

Jorge A. Bustamante, His Contribution to Migration and Border Studies

Jorge A. Bustamante, su contribución a los estudios sobre migraciones y fronteras

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Jorge Bustamante founded the first Center for Border Studies (CEF NOMEX, for its acronym in Spanish) in Latin America in 1982.² His legacy can be attested in a consolidated research institution, with offices in six cities along the Mexican border and a broad presence in the national and international academic field. Yet these notes are intended to rather highlight his intellectual contribution to migration and border studies.³

In the 1960s and 1970s of the 20th century, sociological studies on migration in Latin America debated between the neoclassical (Todaro, 1969), structural-historical (Singer, 1972), and modernization (Germani, 1969) approaches, focusing mainly on the study of massive migrations from the countryside to the city within the framework of industrialization and the social and cultural changes that defined Latin American urbanization. The imprint of this production in the study of international migration can be seen in, among other aspects, the privileged units of analysis—such as the family and the local community—as well as in the analytical frameworks of a national character, heavily focused on the economic adjustment programs that affected peasant societies.

Because of its early beginning, Mexico is an exception in the history of international migration among Latin American countries. The pioneering studies of Manuel Gamio and Paul Taylor were already available in the first part of the 20th century. By the 1970s, undocumented migration had gained attention within the framework of Mexico-United States relations from scholars such as Alba-Hernández (1976), Cornelius (1978), Ojeda (1978), and Jorge Bustamante (1975, 1978)

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² The Center for Border Studies of Northern Mexico (Centro de Estudios Fronterizos del Norte de México) changed its name to The College of the Northern Border (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte) in 1986.

³ These notes are based on Velasco (2021).



himself.⁴ With this background, the field of study of Mexican migration to the United States fully developed already in the 80s, informed by various disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. A classic example of interdisciplinary study is the book *Return to Aztlán: The social process of international migration from Western Mexico*, by Massey, Alarcón, Durand, and González (1987), which presented the theoretical perspective of cumulative causation and evidenced the role of social networks as mechanisms for the reproduction of migration over time.

The works carried out by Massey et al. (1987) combined the anthropological and sociological approaches in the study of communities of origin and assess the impact of labor treaties between countries on the creation of social networks for capital accumulation and the effect of migration policies in the expansion of such networks by undocumented migrants (Massey et al. 1987). This work had an important impact on migration studies in Mexico during the 1990s, placing migrant networks as the most important mechanism for the reproduction of migration, thus moving away from push-pull approaches to the study of international migration.

However, as pointed out by Zolberg (1999), in the 1990s the literature on migration was skeptical about the effectiveness of migration policies in shaping the forms and dynamics of migration flows, particularly those coming from countries with contiguous borders, as in the case of Mexico. In this context, the work of Bustamante (2000) took up various elements of the migration and border history between Mexico and the United States, among them the early racialization of Mexican immigrants (Zolberg, 1999; Andreas, 2003; Alonso, 1994), given the annexation of Mexican territory during the 19th century, and the early *illegalization* of Mexican migration, contradictorily arising from the Bracero Program itself, and which gave rise to the expression “wetbacks” (Ngai, 2005).

By identifying the effects of U.S. migration policies on the Mexican migratory social order, Bustamante’s contribution (1989)⁵ extends to the conceptualization of the border region between the two countries as an adjacent and asymmetrical space, but with high social interaction. Such conceptualization reflects the intellectual influence of Mario Ojeda (1978), who coined such a vision of neighborhood inequality when characterizing the structure of relations between Mexico and the United States.

⁴ In the 1970s, El Colegio de México served as an important intellectual space for the emerging field of studies on undocumented migration from Mexico to the United States, through its journal *Foro Internacional*.

⁵ Border issues began to attract academic interest in the late 1970s, as can be seen in Bustamante’s review (1989, pp. 7-24) of the First National Symposium on Border Studies (Primer Simposio Nacional sobre Estudio Fronterizos), organized by El Colegio de México and held in Monterrey in 1979. By then, Bustamante (1975) had already published *Espaldas mojadas: Materia prima para la expansión del capital norteamericano*.

The termination of labor programs in the 1960s and the consequent expulsion of temporary contract workers⁶ gave rise to a wave of studies focused on the social consequences of the return of Mexican migrants and drew attention to the urgency of investments that would mitigate the growing unemployment in the border region (Fernández, 1980), and of studying the northern Mexican border (Bustamante, 1978).

In the 1980s, Mexican border studies soon focused on three lines of inquiry: a) the impacts of migration on the late urbanization and industrialization of border regions (Fernández-Kelly, 1984; Alegría, 1989); b) the emergence of a border culture linked to cross-border interaction and the immigration flows attracted by the thriving maquiladora industry (Iglesias, 1985; Valenzuela, 1988; García, 1990), greatly influenced by the academic production of Chicano scholars (Vélez-Ibáñez, 1996); and c) the study of the border as a space for circulation and undocumented crossing (Bustamante, 1989, 2000).

Jorge Bustamante's contributions subscribe to these three lines, with derivations that concern both border studies and those of international migration. As for the conceptualization of the border, there was an implicit controversy over it being defined as a binational region due to its adjacency, or as a cross-border region due to the interactions taking place there. In terms of this, Bustamante adopted a Weberian approach and conceptualized the border as a relational space holding cross-border interactions of different kinds, marked by asymmetry (Bustamante, 1989) as it responds to the corresponding national logics as well as to the empirical relationships regionally located between both countries.⁷

As for migration, while studies in the 1980s and part of the 1990s focused on the places of origin or destination,⁸ Bustamante's contemporary studies focused on clandestine crossings, circular mobility, and border control by the United States. This approach characterized the intellectual production of Bustamante and laid the foundations for understanding the tension between the fluidity of daily border interactions, with a strong impact on culture, and the closure of the border for poor undocumented migrants. Along this second line, clandestine crossing, circulation, and State control were seen as constitutive processes of the border itself.

Focusing on the phenomenon of clandestine crossings and circular mobility gave rise to a novel vision of geopolitical borders as spaces of asymmetry and inequality (Ojeda, 1978; Bustamante, 2000) resulting from asymmetric levels of economic development, whose main indicators were the wage differential and the unilateral control of the border by the United States. The study of border crossing controls, as well as of the dynamics, magnitudes, and conditions of crossing,

⁶ The Bracero Program operated from 1942 to 1964 through the hiring of Mexican laborers to work in fields, mainly.

⁷ See Alegría (1989), who showed how border dynamics rather responded to the respective national dynamics than to those of an integrated region, so that asymmetry was more impactful than regional interaction on cross-border urban structuring.

⁸ Simultaneously, interest began to arise on the consequences of the 1986 amnesty program (IRCA) on migration for family reunification.

turned into a research program with a novel methodology at the continental level for the study of migration flows, first of undocumented migrants, later expanding to potential crossers and return migrants.

In 1987, Bustamante created the Zapata Canyon Project (Proyecto Cañón Zapata),⁹ whose goal was calculating the number of migrants crossing into the United States using a quite original technique based on photographic records obtained from a hill in the city of Tijuana (Bustamante, 2000), while also conducting interviews at the most common crossing points in several cities bordering with the United States. For the first time, the relationship between undocumented crossings and border controls became a topic of systematic research in Mexico, and a distinction was made between other irregular cross-border mobilities, such as commuters without work visas and visa abusers (Bustamante, 2000, p. 18). This project was the seed of the current Survey of Migration in the Northern Border of Mexico (EMIF Norte, for its acronym in Spanish), which dates back to 1993. Through a probabilistic sample representative in space and time, the EMIF constitutes, at a continental level, the most ambitious project on the measurement and characterization of international migration flows.

To date, the EMIF holds an almost three-decade battery of databases, including migration flows from south to north and north to south on the Mexico-United States border. As of 2004, it was extended to the Mexico-Guatemala border (EMIF Sur, for its acronym in Spanish). Over time, the research program on migration flows opened the path to important public policies. The Zapata Canyon Project contributed to the creation of the Paisano Program (*Programa Paisano*) and the Beta Group (*Grupo Beta*)¹⁰ for the protection of migrants at crossing.¹¹ Subsequently, the role of Jorge Bustamante as UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants (2005-2011) allowed him to make the vulnerability of undocumented migrants, both adults and minors, visible at the

⁹ Name of the site through where many undocumented people used to cross from the city of Tijuana, since at the time there was no border wall there. On-site interviews were carried out until 1998 (Bustamante, 2000).

¹⁰ Detailing how the knowledge generated by research translates into public policy is beyond the scope of these notes on the intellectual legacy of Jorge A. Bustamante in the field of migration and border studies. However, it should be pointed out that according to an interview granted by Bustamante to a correspondent from the magazine *Proceso* (Ponce, 2012), his strategy followed three steps: researching with scientific rigor, disseminating the results of his research in broad forums, and carrying out constant diligence at the federal level for the creation of both programs. See the experience of Beta Group (*Grupo Beta*), which started as a pilot program to protect migrants in Baja California in 1990 (Weiss & López, 2011), after negotiations by Bustamante with the federal government, after documenting the abuses suffered by migrants on their journey and border crossing on the Mexican side. The disclosure of such findings brought tension and risks for him and COLEF (acronym in Spanish for The College of the Northern Border), as he recounts in the abovementioned interview (Ponce, 2012).

¹¹ I wish to thank María Eugenia Anguiano for the accuracy of this information.

international level, based on scientific evidence, also anticipating the humanitarian crises witnessed today in the world.

Yet beyond the various specific impacts on policy, the measurement and characterization of migration flows from the 1990s made it possible to have reliable data, produced under scientific methodology by a Mexican research center, thus not depending on data from the then Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for the systematic registration of processes crucial for Mexico.

More than three decades later, Jorge Bustamante's contributions continue clarifying the relationship between the current immigration and border control regimes with the dynamics and conditions of human mobilities, which are increasingly complex and diverse in the face of increasing inequalities, violence, and political crises on the continent. Jorge Bustamante influenced migration policy from academia, constantly claiming the importance and role of science to provide specific and reliable knowledge. In addition to his conceptual contributions, the creation of the EMIF constitutes a legacy that transcends the institution itself and belongs among the achievements of science in Mexico.

Translation: Fernando Llanas

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