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# **“Cheap merchandise”: atrocity and undocumented migrants in transit in Mexico’s war on drugs**

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## **Abstract**

Undocumented migrants in transit in Mexico are victims of atrocity. The subject has been largely ignored by scholars, however, until recently when a number of migration experts became interested in the matter. Most observers argue that abuses suffered by migrants are the consequence of the “securitization” of Mexican immigration policy. For them, Mexican authorities perceive migrants from Central America as a threat to national security and have hardened laws and migratory practices as a result, but there is insufficient evidence to support these claims. This article looks at the political economy of undocumented migration in transit in Mexico and the violence associated with it. It investigates the abuses suffered by migrants not as the result of supposed security policies, but rather as the consequence of the interplay between local and global economies that generate profits from undocumented migration. The article explores the role played by state officials, cartels, and ordinary Mexicans in the migration industry.

## **Keywords**

Migration, Mexico, Human Rights, Political Economy, War on drugs, Atrocity, Migration industry, Central America.

## **Introduction**

In 2008, the government of the state of Chiapas, in southern Mexico, created the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Crimes Committed against Immigrants. It was a unique institution created specifically to address a problem that ordinary institutions had not been able to address: the abuses perpetrated against undocumented foreigners, mainly from Central America, passing through the state. One of the Special Prosecutor’s achievements was the arrest of a 57-year-old rancher who cheated migrants by giving them instructions to follow a path that led them to an open-air dump where armed men then assaulted them. Two Hondurans presented a complaint against the rancher. Five days later, they were still waiting for the call from the Special Prosecutor’s Office in order to deliver their statement. They faced a dilemma: they wanted to continue on their journey, but if they did not testify then the

rancher would be released, their accusation would have been in vain, and justice would never be served (Martínez, 2012: 43).

Scholars have largely ignored the issue of undocumented migrants in transit in Mexico. The topic gained some prominence in 2010, when the press reported the discovery of 72 corpses of foreigners at the ranch of San Fernando in the state of Tamaulipas in northern Mexico (Tuckman, 2010). From then on, an increasing number of new migration experts became interested in the matter (Aikin & Anaya, 2013; París & Müller, 2016). Since 2010 diverse human rights organizations have agreed that it is “clear that migrants in transit through Mexico are victims of multiple crimes and human rights violations, such as kidnapping, human trafficking, enforced disappearance, sexual violence, assault, and aggravated robbery” (Knippen et al., 2015).

In the last decade, most observers have argued that abuses suffered by migrants are the consequence of what is called the “securitization” of Mexican immigration policy (e.g., Armijo, 2011; Basok, 2019; Basok & Rojas Wiesner, 2018; Castillo & Toussaint, 2010; Hernández López et al., 2019; Instituto de Estudios y Divulgación sobre Migración [INEDIM], 2011; Leutert, 2018; Rodríguez Moreno, 2016; Washington Office on Latin America [WOLA], 2012). They contend that the Mexican government perceives undocumented migrants in transit to be a threat to national security and has hardened laws and migratory practices as a result. The alleged securitization of migration – the toughening of existing laws and practices – may have facilitated the exploitation of migrants. However, as recent studies on the matter have demonstrated, the securitization of migration is an incomplete explanation for the abuses migrants suffer, which overlooks other factors (París et al., 2015; Treviño-Rangel, 2016). The story of the Hondurans mentioned earlier shows that this problem is far more complex. Those Honduran migrants were not deceived by a rancher and later assaulted by armed men because they were perceived to be a threat to national security. They were assaulted by men who saw in them an opportunity to make a financial gain.

This article explores the political economy of undocumented migration in transit in Mexico and the violence associated with it in order to understand the abuses suffered by migrants not as the result of supposed security policies, but rather as the consequence of the interplay between local and global economies that generate profits from undocumented

migration. Central American migrants meet the demand for cheap labor in the United States, providing a guaranteed supply of exploitable and dispensable workers. At the same time, they transfer a portion of their wages back to their home countries through remittances, which serve as income for their impoverished families. This process has been widely explored by multiple studies on international migration (e.g., Massey et al., 1993). What is less known is the story of how a multiplicity of actors in Mexico make money out of undocumented Central American migrants who cross the country, and how fear, violence, and atrocity are crucial factors in this process.

In Mexico the undocumented migration of Central Americans is a big business. There is a well-established “migration industry”, a “wide assembly of actors” whose existence increasingly depends on “money paid either to facilitate or to constrain” the transit of undocumented migrants (Sorensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012). In this context, I argue, migrants have become *commodities*: objects with a certain economic value that are exchanged (Appadurai, 1986: 3). But they are *disposable* commodities: perfectly dispensable and replaceable. They are dispensable because, as the testimonies collected for this investigation illustrate, Central American migrants in Mexico are easily exterminated, for example, when they cannot be exploited or used to generate money. They are replaceable because the supply of new migrants never ends. The commodification of Central American migrants implies that they endure a process of “dehumanization”, which is intrinsic to the exploitative practices of which they are victims (Sharp, 2000: 293).

The article critically explores how undocumented migrants in Mexico came to be framed as, to use Primo Levi’s term, “cheap merchandise” embarked on a “journey towards nothingness” (Levi, 1987: 17). By doing so, this article moves from the dominant story about what is currently happening to transmigrants in Mexico, according to which they are seen as a threat to national security and hence suffer abuses – an account shared as an article of faith by most experts on the matter – to another story, which illustrates how the lives of undocumented migrants are considered to be a “thing” that is dispensable – an account that is considerably more ambiguous and troubling.

## **Methods**

The article draws mainly on reports published by non-governmental organizations, activists, and the mass media, and official documents released by the Mexican government. It also draws on 88 semi-structured in-depth interviews with undocumented migrants, experts, and agents of the Mexican state who have some link with the deployment of migration policies in Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Most of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. For security reasons, the identities of the interviewees are kept confidential.<sup>1</sup>

I began this research by reading the reports published by activists and experts on the subject. These reports differed in the basic information they presented: for example, in the number of undocumented migrants crossing Mexico or in the discussion about whether the country's southern border was heavily controlled or not controlled at all. It was interesting that, despite these divergences, they all shared two basic ideas: Mexican migration policy is securitized; and securitization is the cause of the abuses committed against migrants. In other words, securitization seemed to be the answer that explained everything about transit migration: either the increase or decrease in the number of migrants crossing Mexico, or the argument that Mexico's border with Guatemala was heavily guarded by authorities or that that same border lacked surveillance at all. So I decided to conduct interviews with activists, experts, and journalists who are part of the growing number of non-governmental human rights organizations working on migration issues. Even if they worked in the same organization, interviewees sometimes had divergent opinions on specific issues about transit migration, but they all had the same view of the securitization argument. The interviewees validated what can be found in the human rights reports, as – surprisingly – did state agents from El Salvador and Guatemala whom I interviewed for this research. Securitization is a powerful and familiar trope that permeates the thinking of most activists and state agents involved in the defense of migrants' rights.

## **Context**

Mexico has historically been a transit point for migrants from Central America. During their brief stay in Mexico, migrants have long suffered abuses from the country's authorities, mainly migration officials, including arbitrary arrest, lack of due process, and confinement in deplorable conditions in disturbing governmental detention centers, euphemistically

known as “migratory stations” (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [IACHR], 2013: 41).

However, a violent increase in the number and brutality of the abuses perpetrated against undocumented migrants in transit – mass kidnapping and mass murder, torture, disappearances, trafficking of persons and organs – began in 2006. This change in the pattern of abuses has been coterminous with the country’s “war on drugs”, which was launched by former president Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) (IACHR, 2013: 42). In December 2006, Calderón began a “war” against organized crime. Since then, more than 50,000 members of the military have been involved in what is known by the all-encompassing term “counternarcotics operations”. This provisional strategy to supposedly fight organized crime and to end with drug-related violence continues today, became permanent, and has led to an unprecedented wave of violence; for example, more than 260,000 people have been killed in the country, and 62,000 people vanished between 2006 and 2019 (Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda de Personas, 2020; Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, 2019a, 2019b; 2019c).

Before continuing, it is important to clarify what Mexico’s “war on drugs” is all about. Paley (2014: 16) rightly notes that Mexico’s “war on drugs” is not about prohibition or drug policy, but about terror that is “used against the population in cities and rural areas”, terror that facilitates “foreign direct investment and economic growth”. In other words:

The violence deployed by the state and justified with claims of combating trafficking can lead to urban and rural populations being displaced, clearing territory for corporations to extract natural resources, and impacting land ownership and property values...It creates institutional (legal and social) conditions that guarantee protection for foreign direct investment, creating the necessary conditions for capitalist expansion and flexible accumulation (Paley, 2014: 34).

Consequently, “drug cartels” are not necessarily trading with illicit drugs. Cartels, as Lomnitz (2019: 97) claims, “rely essentially on the armed privatization of public space, the ransom of public liberties, and the forcible appropriation of public goods”: they are “involved in the regulation of activities as diverse as... mining, fishing, logging, commercial agriculture, street vending, prostitution, illegal gasoline traffic, construction, arms trafficking”. Finally, and crucially, cartels are involved in the business of undocumented migration (París, 2017: 145).

It is also important to emphasize that the “war on drugs” seeks to control through the military and the use of force the social, economic, and cultural changes that the neoliberal policies implemented in Mexico since 1980 brought with them.<sup>2</sup> The neoliberal policies promoted in the country over the last 30 years led to structural changes in Mexico’s economy and society that, in turn, facilitated drug trafficking and the increase in criminal activity in at least two ways. First, the flow of narcotics was further magnified by the neoliberal reforms that increased commerce across the US–Mexico border and facilitated the smuggling of large quantities of drugs (Mercille, 2011: 1642). Second, neoliberal policies have failed to generate jobs or increase wages. On the contrary, these economic policies have “led to a deterioration of essential services and economic conditions, resulting in the exclusion of large sectors of the population from education and employment opportunities” (Gamlin and Hawkes, 2018: 52). Thus, the “mass of unemployed or underemployed in Mexico” has “constituted a perfect supply of desperate labor for the cartels” (Mercille, 2011: 1642). As Gamlin and Hawkes (2018: 52) argue:

The more than seven million young Mexicans between the ages of 16 and 29... who comprise this “industrial reserve army”... referred to derogatively as *ni-nis* since they are neither employed nor in education, have become the waste products of economic restructuring, left with little option but to make a living in the already saturated informal sector... an increasing proportion of which is controlled by organized crime.

The migration industry has thrived in this context. In 2009, the National Commission on Human Rights (NCHR), the country’s highest institution responsible for protecting and investigating human rights violations, reported that every year at least 18,000 undocumented foreign citizens are kidnapped in Mexico (NCHR, 2009). Those kidnapped are taken on different forms of transport, they travel in precarious conditions, sometimes for days, from the place of capture to the premises where they are kept incommunicado: a hotel, a ranch, a “safe house” (the euphemism commonly used in Mexico to name houses in which migrants – or Mexicans – are illegally detained). Once in detention, migrants become victims of ill-treatment, torture, and extortion (Knippen et al., 2015: 19). Men and especially women are victims of sexual abuse.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has demonstrated that migrants are kept in captivity, crowded with more than 400 people. Some migrants reported how they witnessed mass murders in which dozens of people lost their lives; and how they observed

the mutilation or decapitation of their companions, the death of others by hammering, and the dissolution in acid of human remains (IACHR, 2013: 67). The kidnappers – mainly members of cartels – demand sums of money from the abducted migrants or their families that start at US\$5,000 and can be much higher (IACHR, 2013: 51). The ransom payment does not guarantee their release, however (Knippen et al., 2015: 19). Some migrants are killed. Others must perform forced labor. Men are employed as hitmen or vigilantes, and also to transport drugs (IACHR, 2013: 64).<sup>3</sup>

In 2010 the press reported that 58 men and 14 women had been massacred in the state of Tamaulipas. The majority of the 72 corpses were of Central American citizens who were only in transit through Mexico to reach the United States. The government's response at the time was to blame the criminal group Los Zetas. Subsequent investigations into what happened showed that the kidnapping of 72 migrants who were later murdered would have been unthinkable without the diligent participation of multiple state agents (Evans, 2014; Poy Solano, 2014). For months, different police corporations and members of Mexico's National Institute of Migration illegally detained these foreign citizens, for example, when they traveled in passenger buses. Then migrants were handed over to the criminal group Los Zetas, an organization originally formed, and trained, by former members of the Mexican Army.

A cursory glance at this information does not seem to indicate that migrants in transit are victims of atrocious acts as a result of migratory policies that have allegedly been securitized. We seem to be witnessing a process of dehumanization, in which the lives of migrants are considered to be superfluous, unnecessary, disposable, but useful to generate some kind of profit.

### **The securitization of Mexican immigration policy**

The limited literature on this subject conveys that the cause of the abuses currently suffered by migrants is the recent “securitization” of Mexican migration policy (Armijo, 2011; Basok, 2019; Basok y Rojas Wiesner, 2018; Castillo & Toussaint, 2010; Hernández López et al., 2019; INEDIM, 2011; Leutert, 2018; Rodríguez Moreno, 2016; WOLA, 2012). With certain variations and nuances, the securitization of Mexico's immigration policies is understood as follows. First, in the last 15 years, the government shifted its migration policy, which now frames immigration as a threat to national security and, therefore, deploys a series of laws

and mechanisms to neutralize this threat. Second, the United States government is behind this change in Mexico's migration policy (Basok, 2019: 89; Leutert, 2018: 16). Since the terrorist attacks that took place in New York on September 11, 2001, the United States government has perceived documented and undocumented migration to be a potential danger to national security. Subsequently, the argument goes, the United States imposed this vision on the Mexican government.

According to human rights organizations, the securitization of migration in Mexico is *the* reason behind the atrocities perpetrated against migrants in transit. The securitization of migration, these organizations claim, has led to the recent "intensification of migration enforcement operations throughout Mexico", the mushrooming of "new checkpoints in the southern border region", and the deployment of "frequent raids on hotels where migrants are known to stay" (Knippen et al., 2015: 5). This, in turn, "exacerbated the patterns of crimes and human rights violations against migrants" because:

Migration is more clandestine than ever, as migrants and smugglers have sought to avoid the checkpoints and raids that have proliferated... all over the country. This has had an impact on the routes migrants use, inasmuch as they have had to look for alternatives, including traveling on foot, which makes them easy prey for criminal gangs (Knippen et al., 2015: 6).

However, I suggest, this theory should be used cautiously when explaining what is happening in Mexico. There are at least three reasons for this. First, authors promoting ideas about securitization claim that new legal provisions in Mexico currently link the issue of migration with that of national security (Hernández López et al., 2019). That is the case, the argument goes, for the most recent Migration Law in Mexico, established in 2011 (Basok & Rojas, 2017: 3; INEDIM, 2011: 21; Leutert, 2018: 16; Rodríguez Moreno, 2016: 112; WOLA, 2012: 15). However, this is not entirely correct. These authors seem to be unaware that the link between notions of security and migration in Mexican immigration laws is not something new; nor is it something imposed by the United States since 2001. The connection between immigration and ideas about security in Mexico's immigration laws can be traced to the 19th century. The Constitution of 1857, for example, stated that the government could expel foreigners considered "harmful" from the country (Constitución Federal de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, 1857). The Immigration Law of 1909 prohibited the entry into the country of people who were considered a risk: for example, people with "communicable diseases", with "mental illness", people with "epilepsy", the "old", "blind", "lame", "one-

armed”, “crippled”, people with some kind of “deformity”, those “useless for work”, “beggars and the poor”, “prostitutes” (Ley de Inmigración, 1909).

Second, these authors argue that migration policy is securitized because the Mexican government has deployed new practices that significantly affect undocumented migrants (Hernández López et al., 2019: 8). For example, the authorities of the National Institute of Migration, with the help of the Federal Police or the militarized National Guard, install what are euphemistically referred to as “migratory filters” – checkpoints – across the country (Leutert, 2018: 16). It is true that the Mexican government is implementing migratory practices – such as “migratory filters” – that are questionable and unconstitutional. However, these practices were not imposed by the United States as of 2001. They have formally existed throughout at least the last 50 years. The Migration Law of 1930, for instance, established that local or federal security forces could assist migratory agents to carry out their duties (Ley de Migración, 1930). The General Population Law of 1974 allowed only certain foreigners to enter Mexico, only those who were “useful for the country”. The police forces were authorized to assist the immigration authorities. The discretionary deployment of migratory establishments within the country was legally established in the form of “migration filters” and “migratory stations”. Undocumented migration was considered a crime punishable by two years in prison (Ley General de Población, 1974).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, an issue is securitized through language, through a discourse that represents something – immigration, for example – as a threat. Basok and Rojas (2017: 15) argue that the Mexico “continues to portray Central American migrants as a threat to national and public security”. However, these authors provide no evidence to support their claims. In fact, an analysis of official documents, public statements, and speeches shows that something like the opposite is happening. The Mexican government has never suggested publicly that transit migration is a danger. On the contrary, the creation or transformation of immigration laws, and the deployment of migratory practices, have been justified in the name of human rights. For instance, according to the government’s official discourse, police officers are not “detaining” migrants, but “rescuing” them in order to “protect” them. In Mexico, the policies that facilitate the commission of atrocity are authorized and legitimized in the name of human rights.

Mexico is not exceptional in this respect. For example, Williams (2016: 27) has pointed out that the United States government uses human rights jargon to deploy restrictive immigration policies legitimately. Border enforcement efforts are going through a process of “humanitarisation”: “a humanitarian discourse” is “integrated into the way in which border enforcement efforts are both framed and justified”. Williams warns that most academic research on international migration has focused on analyzing the alleged securitization of migration policies, even though “humanitarian discourses” are increasingly “mobilised to justify violent state policies” (Williams, 2016: 28). What happens in Mexico proves him right.

So, the alleged securitisation of migration does not seem to be an entirely convincing explanation. This article focuses on the analysis of what is happening in Mexico. However, the findings of this research may be useful in exploring other cases that have been analysed through the lens of securitisation, cases that could well be understood through a political economy analysis.

### ***“Cheap merchandise”***

The political economy of transit migration and the violence associated with it can serve as an alternative approach to securitization theories. This approach helps us to understand atrocity not only as the result of restrictive migration policies, but as the effect of the confluence of global and local economies profiting from undocumented migration.

In their countries of origin – El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras – migrants are victims of structural violence, “indirect forms of harm exerted by social structures and institutions” (Gamlin and Hawkes, 2018: 53), for instance, poverty and deprivation. They are dispossessed people who are forced to migrate in order to survive. In these countries, “transnational migration is considered the only way to escape both physical and social death” (Vogt, 2013: 769).

Migrants travel to the United States because there they satisfy the demand for labor. Once in the United States, undocumented migrants become a surplus population: “this population is a cheap and accessible source of labor, a reserve army” (Rajaram, 2018: 630). Capital accumulation requires such industrial reserve army “to soak up labor shortages and drive down wages” (Merrill, 2011: 1548). The emergence of a surplus population is not,

however, “an accidental phenomenon” but rather a “structural necessity for the very development of capitalism” (Shammas, 2018: 306). From this perspective, undocumented migrants are “not simply excluded, but included through their exclusion as cheaply exploitable and dispensable labor” (Rajaram, 2018: 628).

Yet, undocumented migrants manage to transfer money back to their impoverished communities of origin. Remittances are an important source of income for many families in Central America. Thus, the labor and exploitation of migrants have value in both the United States and Central American economies (Vogt, 2013).

This cycle of migration has been widely studied from different theoretical angles (Massey et al., 1993). Despite their discrepancies in some conceptual aspects, most existing studies on migration to the United States concur that the endless flow of migrants is made possible by what is known as the “migration industry”: the multiplicity of actors who depend on the money generated by actions that facilitate or constrain migration mobility – for instance: “specialised transportation companies, visa facilitation agencies, labor recruiters, security contractors” (Sorensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012: 1). One branch of this migration industry generates abundant profits from providing services to migrants seeking to enter the United States illegally and obtain the required documents to work there: this includes business related to migrant smuggling, the production of “fraudulent documents such as social security cards, birth certificates, visas, and passports”, and labor contracts (Douglas and Sáenz, 2013: 209; Trujillo-Pagán, 2014: 38).

But there is another branch of this industry that has recently emerged in the United States to criminalize and hence to apprehend, detain, and deport migrants – what is known as the “immigration industrial complex” (Doty and Wheatley, 2013; Golash-Boza, 2009a). There are multiple corporations that establish or extend their business ventures to house immigrant detainees in the United States through contracts with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement. In other words, “one sector that has profited from increased immigration enforcement has been the privately run immigrant detention centers” (Golash-Boza, 2009b: 290). So, in the United States, “to some, undocumented immigrants represented a threat to their way of life”, however, “to enterprising entrepreneurs, immigrants represented potential profit, and to many local officials, immigrants represented the key to healthy budgets and job protection” (Douglas and Sáenz, 2013: 212).<sup>5</sup>

To reach the United States, migrants must pass through Mexico. Yet, the way the migration industry works in Mexico, and how fear and atrocity are a significant part of it, are issues largely ignored by the literature on the subject. Before becoming an inexpensive source of labor in the United States, Central American migrants in transit in Mexico are transformed into commodities: things with a certain economic value that are exchanged, “useful objects of exchange and exploitation” (Appadurai, 1986: 3; Vogt, 2013: 765).

The mass kidnapping of migrants is a lucrative business, which every year generates at least US\$50 million, according to estimates from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR, 2013: 54). Beyond this business, according to a human rights activist, migrants who travel through the country pay between US\$2,000 and US\$9,000 to cover different costs incurred from their countries of origin in Central America to the United States (Interview, 22 August 2013). Most undocumented migrants interviewed for this research said that this money serves to pay one or several *polleros* or smugglers who “guide” the migrants during their journey.

But the money is also used to pay the bribes charged by various state officials. This includes mainly the security forces – members of the traffic police, municipal police, Federal Police, agents of the National Institute of Migration, and personnel of the armed forces – who undocumented migrants encounter during their journey, e.g. in buses, at roadblocks, in bus terminals, on the street. In the United States, state actors benefit from the business of migration by legally constraining migratory mobility. In Mexico, state agents participate in the migration industry by both facilitating and constraining, legally or illegally, the transit of migrants.

Finally, the money serves to pay and keep out ordinary Mexicans. Migrants are perfectly identifiable for multiple Mexican citizens who provide different services at elevated costs, such as taxi rides or a night in a hotel. The cost of these activities comes with a surcharge for migrants because they have no alternative: they either pay or they do not sleep at the hotel or they do not take the taxi. Sometimes these interactions between undocumented migrants and Mexican citizens are accompanied by a threat: either migrants accept the elevated cost of any service or they are warned that they will be handed over to immigration authorities, the police, or a criminal group. If they are transferred to members of organized crime, it is possible that, after extortion, they end up dead or doing forced labor. If they are

delivered to state authorities, it is possible that, after extortion, they end up in a detention center (“migratory station”) and are later deported to their countries – from which they fled to escape death – or sold to an organized crime group in Mexico that will extort them again and then kill them.

This business of migration is visibly successful. It involves not only members of organized crime, but also multiple agents of the Mexican state, for whom migrants are not a threat to security, but rather an opportunity to generate additional income, to enjoy social mobility. Additionally, a considerable number of ordinary Mexicans also take part in this, those not part of organized crime (at least not formally) or of the state. Thus, Central American migrants in Mexico become commodities because they are visibly stripped of all dignity. Commodification, as Sharp (2000: 293) points out, “insists upon objectification in some form, transforming persons and their bodies from a human category into objects of economic desire”. They go through a process of dehumanization. While in transit, as Vogt (2013: 765) has shown, Central American migrants are “valued in various combinations of cargo to smuggle, gendered bodies to sell, labor to exploit, organs to traffic and lives to exchange for cash”. So, the social worth of undocumented migrants “depends heavily on their economic value” (Sharp, 2000: 293).

At the same time, these are commodities that are disposable, because their destruction seems irrelevant. Undocumented migrants in Mexico are seen as “cheap merchandise” (Levi, 1987: 17). As the testimonies gathered for this investigation show, Central American migrants are easily swept away when they are no longer exploitable, when they cannot generate profits, when their bodies or body parts are of no further use. The value of migrants diminishes once they can “no longer be used to extract larger sums of money” (Vogt, 2013: 773). Those involved in the migration industry know that the flow of migrants never stops. Migrants are commodities that can be exterminated because they can easily be replaced.

### **Migrants: “from consumers of goods” to “being commodities themselves”**

In what follows, I illustrate this process of “thingification” (Taussig, 1980: 3) of undocumented migrants in Mexico, though a clarification is needed before moving forward. In the context of Mexico’s war on drugs, it is difficult to delineate a clear taxonomy of perpetrators of abuses. Some “formal” members of cartels were security agents of the

Mexican government in the past. Others are part of both types of organizations: they work for the state and for organized crime, formally or informally – they have multiple affiliations. There are ordinary citizens who do not belong formally to any criminal organization or to the state bureaucracy, but they get involved in wrongful activities and sometimes facilitate cartels' operations or collaborate occasionally in the perpetration of atrocities committed by state officials. There seem to be no clearly defined boundaries between organized crime, ordinary citizens, and state agents, nor between the types of participation that here, perhaps prematurely, I refer to as “formal” and “informal”.

### *Cartels*

The business of migration in Mexico is nourished by the involvement of cartels whose networks reach from the Central American region to the United States. This “industry” expanded and strengthened since 2006, when former president Felipe Calderón launched his “war on drugs”. In the past, *polleros* or smugglers were respected members of the local communities and guided migrants safely in exchange for a quota. Today, migration is the business of armed and murderous criminal groups that traffic migrants and commit unspeakable abuses against them (París, 2017: 136). In the context of the “war on drugs”, cartels saw in transit migration a simple and highly lucrative business and chose to engage in it (París, 2017: 157).

A staff member of a state human rights commission in southeastern Mexico put it this way: the change in the pattern of abuses experienced by migrants is closely related to the diversification of cartels – as they “diversify their activities, they begin to see the migrant as a gold mine” (Interview, 13 May 2013). He concluded, “we are faced with the systematic presence of organized crime gangs that are very aware of the logistical operation of the trains” – freight trains used by migrants to traverse the country.

In my research I frequently heard testimonies of how cartels extorted and killed migrants on trains. A migrant from Guatemala explained how those who traveled with him and had no money left to pay the amount requested by members of cartels were thrown out of the train: “They kicked people off the train; I saw someone whose leg was cut off by the wheels of the train” (Interview, 19 August 2013). A young migrant from El Salvador said: “Yes, I witnessed many cases of migrants that didn't have enough money [to pay criminal

organizations]. They were killed, forced to leave the train or simply thrown out of it... some were shot right there” (Interview, 19 August 2013). Another migrant told me:

I was asked to get off the train by the smuggler. There was a checkpoint, but I was told that that was not a “normal” checkpoint. We kept walking. When we arrived, the persons there were well dressed, heavily armed, they had 4x4 cars, they were “Zetas”. Many migrants could not pay, so they were given a backpack [with drugs] and were told to carry the “package”, which would be collected later [by other members of the cartel] (Interview, 19 August 2013).

This business entails mass kidnapping of migrants who are then extorted, and who are subjected to different forms of exploitation, such as forced labor, prostitution, human trafficking, drug transportation. One migrant survived and described his experience: “I was kidnapped for seventeen days. Between three and five new persons were abducted daily.” Women were raped and forced to prostitute themselves: “women who came back every night sadder, more wounded, beaten”. “We were forced to stand up in front of a wall with our legs wide open”, he continues, “then they [members of the cartel] beat us with a board until we fell to our knees, crying... Those who didn’t pay the ransom were taken outside... [the house by members of the cartel]... to see the stars up close” [to be killed] (NHRC, 2011: 76).

The best explanation of what happens was offered by Federico Mastrogiovanni (2013: 53), an Italian journalist who was one of the first reporters to travel through Mexico alongside undocumented migrants. He observed that the change in the interaction of cartels with transit migration occurred gradually: Central American migrants “went from being a consumer of goods and services” to being a “commodity themselves”.<sup>6</sup>

### *State officials*

The migration industry is possible because of the involvement of many agents of the Mexican government, mainly the security forces. Their participation occurs in three ways: as bystanders, assistants, and executioners.

*Bystanders.* There are state officials who are not victims nor perpetrators of abuses, but who facilitate atrocity with their silence and inaction. Mexico’s NCHR documented that every month more than 30 events of mass kidnapping take place. During each one around 50 migrants are abducted (NCHR, 2009: 11). A migrant from Honduras told his story. He was traveling with a smuggler who sold him to a cartel in the state of Veracruz. He was then transferred to the state of Tamaulipas, in northern Mexico, with another 80 abducted

migrants. They traveled in two buses, 40 migrants in each bus. According to the testimony of this person, there were already 140 migrants in the “safe house” where he was kept in captivity. He was detained for two months (NCHR, 2009: 39). More than 80 people cannot disappear at the same time without security authorities registering it. It is unlikely that criminal groups can detain more than 200 people in a house for weeks without the security forces having information about it.

Multiple migrant testimonies concur that mass kidnapping takes place near the numerous locations where security forces are present, such as checkpoints and military or police offices. Most migrants interviewed for this research agreed that once kidnaped, as they are transferred from one city to another, they pass several checkpoints organized by Mexico’s security forces, but they are never stopped. These state agents know what is happening. They know well the future that awaits these Central American citizens: extortion, torture. The actions of these state agents do not seem to be inspired by any sense of securitization: rather than seeking to capture migrants who are seen as a peril to the nation, they prefer to ignore those migrants when they are kidnapped by cartels.

So far, I have described the role played by some grassroots officials who are in charge of checkpoints or patrolling the streets. But there are many senior officials in the federal government who have abundant knowledge about the corruption of local police officers, about the abuses committed against migrants by security forces, but prefer to act as if they know nothing. I asked a migrant from Guatemala the reasons behind this. He replied:

This is a one million question. Because the government in this country knows that these things are happening, but they do not take action on the matter because they [senior officials] get some benefits out of it in one way or another. I don’t want to talk badly about Mexico, but you can hear it everywhere: [a] certain amount of the money charged to undocumented migrants goes to the government. In the long run, they [senior officials] are also beneficiaries of our money, definitely (Interview, August 2013).

*Assistants.* Other state agents actively collaborate with cartels. A migrant from Honduras who was kept in captivity for nine days told the story of what he saw: “I never lodged a complaint with the police, because I knew the police were involved. Police officers with [a] white shirt and trousers went four or five times to the ‘safe house’ where I was held” (NCHR, 2009: 38). This is how a migrant whom I interviewed in Guatemala narrated his experience in Mexico:

Municipal police officers were on the side of criminals. The police stop by the safe house [where he was kept] every day. Then members of the cartel gave them money, a payment. Otherwise, the police would have helped us to get out, but they didn't. They did nothing to help us (Interview, August 2013).

A migrant from El Salvador explained how he traveled through Mexico:

- \*\* How did you manage to get to the US? Did you travel by yourself or did you hire a smuggler?
- Migrant I hired a smuggler. I paid him 7,000 American dollars. I traveled together with my girlfriend. So, in total, I paid 14,000 dollars.
- \*\* How did you travel throughout the journey? What means of transport did you use?
- Migrant We traveled half the way by bus, and the other half in a van.
- \*\* Whose van was that?
- Migrant It belonged to Mexico's Federal Police.

*Executioners.* Finally, there are state agents who perpetrate abuses. For example, those who illegally detain migrants in passenger buses, bus stations, police checkpoints, or the streets, and then sell them to organized crime groups. One testimony comes from a migrant from El Salvador:

In fact, the criminals are the authorities themselves. The cartel of Los Zetas takes care of people. The Federal Police kill those migrants who complain or those who are kidnaped. At some point during my journey, I was together with other migrants in the hands of smugglers and the cartel of Los Zetas. Suddenly, a group of members of the Federal Police arrived and the smugglers and members of Los Zetas hide themselves. Then, the Police approached us and asked what we were doing. I said that we were doing nothing. But another migrant said we were kidnaped. So, the very same Federal Police detained this guy and handed him over to members of Los Zetas that were allegedly hidden. They killed him right there. The only thing the police did to me was to take away my money and belongings (Interview, August 2013).

Certainly, within this third category of state agents there are also those who actively participate in the migration industry without having links with organized crime. There are officers who illegally detain migrants in order to extort them. Most individuals interviewed for this study talked about the amounts charged by state agents to refrain from detaining migrants. This toll guarantees the freedom of migrants until they arrive at another police checkpoint or encounter another migration official. One useful example: a migrant from Guatemala explains how the Federal Police put a checkpoint on the highway. The police stopped an ordinary passenger bus, most of the passengers were Mexican, but there was also a group of Guatemalan citizens traveling in it. The Federal Police forced all the passengers who, according to their racial and racist criteria, appeared "Central American" to get off the

bus. Only the Mexicans who could prove their nationality were allowed to return to the bus. The Guatemalans were illegally detained while the police requested a bribe from the “smuggler” who accompanied them. When they obtained the sum of money they requested, the police halted – arbitrarily and, again, perhaps unconstitutionally – another passenger bus passing through that road and forced the driver to transport the Guatemalans (Interview, 20 August 2013).

### *Ordinary Mexicans*

The brutal and large-scale business of transit migration is often assisted by ordinary citizens who do not necessarily form part of organized crime or the state bureaucracy. I have identified at least three ways in which they do this: as beneficiaries, collaborators, or perpetrators.

*Beneficiaries.* Regardless of whether they make the trip alone, in groups, or accompanied by a smuggler, migrants take taxis, eat in humble restaurants, and spend the night in modest hotels. But migrants are usually required to pay a higher price than the standard rate. A human rights officer offered an example:

It is an impressive generation of money. That is, everyone benefits. In the neighborhood of Lechería, a 600-milliliter Coca-Cola bottle costs 30 pesos for a migrant, plus the businesses where they eat, plus the businesses where they are allowed to sleep. This, all that population, Internet cafes... the costs, phone calls to their homes, to their countries of origin... I mean, that is why I say this, it is a matter of [generating] money. Migrants generate an impressive amount of money and ordinary citizens [benefit] from this (Interview, 13 February 2014).

Similar events happen in pharmacies:

I went to a store because I had a very upset stomach, severe diarrhea and I told him [the person in charge of the pharmacy]: “Hey, can you sell me some pills?” And he sold them to me at a much higher price than they were worth. It seems they were worth three pesos, it was some Alka-Seltzer or something for diarrhea... and I got two pills for \$10 (Interview, 19 August 2013).

The extreme occurs in places where migrants must pay for things that are normally free: “if I wanted to put salt in the food they charged me 3 pesos” (Interview, 23 August 2013).

*Collaborators.* There are ordinary Mexicans who are not formally members of cartels, but who actively collaborate with them. According to a human rights activist in Guatemala, “safe houses” in Mexico can operate, in part, because many ordinary citizens assist those

running them in various ways: taxi drivers serve as informants, money changers help with money transfers from Central America or the United States, food vendors (Interview, 19 August 2013). Some neighbors, particularly poor and unemployed youngsters, act as lookouts.

*Perpetrators.* The story with which I started this article illustrates the role of perpetrators well. Two young Hondurans were tricked by a rancher to follow a path that led them to a garbage dump. Once there, two ordinary and armed Mexicans assaulted them.

Federico Mastrogiovanni (2013) documented the case of a 19-year-old Honduran kidnapped by a family of ordinary Mexicans. He was gay. While he was kept in captivity, he was raped, beaten, and extorted. Several days passed, the family took him to a “safe house” in another city, where he was awaited by a cartel that forced him to practice prostitution in brothels. The people who captured this person and then sold him to a criminal group were not members of any cartel; they were a common family: “A family that used to live off coffee farming is now dedicated to assaulting defenseless migrants” (Mastrogiovanni, 2013: 152).

### ***Conclusions***

This article offers a critical view of what is taking place with transit migration in Mexico, giving an alternative perspective to the dominant literature that currently exists on the subject, which is based on the idea of securitization. Restrictive immigration laws and practices are not new, they have existed in post-colonial Mexico for decades and are founded on racial and racist premises. In practice, as this article showed, state officials do not detain migrants because they are considered a threat to national security, but because they make economic gains from them. Moreover, cartels and ordinary Mexicans participate in this industry too. They are not inspired by ideas on national security, but they are behind the mass kidnapping, mistreatment, torture, disappearance, and death of thousands of Central American citizens who cross Mexico every year.

Hence, this article explored the political economy of transit migration in Mexico. It sought to understand the unspeakable abuses suffered by migrants as one of the effects of local and global economies that generate profits from migrant mobility. In Mexico, the migration industry is possible because Central American migrants go through a process of “thingification” and gradually become “cheap merchandise”. Before reaching the United

States, Central American migrants are traded in Mexico as disposable commodities whose exploitation generates different kinds of opportunities: economic, in social mobility, to show and feel power. Migrants' lives are socially induced to transience.

Let me conclude this article with a final thought about victims and perpetrators. Central American migrants and their families are resilient. The disappearance and death of thousands of migrants in Mexico has recently led to the creation of dozens of non-governmental organizations in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. These organizations are mainly run by migrants who crossed Mexico and were deported to their communities of origin, or by the mothers, wives, and sisters of migrants who are missing. These organizations have created links among themselves, building transnational networks that seek to influence Mexico's migration policies. These organizations have succeeded, to some extent, in re-humanizing migrants so that they are no longer seen as objects.

Yet there are also migrants who went from being victims to being perpetrators of crimes. Those providing testimonies collected for this research concur that some migrants become involved with criminal organizations to kidnap other migrants. Some even formed their own criminal organizations to traffic or scam their compatriots and families. As Vogt (2013: 773) found in her research on migrants in transit through Mexico: "money is thicker than blood".

This article provided a detailed account of how members of organized crime and ordinary citizens perpetrate abuses against migrants. But, to some extent, are some of these perpetrators not also victims? As I explained before, the neoliberal economic policies of the last 30 years have led to the deterioration of the standard of living of the majority of the population in Mexico. More than half of the population lives in conditions of poverty. Millions of young people in Mexico have no choice but to work in the informal economy, which is largely controlled by organized crime. This includes the migration industry. Like migrants, these groups of dispossessed people in Mexico are victims of structural violence: poverty and deprivation.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The interviews were carried out in 2013-15 and should be read against the period of the "drugs war" from 2006 to 2015. Since then, the "drugs war" has persisted and the findings can plausibly be extended to the present.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1983, Mexico transformed its economy and adopted neoliberal policies based on the International Monetary Fund's recipes. This meant lower government borrowing to discourage high fiscal deficits, freely-floating currency exchange rates, cuts in government subsidies that affected rural farmers, lower corporate taxes, relaxing rules that obstruct foreign direct investment and competition, free trade policies, and the privatization of public assets. This led to a decrease in wages and salaries, and a significant rise of unemployment.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the perpetration of serious abuses against migrants takes place mainly on the routes they take to travel through Mexico from Central America to the United States. There are two main routes. The first crosses eastern Mexico through the states of Veracruz and Tamaulipas to enter the United States through Texas. The second crosses the western part of Mexico, through the states of Oaxaca, Michoacan, Sinaloa and Sonora, to enter the United States through California and Arizona. Most migrants from El Salvador and Honduras take the eastern route, while a significant number of Guatemalan citizens take the western route.

<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that the link between security and migration has been the same over the past 50 years. Certainly, that link has evolved over the years (Guevara Bermudez 2014). What this article seeks to highlight is that the relationship between security and migration is not new, as most studies on the securitization of migration in Mexico tend to believe.

<sup>5</sup> The fact that it is more difficult for undocumented migrants to cross the US border has resulted in the proliferation of smugglers and the increase in their fees, and has also contributed to criminal groups in Mexico taking part in the business of migration as it is seen as an increasingly lucrative business. Thus, the immigration industrial complex in the US has a clear effect on the situation of migrants when they are in transit through Mexico.

<sup>6</sup> Certainly, one can be both a consumer and a commodity at the same time, and produce profit for others in both capacities.

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