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THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE ACROSS THE AMERICAS

SOLEDAD ÁLVAREZ VELASCO

As a result of new global and regional migratory patterns, migration has been on the rise across the Americas. In the past decade, two extended migratory corridors have emerged, connecting the Andean Region with Central America, Mexico and the US towards the north, and with the countries of the Southern Cone towards the south. Products of power relations around migrant mobility and control, these corridors have given rise to new geographies and new forms of mobility. How the tension between undocumented migrant mobility and reinforced border control regimes across the Americas gives rise to spatial and temporal transformations is the subject of ethnographic research carried out by scientists at the Heidelberg Center for Ibero-American Studies.

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What do La Peñita, a Panamanian village near the border with Colombia, the Mexican towns of Tapachula and Tijuana, Huaquillas in Ecuador and Arica on the border between Chile and Peru have in common? From a traditional cartographic view, it would seem that, apart from all of them being border towns, these Latin American localities do not share any other features. In fact, however, they are key stepping stones for global migrants travelling north to the US and south to other Latin American countries. Because of this, these seemingly disconnected locations are simultaneously spaces of mobilities, control, crossing and waiting times.

Spatial connectors between the Americas

Since the second decade of the twenty-first century, every month about 2,000 undocumented migrants in transit to the US reach La Peñita from countries as distant as Nepal, Bangladesh and Cameroon, but also from Cuba or Haiti. This border town, and Panama as a whole, are spatial connectors between the Americas through which roughly 25,000 undocumented migrants from all over the world annually transit from south to north. The effects are felt as far afield as Tapachula and even Tijuana, localities that receive these diverse thousands of migrants in transit to the US.

If La Peñita is a global connector on the path northwards, Huaquillas plays the same role on the journey southwards. Haitians, Dominicans, Cubans, Venezuelans, Ecuadoreans, Colombians and, to a lesser extent, African migrants pass through this Ecuadorean border town. In 2019, people from 130 different countries reached Huaquillas and more than 700,000 departures were counted at the official checkpoint. Whereas many migrants stay in Peru, hundreds continue southwards. That is why South American, Caribbean, and African migrants, after transiting Peru, reach the Chacalluta border on their way to Arica, many of them continuing on into Argentina. When reading the map of the Americas, it becomes clear that a global diaspora on the move, comprising undocumented migrants in transit, articulates the Andean Region with La Peñita, Tapachula, and Tijuana to the north, and Huaquillas and Arica to the south.

New forms of migration

The new millennium brought a transformation of global migratory patterns, and the Americas were no exception.

Many migrants from Asian and African countries, prompted by conflict, war, and restrictive immigration policies adopted in Europe, arrived searching for refuge and intending to reside there, while others have used South American countries as stepping stones on their undocumented transits to the US. Simultaneously, the deepening of systemic inequality and poverty and the effects of climate change in Latin American and Caribbean countries have increased traditional transits of undocumented Latin American and Caribbean migrants to the US. In response, US anti-migrant policies have intensified, leading to more violence across transit routes and diversions of migrations to South American destinations. In addition, the massive Venezuelan exodus since early 2016 has resulted in incessant continental transits, primarily within South America.

Undocumented transit migration is not only part of the new geography of migration in the Americas, but is reshaping that geography. One of the ways in which it affects the continental map is through the spatial and temporal production of two extended migratory corridors: 1) a northern corridor connecting the Andean Region, Central America, Mexico, and the US; and 2) a southern corridor connecting the Andean Region with Southern Cone countries – with La Peñita, Tapachula, Tijuana, Huaquillas, and Arica being just some of the Latin American localities constituting them.

Mobility, control, and spatial production

In its annual “World Migration Report” (2020), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) pinpoints the following as the most relevant corridors in the Americas: Mexico – US, El Salvador – US, Cuba – US, Dominican Republic – US, Guatemala – US, and Venezuela – Colombia. However, migratory corridors are more than unidirectional movements between two bounded territories. Following Lefebvre, they should be conceptualised instead as contingent and heterogeneous spaces of dispute produced from power relations.

Shaped by capitalism, human mobility is one of the central dynamos of the social production of space. In fact, capitalism dictates the speed and rhythm with which bodies (or objects) can move, including where and how they move. Mobility, control, and space are mutually constitutive. Controlling migrant mobility has been a sine qua non function of nation-states since their inception, legitimising two state fictions: a sovereign dominion over a territorially “fixed” bounded space, and the governance of a national population differentiated from those presented as non-nationals. It also feeds national capitalist accumulation by regulating the entry and exit of exploitable labour embodied in migrant workers. The tension between mobility and control resides at the heart of unequal global geographical development and its border regimes. This tension explains the



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Heidelberg Center for Ibero-American Studies

Das Heidelberg Center for Ibero-American Studies (HCIAS) ist eine 2019 gegründete zentrale wissenschaftliche Einrichtung der Universität Heidelberg an der Schnittstelle zwischen Geistes-, Sozial- und Verhaltenswissenschaften. Es beschäftigt sich mit interdisziplinären Fragen, die die Makroregion Ibero-Amerika betreffen – Lateinamerika und die Iberische Halbinsel sowie die damit historisch oder sozioökonomisch verbundenen Regionen. Damit ergänzt das HCIAS die institutionellen regionalen Schwerpunkte Südasiens, Ostasiens und Nordamerika und trägt zur Profilschärfung der Area Studies an der Universität Heidelberg bei. Geleitet wird das HCIAS von dem spanischen Sprachwissenschaftler Prof. Dr. Francisco Moreno-Fernández, der 2019 mit einer Humboldt-Professur an die Universität Heidelberg wechselte.

Die Forschungsaktivität des HCIAS richtet sich auf das globale Thema „Räume und Dynamiken“, das den Rahmen definiert, in dem sich die Forschung den sozialen, kulturellen und umweltbedingten Realitäten Lateinamerikas mit all ihren inneren und äußeren Entwicklungen, Transformationen und Verflechtungen nähert. Innerhalb dieses Rahmens entsteht ein ganzheitliches Netz aus Perspektiven, das sich in drei allgemeine Bereiche gliedert: soziale Transformationen und soziale Kohäsion, Globalisierung und Mobilität des kulturellen und natürlichen Erbes sowie gesellschaftliche und kulturelle Kommunikation.

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production of migratory corridors like those shaping the new geography of the Americas. These are abstract spaces which exist as products of historical and social circumstance. Accordingly, migratory corridors should be conceived as transnational social spaces, products of power relations around migrant mobility and control.

To capture the spatial complexity of migratory corridors, it is worth focusing on one type of migrant mobility, such as undocumented transit migration. From the autonomy of the migration perspective, this type of mobility should be conceived as a contingent social force that responds to systemic violence and the current border regime that criminalises this movement in its insistence to control it. During crossing and waiting times, migrants deploy practices and strategies of solidarity and care while negotiating with the various actors of a heterogeneous border control regime. These (im)mobility practices constitute migrants' spatial and temporal struggle; a struggle to sustain their lives and one that shapes these migratory corridors.

The northern corridor and US interventionism

The unequal geographical development of the Americas is one major reason behind the historical formation of the northern corridor. While the US economy is the largest globally, Latin America and the Caribbean represent the most unequal regions on the planet. Although this geo-economic inequality has colonial roots, it is inexplicable in the present without considering postcolonial US interventionism across the Americas, which has had undisputed and severe socio-economic consequences in Latin America and is key to understanding the formation of the northern corridor. Since the 1970s, Latin American and Caribbean people have migrated mainly to the US to escape hyper-precariousness, accompanied by ever increasing mobility restrictions (like visa regimes) imposed by the US. More than fifty years of migration from Colombia and Ecuador have given rise to a highly profitable illegal economy built around undocumented transits and “coyoterismo”, as migrant smuggling is locally known. Over the past four decades, undocumented transits of Asian and African migrations to the US via Ecuador and Colombia have likewise continued uninterrupted.

To contain this incessant global migrant mobility, starting in the 1990s and with much higher intensity in the post-9/11 context, the US not only tightened but externalised its control mechanisms to the immediate geographic space. This is another way in which US interventionism operates in the present. Under security cooperation agreements, Mexico has imposed visas for unwanted migrants in the US; its border agents are trained by the US; it has re-doubled border police and military presence; and it shares with the US programmes for identifying, detaining, and deporting migrants. US border control practices have also been put into practice in Guatemala and Honduras to halt regional and extra-continental migration north.

Unlike Mexico or the abovementioned Central American countries, Andean countries like Ecuador or Colombia have so far not taken deliberate action to halt undocumented transits. Panama and Costa Rica, for their part, have created the “Controlled Flows” programme with the support of the IOM to manage undocumented transits to the US. This programme includes biometric controls upon arrival in Panama and a two-week waiting period in camps set up by the government and the IOM to receive migrants before they are transferred by land by militaries to Costa Rica, where a similar protocol is in place to facilitate transits to Nicaragua. This programme conceals, however, other forms of control that force migrants to take more lethal routes. Without any state protection, migrants from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean cross the Darien jungle in a perilous and sometimes fatal eight-day journey to Panama. In this jungle, it is not the state which exerts control but Colombian self-defence as well as drug trafficking groups.

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The Darien jungle thus takes part in the governance of migration: the complex dynamics of the jungle slow down migrants' mobilities while increasing the lethality of the northern corridor.

The southern corridor

If we now look southwards, we find that intraregional migrations are constitutive of South American migratory formations, yet these types of mobilities do not explain in themselves the character of the southern corridor. The conceptual key that I propose is that migratory corridors are the product of the tension between mobility and control. From this analytical premise, it is only through the recent reinforcement of border control that we can understand this spatial formation dating back just a decade.

Unlike the northern corridor where the US is the leading destination, in the southern corridor Peru, Chile, and Argentina are possible destinations. For example, upon arrival, Senegalese and Nigerian migrants transit via irregular land routes from Ecuador to Argentina, where there is a large Senegalese and Nigerian community. Because south-south crossings such as these have proliferated, South American border control has redoubled. Leaving aside its migratory progressivism, between 2010 and 2020, Ecuador imposed visas on more than 29 countries, including Cuba, Haiti, Syria, Senegal, and other “Global South” nations. Argentina imposed visas on Dominicans in 2012 and Haitians in 2019, a measure which Chile adopted in the same year. Moreover, migratory policies have turned increasingly restrictive in Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Argentina, limiting regularisation processes or denying

asylum, redoubling police and military border presence, and deporting more regional migrants.

The response of South American states to the Venezuelan exodus has not been the most welcoming either: since 2016, on several occasions, they have closed or militarised their borders, confining Venezuelan migrants to long waiting times in squalid cross-border campsites managed by the UNHCR and the IOM. Amid waiting and crossing times, the Venezuelan “trocheros” and “caminantes”, as undocumented Venezuelans call themselves, travel in extreme conditions. Some cross the Paramo of Berlin in Colombia and others the Paramo de El Ángel in a difficult detour to reach Ecuador undetected. Among those who continue to Peru, some traverse the Amazonian jungle and those who aim to reach Chile have to travel hostile stretches of the desert to Arica. Like the Darien jungle, these southern wild geographies also claim the lives of those attempting to brave them. Although paramilitary forces or the cartels are not present in the southern corridor yet, accounts of Venezuelan trocheros confirm that they face abuse from authorities and assaults along the route. As in the northern corridor, military, police, humanitarian and illegal practices derived from coyoterismo co-exist around these mobilities.

Global control of mobility

The tension between mobility, embodied by thousands of undocumented regional and extra-continental migrants in transit, and control is provoking spatial and temporal disputes across both corridors. Despite the contrasting nuances between them, especially regarding their history

TRANSNATIONALE RÄUME

MIGRATIONSERFAHRUNGEN ZWISCHEN NORD- UND SÜDAMERIKA

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Mit einem Zustrom von Migrant*innen aus den Ländern Afrikas und Asiens sowie der inneramerikanischen Migration von Lateinamerika in die Vereinigten Staaten haben die jüngsten Veränderungen globaler und regionaler Migrationsmuster auch die Länder Nord- und Südamerikas erreicht. Dieser Beitrag analysiert, wie das Spannungsfeld zwischen undokumentierter Durchgangsmigration und Migrationskontrolle zur räumlichen und zeitlichen Bildung von zwei großen Migrationskorridoren auf den beiden amerikanischen Kontinenten geführt hat: Ein Korridor führt von den Anden über Zentralamerika und Mexiko in die USA, der andere verbindet die Andenregion mit den Ländern des Südkegels.

Auf der Grundlage von Erkenntnissen aus der Mobilitätsgeographie, der kritischen Migrationsforschung und der Grenzforschung schlägt der erste Abschnitt dieses Beitrags einen analytischen Rahmen zur Untersuchung dieser räumlichen und zeitlichen Korridorbildung vor. Mithilfe von historischen und ethnographischen Belegen wird die Dynamik beider Korridore kurz beschrieben sowie die Rolle untersucht, die die Externalisierung der US-Grenze in Nord- und Südamerika bei diesen räumlichen Dynamiken gespielt hat und noch immer spielt. Zum Schluss werden neue Forschungsansätze beleuchtet, die sich aus der Corona-Pandemie und ihren Auswirkungen auf die Mobilität von Migranten sowie auf die Migrationskontrolle in Nord- und Südamerika ergeben. ●

JUNIORPROF. Dr. Soledad Álvarez Velasco hat am King's College London (Großbritannien) zum Thema Humangeographie promoviert. Vor ihrem Wechsel an das Heidelberg Center for Ibero-American Studies (HCIAS) im September 2021 war sie als Postdoktorandin am Department of Comparative Cultural Studies der Universität Houston (USA) tätig. Soledad Álvarez Velasco befasst sich mit den Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Mobilität, Kontrolle und räumlichen Veränderungen in Nord- und Südamerika. Ihr besonderes Interesse gilt der Schnittstelle zwischen undokumentierter Süd-Nord-Durchgangsmigration, Grenzschutzsystemen, der Bildung von Migrationskorridoren auf den amerikanischen Kontinenten und den leidvollen Erfahrungen der Migranten bei der Durchquerung dieser transnationalen Räume. Daneben beschäftigt sie sich mit den irregularisierten Bewegungen unbegleiteter Migrantenkinder und der Dynamik transnationaler Schleusernetzwerke entlang der Migrationskorridore auf dem Kontinent.

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„Migrationskorridore sollten als transnationale soziale Räume betrachtet werden, als Produkt der Kräfteverhältnisse zwischen Migrantebewegungen und Migrationskontrolle.“

and violence, the parallels in how they work indicate that the Andean Region has a notable role as a historical connector to the north and, recently, to the south. Both corridors are part of a systemic form of global control of mobility where the military, police, humanitarian organizations, the state, and para-state groups seek to control the mobility of specific impoverished migrant populations. Increasingly, both corridors are dominated by control practices that confine migrants to face further risks and even death. In the absence of state protection for their lives, the migrant struggle in both corridors cannot but be redoubled: practices of care and solidarity materialized in sharing migratory knowledge to caring and protecting themselves when crossing borders or facing multiples forms of violence. Solidarity en route radically contrasts with state hostility and inaction to protect migrants in transit across both corridors.

Migrant mobility and control during the pandemic

The Americas enter the third decade of the twenty-first century spatially and temporally reconfigured by the mobility of a diverse global diaspora that shows no signs of ceasing but rather increases as a result of the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, which has intensified the tension between mobility and control across the continent. In several countries, the current health crisis has justified a perverse combination of health and control policies, resulting in a de facto state of exception in migration matters that has given rise to new migration laws, reinforced visa schemes, stricter asylum policies, and a redoubled military border presence. In the northern corridor in particular, transit routes and borderlands have turned into battlefields, as under the pretext of containing the spread of COVID-19 transiting migrants have been beaten, gassed, detained, and deported without due process, in open violation of their rights.

The Americas is the continent most severely affected by COVID-19, where the effects of vaccine equality are evident, exacerbating its already hyper-precarious realities. However, despite border closures, migrant mobilities have redoubled since mid-2020. So far in 2021, at least five migrant caravans have traversed the northern corridor, comprising mostly Central American migrants and, to a lesser extent, South American, Caribbean, African, and Asian migrants aiming to reach the US to find refuge. That explains why, thus far this year, the US-Mexico border has recorded historic peaks in detentions and deportations.

Transits across the southern corridor have also multiplied and taken new directions. Given the Latin American economic collapse and its anti-migrant turn, Haitians and Venezuelans, for instance, residing in Brazil, Argentina or Chile, have undertaken land transits to reach the US. This suggests that the southern and northern corridors do not

operate in a disconnected manner since migrant mobilities articulate them.

What comes next

The pandemic thus opens up new avenues of research regarding, 1) spatial and temporal interconnections between northbound and southbound migratory corridors across the Americas; 2) the devastation of migrants' living conditions and the exacerbation of undocumented transits through both corridors; 3) regional socio-economic and political pressures that these transits place on societies and states along both migratory corridors; 4) new ways in which the US externalises its borders across the Americas; 5) reinforcement of the heterogeneous Latin American migratory control regime and its damaging effects on the migrant population; and 6) forms of migrant resistance and survival during crossing and waiting times in a highly hostile, racist and xenophobic environment.

Capturing and decoding these complexities is not easy. Turning to ethnography, including digital ethnography, seems to provide a path toward capturing them. By adopting a historical and multiscale perspective and turning our attention to the migrant experience, it is possible to decode the spatial and temporal transformations that take place across the Americas as migrants negotiate hostility and solidarity as well as waiting and crossing times in an incessant struggle against a reinforced border regime. Their mobile lives have unfolded and will continue to unfold against a backdrop of intolerable precariousness, a direct product of destructive contemporary neoliberalism. Their collective transits are not to be stopped – they are, indeed, the contested path to preserving their lives, a struggle that today reshapes not only migratory corridors but the Americas as a whole. ●