

Migrants Trapped in the Mexican Vertical Border

Amarela Varela Huerta

Lecturer /researcher, Autonomous University of Mexico City

amarela.varela@uacm.edu.mx

In academic literature specializing in global migration, Mexico is known as the second largest territory of labor expulsion; as a nation with one of the most significant diasporas living in “economic exile” in the United States; and for some time now, as one of the most clear examples of the systematic violation of the human rights of migrants in transit. Mexico is a geography in which the horizontal US-Mexico border has been extended vertically from north to south, covering the entirety of Mexican territory in order to prevent the arrival of millions of forced migrants, political refugees, and economic migrants from reaching their destinations in the countries to the north. This post offers a set of situations and stories of the history of migration by and through Mexico, forming a panoramic view of the vertical border of Mexico.

Historically, Mexico has been a country that expelled workers to the United States both legally and illegally, hence the diaspora of almost 13 million persons of Mexican origin who currently reside in that country. Mexico also has a long history as a country of settlement whose key milestones include the arrival of Spanish Republican exiles as well as exiles from the military dictatorships of South America and from Guatemala during the civil wars of the 1980s and 1990s.

Deportees and displaced persons are also central in Mexico’s migratory history. Mexico has been a country of return since the last century due to recurrent waves of mass deportations from the United States as a mechanism of the biopolitical management of the US labor market (the ways in which governments administer and control the mobility of persons across borders based on ethnic and racial criteria). More recently, Mexico has become a geography of internal forced displacement, a reality that dates back to the 1990s when paramilitaries displaced entire villages in the southern state of Chiapas, whether they were Zapatistas or not (in 1994 the Zapatista army began an armed insurrection, which later converted into a non-violent civil disobedience movement against the Mexican government). The issue of forced displacement has intensified in the past decade during the so-called Mexican drug war (*la guerra contra el narco*) that has resulted in an unprecedented outbreak of violence against Mexican citizenry.

This post summarizes some snapshots from my research on Mexico as a country of migration, and of migrants, that may serve as a welcome album to Mexican territory. Yet, the purpose of this piece is not to reproduce the critiques that have already been more than documented in academia, journalism, and the NGO-sector, nor to simply offer a diagnosis of the grave situation in which Mexico finds itself. This post seeks to elaborate a more ferocious violence, a more refined institutional racism, and a social and cultural racism that “*basuriza*” migrants, whether in they are in transit, or are deportees, returnees or asylum-seekers trapped in the limbo of waiting; A concept that makes reference to the production of subjectivities by the state and market through laws and public policies, but also through social perceptions that are a product of cultural (re)presentations that, in relation to migrants in this case, strip away their human dignity and therefore their rights

under the law, rendering them disposable. This phenomenon of social “basurización” (like, “disposability”) has already exploded in Central America ([Coutin, 2016](#)).

The creation of a disposable class of people trapped in a state of exception ([Urteaga & Moreno, 2015](#)) translates into public policies known as necropolitics: *juvenicidio* (the killing of youth), femicide (the killing of women), and ecocide (the destruction of the environment). Necropolitical regimes such as these are understood and defined by the theoretical framework of South African philosopher Achille Mbembe, who drawing from Michel Foucault, argues that capitalism exercised through biopolitics (bio/life, politics/governance) is what governs life, necropolitical regimes, however, also govern through death ([Mbembe; 2011](#))

Mexico, a vertical border...

After the signing of economic liberalization treaties in Central America beginning in the 1990s, through the 2000s, between 400-500,000 persons per year attempt to traverse Mexico by land, sea, air or even underground in order to enter the United States ([Varela, 2015](#)). These attempts are mostly an exodus of Central American citizens fleeing from precarious economic conditions, insecurity, extortion and violence. Every year thousands of people, including a significant number of migrant children fleeing violence, attempt this journey - either with other family members or unaccompanied - through the world’s most crossed, monitored and militarized border, which divides Latin America from North America ([Redodem, 2016](#)). Before they can even make the effort to cross the actual border, they have to overcome many types of institutional violence, especially at the hands of the Mexican police and military, but also are left to deal with the criminal networks of *narcos* and human traffickers ([Ureste, 2016](#)).

This is perhaps one of the most documented humanitarian tragedies in Mexico, denounced and represented by academia, the media, as well as artists, most of whose interpretations emphasize the agency of migrants, although the perspective of victimization is also prevalent.

Beyond the risks associated with organized crime or the accumulated “vulnerabilities” to which migrants are exposed while in transit through this “vertical border country” (as migrants themselves call it), are the threats represented by the Mexican legal framework for migration (domestic immigration laws), which is based upon the global logic of the securitization of migration. As a county that is acknowledged as a vertical border of the United States by experts, activists, scholars and even government officers, these approaches limit the possibility of transit migration. That is, in addition to the dangers and paralegal vulnerabilities faced by migrants in transit, migration is managed by the Mexican state from a perspective that privileges national security, rather than the security and safety of the people, and that therefore privileges a judicial treatment of the social phenomenon of migration.

Mexico is a territory with different migrant routes, as is shown in the graph below (Fig. 1.1). Migrants who cross the countryside are forced to pay a toll of extortion and violence, mostly by public officials such as immigration agents, police (local, state and federal) as well as military. State crimes are made possible by the combination of three legal logics: i) the externalization of the US border regime (ie. where the policies of national security to protect borders are replicated or copied from one country to another, generally from a strong country to one that is dependent on the other); ii) the securitization of the US border regime (ie. the so-called “security turn” that manages state territories from the perspective of “threats to national security”); and iii) the “state of emergency”

(ie. a state of permanent crisis) imposed by the reordering of land management pacts between cartels and government officials (these are special laws arising from the drug war).

GRAPHIC Fig. 1.1



“Map of Risks: The National Commission of Human Rights specified in their *Special Report on Cases of Kidnapping of Migrants in Mexico* the sites in which migrants run the risk of becoming victims of organized crime.” Source: ([National Commission for Human Rights CNDH](https://www.cndh.org.mx/))

The most visible face of this perverse trinity that crosses the bodies and stories of thousands of migrants is the *Southern Border Plan*, a governmental program that combines the anti-drug security discourse with the fight against human trafficking and illegal migration. This program functions to outlaw those who flee from multiple forms of violence and has a long genealogy anchored in the neoliberalization of the region (see [Varela, 2015](#)).

What are the costs of these governmental policies? In a country where as a result of the so-called “war on drugs” there are already between 100-150 thousand deaths (based on government and civil organization sources respectively), transit migrants cross through the most violent country in the world for migrants, a country that registers more than 20,000 kidnappings of migrants per year and an estimated 72,000 to 120,000 missing migrants in total. Since the intensification of the

securitization/externalization of border control from 2006 to 2015, approximately 24,000 corpses have been found in mass graves in municipal cemeteries and in clandestine graves around the country, plus an additional 40,000 unidentified bodies remain in public morgues (Sánchez, [2015](#)).

Caught in this necropolitical scenario, thousands of migrants in transit have decided to remain on their journey so long as their bodies can sustain them.

Although it may seem absurd to embark on such a grim and dangerous path, the community, family, and survivor networks have created a webs of mutual support and aid to facilitate the exodus of migrants and asylum seekers from the terrors in Central America. Unfortunately despite fleeing violence and hardship, these same migrants are met by another war that is being waged against them in Mexico.

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