

Explaining Migrant Caravans: Research hypotheses, academic activism or conspiracy theories?

Explicando las caravanas migrantes: ¿hipótesis de trabajo, activismo académico o teorías conspirativas?

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The study of migrant caravans is extremely relevant, given the implications these movements have entailed for U.S. and Mexican migration policies, the actions implemented to reinforce hemispheric border security, and changes in the conditions of traveling and crossing borders over the American continent for undocumented migrants in recent years. This phenomenon has contributed to transform the dynamics of irregular or undocumented migration in our hemisphere, the demographic composition of migration flows, as well as the behavior of human smuggling networks along the migration routes and at the borders of North America, Central America and other countries. As a part of this process, there is an increase in the number of “unaccompanied migrant children”, while seeking asylum becomes a resource increasingly resorted to by migrants or refugees, who move in groups that comprise a growing number of women and children (Hallock, Ruiz Soto, & Fix, 2018). The inception of migrant caravans has also had an important effect on the Mexican and U.S. political electoral debates (Correa-Cabrera & Bersin, 2018).

In recent years, some actors have accompanied and facilitated the transit of migrant families, adults and unaccompanied children toward the Mexico-U.S. border in a relatively well-organized manner. In the context of a very dangerous journey toward the United States, pro-migrant activists, nongovernmental human rights advocacy organizations, as well as members of the Catholic Church have supported, accompanied and even promoted new forms of migration in larger groups and also widespread asylum requests from migrants from

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Central America, regions of the south of the continent and other countries of the world. It is also necessary to recognize the fundamental role of human smugglers (also known as *coyotes*), who in exchange for a fee facilitate new human mobility processes (Ruiz Marrujo, 2001; Spener, 2009; Slack and Whiteford, 2010; Izcará Palacios, 2014; Martínez, 2016).

These new dynamics gained noticeability by mid-2014 with the so-called “crisis of the unaccompanied migrant children” (Solalinde Guerra and Correa-Cabrera, 2019); migrant caravans were born in this period as well, though initially they did not receive a lot of attention internationally. Then, two types of caravans were identified over the years: one organized days before the Holy Week, called *Viacrucis Migrante* [Migrants’ Way of the Cross]; and a second one (formed during the last quarter of the year), which gathered relatives of migrants who disappeared in Mexico (París Pombo, 2018). It was not until 2018 that this phenomenon began to receive international coverage, and was later generalized and repeated over time. Hence, migrant caravans became an option for those who wanted to travel apparently safer across Mexico, and did not have the resources to afford the fees charged by smugglers or organized crime. Such actors facilitate the journey—which ends up being rather unsafe—in exchange for substantial amounts of money (Sieff, 2018). In this context, migrant caravans multiplied once they were thought of as an actual possibility to reach the United States.

The phenomenon of migrant caravans acquired special relevance during Donald Trump’s administration and its political use became evident. Before the mid-term elections in the United States in 2018, a large caravan congregated thousands of migrants, largely Hondurans, and had important implications on two fronts. On the one hand, it strengthened the base of support for Donald Trump and his party, as its coverage increased the anti-immigrant sentiment, and justified the restrictive migration policies implemented then (Andersen & Bergmann, 2020). Some individuals close to Trump perceived a crisis at the border, and maybe were afraid of an immigrant “invasion” of the United States. On the other hand, supporters of and politicians affiliated with the Democratic Party in the past Trump’s administration gave images of the caravan a political use and outlined a deep criticism of the migratory and asylum policy of the then republican president (Correa-Cabrera, Koizumi, Gomez-Schempp, & Kulkarni, 2020).

A significant number of academics and journalists have researched and written about these migration phenomena (El Colef, 2018, 2019; Hernández-Hernández, 2019; Martínez, 2019; Peña & Rodríguez Castro, 2019; Pradilla, 2019; Valenzuela Arce, 2019; Varela & McLean, 2019; Pérez Caballero, 2020; Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, & Narváez Gutiérrez, 2020). These works focus almost exclusively on the “push” factors of Central American irregular migration, such as extreme violence and poverty, which cause massive forced displacements. Most of them suggest there are neither clear leaderships nor professional organizers, but spontaneous displacements. They also underscore the alleged benefits of traveling in caravan, however many of them only examine the journey from the point of origin to the border line without analyzing the consequences of these movements in the long term. Such narratives

describe this sort of phenomena as exodeses of people displaced by destitution and gangs, who are desperate and look for security by traveling in groups. Some of these works even interpret these new modalities of migration in large groups as a form of insurrection, self-defense or coordinated resistance (with no leaderships) among the participants, in the face of Mexican and U.S. restrictive migration policies (Varela & McLean, 2019).

Many of the studies or journalistic reports published so far about migrant caravans — which were previously mentioned— show important conceptual and methodological limitations and do not manage to adequately explain the origin, development or consequences of this type of movements. In spite of the above, some of these analyses provide the discussion with relevant elements to better explain the cause of displacement and to defend the rights of migrants and refugees. In fact, caravans are organized in a context in which an important number of people has weighty reasons to join them. These mobilizations, however, do not seem to be totally spontaneous. Bearing in mind the conditions under which these migrations started, it would be worth asking various questions that seem relevant.

Why do individuals join the caravans instead of looking for more conventional ways (perhaps more effective, as they are less visible) to enter into the United States? As previously expressed, there exist reasons that might make migrating in caravans attractive, it considerably reduces costs and does away with some of the risks of traveling with human smugglers, who are oftentimes linked to other groups of organized crime. All in all, there are problems with this logic nevertheless, for many of these people do not manage to enter into the United States and frequently end up trapped in conditions of poverty and insecurity in Mexico. In the end, these individuals are forced to look for a *coyote* to cross to the other side. What do the people who travel in caravan think will occur once they reach the border with the United States? Considering the migratory policies and strong restrictions for undocumented migration —mainly in the United States— why don't these individuals initially travel secretly over known clandestine routes and instead prefer to be part of a very visible group excessively monitored by government authorities?

The congregation of migrant caravans does not seem to be a merely spontaneous or “organic” phenomenon; in other words, it does not seem to be exclusively explained by structural factors or traditional pull and push factors of migration. In reality, a deeper analysis of these recent phenomena suggests the existence of external actors and factors that contribute to explain such mobilizations. Various opinions—in Mexico and the United States (including those of governmental authorities in both countries)— have pointed at several individuals or groups (such as *Pueblo Sin Fronteras*) who directly supported the creation, organization and transportation of members of migrant caravans (Correa-Cabrera & Bersin, 2018; Esquivel, 2019). Similarly, in July 2019, the Financial Intelligence Unit—an agency of the Secretariat of the Treasury and Public Credit of Mexico (SHCP for its acronym in Spanish)— blocked bank accounts of persons and organizations who presumably had “participated in human smuggling and the illegal organization of migrant caravans”

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(Expansión Política, 2019, s/n). Recently, this same agency “detected that some migrant caravans that travel along Mexico’s migration routes toward the United States receive money from criminal organizations involved in human smuggling, which are located in various parts of the Middle East and Africa” (Valencia, 2020, s/n).

At first sight, it is not clear who has or have been behind the migrant caravans. However, everything seems to indicate that such phenomena are not totally spontaneous and partly respond to agendas or incentives from external actors, organizations or specific countries. In the case that caravans had been effectively organized (or supported) by external actors, other questions arise: Who are the organizers? Which are their goals or agendas? Why do they participate? And, who are their allies and financial supporters?

With the aim of better understanding these phenomena, it seems appropriate to resort to social movement theories (Jenkins, 1983; Buechler, 1995; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Tarrow, 1998). This would consider a context in which the economic, political and social conditions in the countries of origin —that is, the pull and push factors of undocumented migration— do not vary too much. Simultaneously, other elements that are central for developing this type of theories have to be considered, such as:

... substantial material resources, concrete political opportunities (such as the mid-term elections in the United States), well-articulated leadership and effective framing processes —including the effective use of formal means of communication and social networks to cover these phenomena at the national and international levels (Correa-Cabrera, Koizumi, Gomez-Schempp, & Kulkarni, 2020, p. 8).

Taking this into account, we performed a preliminary research project that explains the creation of migrant caravans, focusing on their organizers and the groups they represent. The goal of this work was to identify and analyze the main organizers of migrant caravans and related movements, their specific role in the process of formation and support of this novel form of mass migration, as well as the role of the organizations they belong to (Correa-Cabrera, Koizumi, Gomez-Schempp, & Kulkarni, 2020). With the aim of understanding these links and interactions among the main actors, we applied *social network analysis* as part of the methodology and established specific categories to assess the role of each actor and organization in the migrant caravans support network and related movements.

Through this analysis, it was possible to verify the relationship that exists or existed between: the activists who were decisive for the mobilization of several caravans, U.S. politicians, communication media, civil society organizations, and personalities of the entertainment industry. These actors —many of them of U.S. origin— are part of a larger network related, to a certain extent, to “progressive” movements in the United States and other parts of the world. They are also related to radical groups (some of them self-identified as “anarchists”) and certain non-governmental organizations, whose functions are not always clear, or else, they are complex. Some of them may be related to U.S. political-electoral

processes or even geopolitical interests (Correa-Cabrera, Koizumi, Gomez-Schempp, & Kulkarni, 2020).

The actors analyzed in this study may relate to movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the Women's March, demonstrations against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) in Standing Rock and campaigns of important political leaders in the United States (such as Bernie Sanders and other members of the Democratic party). At the same time, some interact and send messages through social media platforms —some of them managed in other continents (Yaworsky, Correa-Cabrera, & Gómez-Schempp, 2021). Our preliminary study suggests the existence of a complex network of political-electoral (maybe economic) interests, supported by international communication media.

Considering this context, there is a possibility of collusion between activists and 'professional' organizers of social movements and other political and economic interests, even maybe geopolitical, which are more difficult to identify. The dynamics are not clear and there is still much more to investigate. What seems to be interesting is that some of the recent mobilizations supporting migrant caravans and mass migrations overall, in addition to having an organic or spontaneous component that comes from the genuine necessities of vulnerable populations (or populations at risk), respond to interests that may have a transnational origin; such origin would seem to be located in developed countries, e.g., the United States.

The results of our research are still preliminary and there are specific questions regarding the caravans, their creation, development and consequences we must still try to answer, among them: Who actually benefits from these movements? How do they impact border policies in Mexico and the United States? Are they related to political events and geopolitical processes? What is the role, in these new forms of migrations, of politicians and other actors (for instance, human smugglers) who engage in transnational illicit activities?

This work is relevant because it demonstrates the importance of applying scientific methodologies and the outlining of alternative theories to analyze complex phenomena (e.g., social movements theory). Many of the works published on migrant caravans from Central America are, in the light of more recent research and some official data, extremely limited (Martínez, 2019; Pradilla, 2019; Pérez Caballero, 2020; Varela & McLean, 2019).

The authors of some of these texts tend to avoid a focus on the participation of external actors in migrant caravans maybe because of particular ideological biases or identification with pro-migrant causes, or plausible because they consider that human rights will be violated if they do so. Moreover, the haste in developing some of these research works, the lack of rigor of others or affiliation to groups related to such movements may also explain some of these biases.

Although we recognize the value of many of these works (for example, Valenzuela Arce, 2019; Gandini, Fernández de la Reguera, & Narváez Gutiérrez, 2020) —especially with regards to the promotion of solidarity, furthering of integration, fighting xenophobia and

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advancing the defense of migrant rights in Mexico—, we also identified various fundamental problems that characterize some of them and which limit our overall understanding of the phenomenon. For example, the work by Varela and McLean (2019), which considers caravans as new forms of migrant self-defense, exemplifies a sort of academic activism that denies any external interference in these migration movements and tends to romanticize the phenomenon, thus obscuring the human smuggling component linked to these phenomena and violations of human rights by those materially or politically benefitted from indirectly organizing this sort of mobilizations. It is thus suggested to consider and to analyze thoroughly the works that oppose these perspectives (for instance, Correa-Cabrera, 2020; Ludwig, 2018; Rodeback, 2020), as well as research by governmental agencies (such as the one carried out by the Financial Intelligence Unit of the Mexican government), which refer to possible external interference in these mobilizations (Expansión Política, 2019; Valencia, 2020).

Taking these considerations into account would enrich the research hypotheses and add rigor to the overall research and incipient literature on migrant *caravanology*. The considerations about reflexivity and positionality (Corlett & Mavin, 2018; UKEssays, 2018) are also basic for academic studies on migrant caravans. It is desirable, mainly in the social sciences, to incorporate all the possible perspectives with the aim of verifying and rejecting valid hypotheses, and contributing more rigorously to the understanding of phenomena with strong human, social, political-electoral and maybe geopolitical implications. What is more, better reflection and wider acceptance for visions that contrast with our own ideologies are welcome, since understanding migrant caravans is not an issue of perceptions or aspirations with no scientific support, but of realities that may be materialized as human tragedies. The alleged *new forms of self-defense* and *transmigration* usually turn into unfulfilled promises, permanence in violent and unsafe territories, abuses from criminal groups or corrupt authorities, and even into death.

According to recent research and media commentaries (see Correa-Cabrera & Bersin, 2018; Solalinde Guerra & Correa-Cabrera, 2019), testimonies of various actors—including migrants, activists and governmental authorities of Mexico and the United States—and data from agencies such as the Financial Intelligence Unit in Mexico, denying the participation of external actors in the organization and political use of migrant caravans seems to be a mistake. Academic activism is valid, though in some cases it seemingly clouds our understanding of complex phenomena. Biases in journalism and propaganda design also contribute to legitimize certain political agendas. Finally, it is important to mention other type of works that disqualify research that opposes their vision or ideology; characterized by limited analyzes or insufficient field or documental research. Considerations on reflexivity, positionality and power relations are fundamental in qualitative research, mainly in case studies (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) so as to ensure the highest ethical research standards (UKEssays, 2018).

An instance of a research project that lacks analytical rigor with noticeably biased conclusions is a work recently published in this very journal entitled *Consideraciones sobre las teorías conspirativas aplicadas a las caravanas de migrantes* [Considerations regarding the conspiracy theories applied to migrant caravans] (Pérez Caballero, 2020). The author of this article decisively denies the possibility of coordinated participation of external actors—as political or economic interests—in the organization and support of migrant caravans. The article explains such phenomenon as “a novel way of traveling due to its swarming features” (Pérez Caballero, 2020, p.1). Although this narrative is interesting, as it is related to military doctrines (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2005), it lacks empirical evidence that verifies its main postulates. It is worth underscoring that such analysis is extremely simplistic and lacks explanatory power since it completely ignores the foundations of the most basic theories of social movements. Moreover, it overlooks the presence of actors whose role is fundamental in this sort of mass migration movements, such as human smugglers and other characters or key groups with economic, political-electoral and possibly geopolitical agendas.

The most problematic aspect of the work described above is that it disqualifies any study, declaration from authorities, or official research (endorsed by governmental authorities) that contradicts “the swarming doctrine” and the essentially organic nature of migrant caravans. It is even stated that these other narratives are conspiracy theories. Possibly considering Popper’s critique of these alternative theories, Pérez Caballero (2020) also disregards other perspectives that contrast with his vision and which suggest some sort of conspiracy or action organized by actors. In his limited and biased analysis, Pérez Caballero ignores—or maybe is not aware of—the interesting criticism of Pigden (1995) to the Popperian analysis of conspiracy theories. This critique recognizes the explanatory power of hypotheses on conspiracies and affirms that “the belief that it is superstitious to posit conspiracies is itself a superstition” (Pigden, 1995, p. 3).

Another serious problem of the work by Pérez Caballero (2020) on migrant caravans is his unsubstantiated allusions to an alleged “Jewish conspiracy factor”, when he refers to some attempts to explain the participation of external actors in the organization of caravans. Let us think, for example, of those that have focused on the supposed participation of George Soros’ *Open Society Foundations* (Solalinde Guerra & Correa-Cabrera, 2019; Ludwig, 2018; Rodeback, 2020). It is true that in various political circles, specially in those formed by conservative groups in the United States, and in certain discussion forums—in which the voices of nationalist actors or groups dominate—the supposed or possible participation of the *Open Society Foundations* in the organization of migrant caravans is sometimes referred to (Ludwig, 2018; Peláez, 2018; Rodeback, 2020).³ In spite of the above, such theories do

³ It has also been stated (largely by conservative or nationalist groups) the possible participation of the U.S. State Department, via the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This hypothesis distinguishes the relationship that such agency has

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not seem to be groundless and have some support (but based only on preliminary data). What is more, they do not seem to have a conspiracy bias and much less are necessarily antisemitic.

It is possible to partially assess the origin of the funds received by some of the nongovernmental organizations (or civil society organizations) that have directly or indirectly supported migrant caravans. It is worth underscoring that at present, the results of these efforts do not allow us to conclude in a definitive manner on this topic. However, some of the organizations and instances that have provided support in various manners, or favorably covered the formation of migrant caravans, have received funding from (or have kept a relationship with) the *Open Society Foundations*, or from other foundations and organizations supported by them, such as *Fundación Avina* and the Central America and Mexico Migration Alliance, CAMMINA (a program of Hispanics in Philanthropy, HIP).⁴ In order to verify such links, see Hispanics in Philanthropy (2018) and *Fundación Avina* (2021). It is worth noting that Albicker, Ezeta and Pérez (2017) coordinated a report for CAMMINA, in which they present a mapping of organizations and migrant support networks that helps to understand some of these relationships (if one compares their funding sources and operation links).

The study of the funding sources of the actors that support caravans is still preliminary and it is not possible to conclude definitively or decisively in this regard. Notwithstanding the last, it is indeed possible to identify some links between George Soros' *Open Society Foundations*, some of their partners, support networks for irregular migrations and migrant caravans. It is also possible to distinguish certain nongovernmental organizations, communication media and even programs of academic institutions directly or indirectly funded by *Open Society Foundations*, which have supported —either through their rhetoric or more directly— the creation of migrant caravans or else, have made a favorable coverage of them (Correa-Cabrera, 2020).

In this network of actors and groups, participate several civil society organizations and some communication media such as Amnesty International, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Human Rights Watch, *Pueblo Sin Fronteras*, *Al Otro Lado*, Border Angels, No More Deaths, *Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración*, IMUMI [Institute for Women in Migration], The Intercept, *El Faro* digital newspaper, *Animal Político* [Political Animal], *la red de casas del migrante* [the Network of Migrant Houses] (which supported the caravans and some of the organizers, such as *Casa del Migrante* in Saltillo, *FM4 Paso Libre*, among

had with the *Open Society Foundations*. However, it is worth underscoring that up to this day, no evidence to validate this idea has been presented.

⁴ The accusations that mention antisemitism as a response to any criticism or mere reference to the founder of *Open Society Foundations*, or their organization, without analyzing the context or specific argument are groundless. The authors of the present work strongly condemn any manifestation of racisms or antisemitism and express their absolute respect for everyone's beliefs, religion, ethnic origin, identity or social condition.

others), *Programa de Asuntos Migratorios de la Universidad Iberoamericana*, PRAMI [Program for Migratory Issues of Universidad Iberoamericana], Front Line Defenders, and many more (Correa-Cabrera, 2020).

Effectively, some of these organizations and media have received financial support from the private philanthropic organization of George Soros. Noticeable are the cases of ACLU, Amnesty International, *El Faro*, Front Line Defenders and *Animal Político*, through *Editorial Animal S. de R.L. de C.V* [Animal Publisher, roughly an LLC]. All this information is verified in the website of *Open Society Foundations*, the internet sites of these organizations, or else, reviewing 990 forms (Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax) which the philanthropic organization files with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) of the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

Although there is much more research to conduct in order to explain in a comprehensive way the formation of migrant caravans, and also to verify the involvement or not of the *Open Society Foundations* in them, the relationships we have outlined and the hypotheses that might be stated from them are part of a valid exercise, which should not be underestimated. The observations presented here are supported by a rigorous analysis and concrete evidence, and not just based on superstition.

Likewise, our efforts to understand the caravan phenomenon are not defined by ideological stances. Serious journalistic or academic works that put forward the presence of external factors to explain migrant caravans (Solalinde Guerra & Correa-Cabrera, 2019; Correa-Cabrera, Koizumi, Gomez-Schempp, & Kulkarni, 2020) —and even those propositions that suggest a role of the *Open Society Foundations* and are still subject to verification— cannot be considered disinformation or conspiracy theories in a derogatory sense, as proposed by Pérez Caballero (2020).

Similarly, it is impossible to find in those works and in their arguments a *Jewish conspiracy factor* or an antisemitic bias. They are simply part of an academic exercise, or journalistic investigation to find explanations of a very complex phenomenon such as migrant caravans, which has changed, to a certain extent, the dynamics of undocumented migration and has had important effects on migration and development policies in a number of countries of the continent. Political contests and hemispheric power relations —particularly in the United States— allow putting forward hypotheses as the aforementioned ones, under the assumption that they are, so far, merely research hypotheses.

Finally, it is important to stress the idea that the formation of migrant caravans or migrations in large groups that have been recently observed do not only respond to the external factors mentioned in the present article (which possibly comprise nongovernmental organizations with a political agenda, human smugglers and even other forms of organized crime), but are also fundamentally explained by the existence of structural reasons; that is to say, they have a clear organic, or spontaneous, component.

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Many of the migrants who have travelled in caravans experienced starvation, destitution or extreme violence, which displaced them from their original territories. Moreover, it is undeniable that many of those who travel in caravans, find a less expensive, safer way to travel toward the United States. In spite of the above, it is difficult to imagine that migrant caravans of such dimensions as the one formed in October 2018—which besides remained united and kept growing over thousands of miles—is organized without the support of external actors (maybe even human smugglers, professional activists, among others) to facilitate the process, perhaps with specific goals.

Translation: Luis Cejudo Espinosa

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