marchers for free movement in Mexico and collective

refuge for all in the United States. Instead, their legal advice appeared to ruin the political strength of the collective claim on refuge. The following extract of a question and answer session led by an American lawyer during the stay of the Caravan in Mexico City reflects an undermining of political and social struggle, or at least the clash between the law (depicted as a threat rather than a protection) and the political demands of rights and justice (dismissed as a naive utopia).

*A man from Nicaragua:* 'In the history of Latin America, there has never been an exodus of people the size that is now taking place. The question is what is the treatment that US laws give to this type of human movement?, and what about the laws contemplated within the United Nations? What would then be the way to be able to enter en masse? Because look, individually we all already know the reality. However, if we make this move en masse, then we will have to negotiate directly with Donald Trump himself. I do not know... What would be the provisions of the laws?'

*A US Lawyer:* 'The question is, is there any provision in US laws to enter en masse? No, it does not exist, and the truth is that it will not go well if you try to enter en masse into the US. I could not recommend this. Moreover, thousands of people come to the United States every day. So yes, you are all together, and because you are together, you think you are numerous, but in terms of numbers of entrance in the United States every day, you are not so many... I do not think you are going to get shot but maybe the army is going to stop everybody, and they are going to charge all of you with a criminal record and it is going to be more difficult for you to apply for asylum. So my recommendation is that everyone tries to enter through the bridge if one is afraid to return and wants to seek asylum.'

To a large extent, all the speeches addressed to the participants of the caravans converged in favour of promoting the installation in Mexico. '*Every time, we are told about detention, expulsion ... But we are here and we will continue to move forward!*' observed one of the migrants in reaction to the speech made by a UNHCR staff.

As a counterpoint to humanitarian practices and their individualising logic, the caravan's stay in a stadium in Mexico City also revealed the logic of self-organisation at work and the tensions that arose with Pueblos Sin Fronteras' attempts to promote and set up their own organisational methods (such as night assembly), to appoint so-called spokespersons. In fact, each group had its own organisation but those who had already migrated or had a battery charger could serve as resource persons to give advice on the safest place to stay, to keep in touch with the other marchers, to choose the next stop. However, with Pueblo Sin Fronteras' support, there were also several persons elected as spokespersons designated as 'chalecos' or, in English, 'the vests'. They were supposed to represent social groups (women, LGTBQ) or groups according to their place of departure. They were in charge of passing information, relaying demands, making a census of their groups to make sure that in case of disappearance or any other issue they will be able to give information to the competent authorities. The identification of the number of participants was also a strategic information both for the authorities and for the civil society supporting the caravans.



*Inside the stadium: An organisation based on the place of residency in Honduras*



*Meeting: Pueblo Sin Fronteras and «los chalecos» (the vests) on the stage*

**Borders and corruption a global rebellion**

The formation of a containment area in Southern Mexico echoes the entrapment situation on the country's northern border, reinforced in November 2018 by the 'Plan Remain in Mexico', which has since been poorly



renamed the 'Migration Protection Protocol'. The United States, which already required asylum seekers to register and wait at the border, unilaterally decided to force non-Mexicans to return to Mexico during the processing of their asylum application, unless they could demonstrate the risks they would face there. Other deals have been concluded or are still under negotiations with Guatemala, Honduras and Salvador to convert them into a buffer zone.

Over the past few months, obstacles and denial of rights have contributed to the emergence of new forms of mobilisation of migrants from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, who were until then quite invisible in Mexico. People seeking regularisation face corruption: from crossing the border to entering the premises of the National Institute of Migration (INM) or just trying to obtain a form is subject to extortion. The issuance of the *oficio de salida*, [laissez-passer] allowing some of them to cross the country to the United States, became the subject of a racket in 2018. INM agents have intermediaries in charge of collecting the money from migrants for the issuance of this document, which gave (until July 2019) about twenty days to reach the northern border. In an attempt to bypass this system, people stayed for days in front of the entrance of the detention centre in the hope of gaining access to it: most often, only families would eventually enter. In March 2019, Cubans, exasperated to wait for several months, tried to enter the INM delegation by force. Joined by people from Haiti, Central America, Africa and Asia, more than 2,000 people made for the headquarters of the INM. Then, after several weeks of waiting in vain, they decided to form the Central American and Caribbean caravan towards the northern border. In October 2019, a new caravan of migrants from Africa, Haiti and Central American migrants departed from Tapachula: the national guards prevented them from leaving the Southern State of Chiapas, some of them were arrested, and others escaped or decided to go back to Tapachula. Recently a deportation charter flight was organised by the Mexican authorities to India: it is the first time Mexico organise a transatlantic deportation flight.

Today, the solidarity that had welcomed the first Honduran caravan is gone. Those who continue to travel to Mexico and the United States receive neither the same media coverage nor the same political treatment. In January 2019, the INM announced that it had issued 11,823 humanitarian visitor cards during the month. By March, there were only 1,024. In addition to an increase in deportation, a new 'restraint plan' provides for the reinforcement of the police presence in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. This strategy also extends beyond the country's borders, as humanitarian visa applications should now be made from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

While some observers have seen caravans as a new migratory paradigm, one thing is certain: the contestation of borders and the distrust of States carried by these movements are the expression of a political gesture that has long been denied to a migration that was previously confined to silence.