

(Im)Mobility Nodes in Southern Mexico. Tapachula as the Epitome of Border Externalization

Nodos de (in)movilidad en el sur de México. Tapachula como epítome de la externalización fronteriza

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformations in social dynamics within Tapachula, Chiapas, located at Mexico's southern border, a strategic node for south-north American migratory corridors. Through a review of processes that have consolidated the externalization of migrant management, extending U. S. border enforcement into this region, the study documents how social interactions have been reconfigured in the area using ethnographic techniques. Findings reveal tensions that stem from forced coexistence between migrants in contexts of (im)mobility and permanent residents; this has exacerbated social and institutional antagonism in an area historically accustomed to cross-border transit. This dynamic has heightened the vulnerability of those traversing these routes. The study's relevance lies in demonstrating how transnational migration control mechanisms manifest as localized forms of social interaction within waiting territories along migratory routes, deepening inequalities and reshaping community relations.

Keywords: 1. migration management, 2. southern border, 3. migration in transit, 4. Chiapas, 5. social dynamics.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se analizan las transformaciones en las dinámicas sociales de Tapachula, Chiapas, al extremo sur de México, nodo estratégico de los corredores migratorios americanos sur-norte. Mediante una revisión de los procesos que han consolidado la externalización de las gestiones migratorias, que han extendido el control fronterizo estadounidense hasta esta región, se registra cómo se han reconfigurado las interacciones sociales en el sitio aplicando técnicas etnográficas. Los resultados evidencian tensiones derivadas de la convivencia forzada entre personas migrantes en contexto de (in)movilidad y residentes permanentes, lo que ha intensificado el encono social e institucional en una zona históricamente acostumbrada al tránsito fronterizo, incrementando la vulnerabilidad de quienes la atraviesan. La relevancia del estudio radica en mostrar cómo estos mecanismos transnacionales de control migratorio se traducen en formas específicas de interacción social en los territorios de espera a lo largo de las rutas migratorias, profundizando desigualdades y transformando relaciones comunitarias.

Palabras clave: 1. gestión migratoria, 2. frontera sur, 3. migración en tránsito, 4. Chiapas, 5. dinámicas sociales.

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INTRODUCTION

Southern Mexico has undergone significant growth in contemporary migration processes, which have gradually intensified since the beginning of the 21st century until reaching the peak of migrant concentration during and after the COVID-19 health crisis. The diverse migrant populations in this region, coming from different parts of the world, represent the convergence of American migratory corridors, originating in the Southern Cone, from which people are gradually joining throughout the continent, the main destination being the United States. It is in this context that this article identifies, describes, and analyzes recent transformations in the cross-border dynamics of southern Mexico, particularly in the city of Tapachula, state of Chiapas, the main migratory transit point in the region (Rojas & Ángeles, 2023).

The first section begins with a brief description of Mexico's southern border, to then examine the notion of migration management externalization, an expression that serves as conceptual basis for identifying how the limits of territorial control of one nation state are extended to the geographic borders of others. Based on a review of academic and journalistic literature, this first section highlights the extraterritorial migration management mechanisms deployed by means of foreign policy initiatives. These initiatives aim to strengthen border security and contain migrant transit, as well as to implement regional economic development programs that seek to discourage migration, involving countries of origin, transit, and destination. Other forms of externalization are also presented, such as the use of international protection mechanisms and the presence of transnational humanitarian organizations to assist migrants at key transit points.

The second part of this article provides a brief chronological review of border externalization strategies in southern Mexico, based on federal programs and binational agreements on migration implemented since the end of the last century. Next, the concrete effects of these policies are analyzed through recent ethnographic approaches, constructed from observation and dialogue with people who occupy public spaces in Tapachula. The COVID-19 health crisis marked a turning point in the region's cross-border dynamics; while concentrating and containing large numbers of migrants in the city, it also evidenced the externalization strategies of migration processes, establishing environments of (im)mobility. Social tensions emerged in this context, derived from the prolonged and involuntary stay of migrants, forced to remain in the city for indefinite periods due to the slowdown in immigration procedures.

Towards the end of the article, the diachronic review of the processes that have shaped an externalized border environment will shift to the social dimension, based on the identification and description of the transformations in everyday interactions in public spaces between permanent and temporary residents. Among the situations observed are the emergence of economic practices driven by the migrant presence in Tapachula, the increase in social animosity resulting from forced coexistence between the local population and migrant groups, as well as the collective strategies deployed to sustain the transit, such as the constant organization of caravans and the setting up of temporary camps in public spaces.

CROSS-BORDER RECONFIGURATIONS IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

Mexico's southern borders have gone through various long-standing cross-border processes with Guatemala and Central America as a whole. Other forms of human mobility from South America, the Caribbean, and, in recent years, from different parts of the world (Cinta Cruz, 2020; Rodríguez Chávez, 2016), mostly bound to the United States, have also joined these processes. These spaces encompass diverse migratory profiles, among which undocumented migration is the most prevalent. According to reports from the Migration Policy, Registration and Personal Identity Unit (2024), this form of migration has grown to such an extent that it reached 925,085 registrations from January to August 2024 alone. From a government perspective, this figure highlights the magnitude of the migration processes affecting the country.

Other State data on contemporary migration through Mexican territory were presented by the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR, acronym in Spanish for *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados*) on its website. The report stated, since 2014, there has been a gradual increase in refugee applications in the country, reaching historic records.⁴ At the same time that these applications showed unprecedented growth, the state of Chiapas, and particularly the COMAR headquarters in Tapachula, positioned itself as the municipality that has submitted the largest number of applications for international protection in the country. These statistics, as well as the significant migration flows observed in the region during the first decades of the 21st century, position this municipal seat of Chiapas as the most active point for migratory transit in the area.

Whether due to the increase in undocumented migrants or those under international protection schemes, it is evident that migration flows have reached extraordinary levels in recent years. This situation has become visible on both the northern and southern borders of Mexico, reshaping the cross-border dynamics common until recently. The COVID-19 health crisis exacerbated this situation and triggered processes that highlight the way Mexico manages migration, in line with U.S. immigration policies. These policies are implemented in the south of the country extraterritorially, which consolidates the perception that Mexico acts as an extension of the U.S. border (Varela Huerta, 2019) by remotely managing migration from its southern borders.

Prior to addressing the practices of migration management externalization, it is necessary to start from the premise that southern Mexico has distinctive characteristics compared to the northern context of the country. Although both borders are crossed by complex migration transit processes, they are still particular in different dimensions, such as control mechanisms (Border Patrol, *Guardia Nacional*, army), the actors involved (Mexican migrants, border state authorities, non-governmental organizations), and migration management programs (Migrant Protection Protocols, Southern Border Plan). The northern border has historically been a space for the direct deployment of binational policies with high media impact. The direct border with U.S. territory

⁴ The data is no longer available on the current version of the website.

allows for a constant display of the border spectacle (De Genova, 2018) that the surveillance of the geographical limits by the U.S. State and civil forces represents.

Unlike the southern border, where externalization operates as a literal displacement of immigration controls beyond national boundaries, externalization in the north takes functional forms: it does not transfer physical borders, but rather externalizes responsibilities through extraterritorial asylum policies, militarized cooperation, and diplomatic pressure for Mexico to function as a migration filter (Zaiotti, 2016).

At the other end, in the southern regions, despite the exuberance represented by the area's high levels of biodiversity, pronounced economic precariousness and social inequalities prevail. The ethnic plurality of the region, intensified by the groups that settled there through various migration processes in pre-Hispanic, colonial, and subsequent eras (De Vos, 1992), has forged a multicultural environment conducive to diverse tensions and exchanges between geographical and cultural territories that were fragmented by the imposition of political borders. From a historical perspective, the definition of spatial boundaries in the southern region, both between entities such as Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, and Yucatán—and the territorial fraction that would later become Quintana Roo—and the borders with Guatemala and Belize, was the result of lengthy negotiations and conflicts (Castillo et al., 2006), many of which not only are still latent and unresolved but have also intensified at times, triggered episodes of territorial struggle and spatial disputes (Basail Rodríguez, 2016).

In these areas, historical ties with Central America are evident in the daily population flows and exchanges between regions and countries, driven by migrations that took place over different periods of time (Castillo & Toussaint, 2015; Martínez, 1995). In this regard, it is important to note that, since the formation of the Mexican and Central American Nation States, the region has shared scenarios such as the intensive exploitation of natural resources, oligarchic enrichment sheltered by authoritarian governments and political regimes, as well as the political intervention of world powers. In response to these contexts, social and paramilitary movements, as well as armed indigenous uprisings, have emerged both in Central American countries and in southern Mexico, to challenge the political and economic models that have kept a large part of the population in dire conditions (Pettinà, 2018). The concurrence of all these factors has resulted in an environment of social instability plagued by various forms of violence or threats to the resident and migrant populations. These combined with economic precariousness and other factors such as displacement due to natural disasters or climate change, represent the main drivers of autonomous or forced human mobility.

This brief overview of the southern border areas seeks to not only account for their complexity, but also to highlight how throughout the 21st century, and to a greater extent following the international health crisis, the migration processes that traverse these borders have significantly increased both in volume and diversity of nationalities. Different populations in transit are entering these regions as part of American migratory corridors, understood as transnational social spaces formed and transformed by the passing of diverse migrant mobilities (Faist, 2015), corridors

shaped by conflict, border control, and mobility, which affect the social dynamics of the spaces they cut across (Álvarez Velasco et al., 2021). Given this circumstance, the State response of both the United States as a destination country and Mexico in its role as a transit territory has consisted of the implementation of migration management programs and strategies executed from this transit node in southern Mexico.

The externalization of migration management implies that a destination country's border control extends beyond its geographic boundaries, de-territorializing borders to States of origin or transit (Naranjo Giraldo, 2014). This practice materializes through the militarization of borders, the construction of physical barriers, the signing of international agreements, or the reconfiguration of humanitarian protection frameworks to grant political asylum or refuge. Its rationale is a collaborative discourse between countries involved in migration flows (Santi, 2022), aimed at deterring, slowing, or hindering the mobility of migrants and applicants for international protection. Although the following sections will present specific examples of how these strategies have been implemented in southern Mexico, it is worth highlighting the relationship that develops between the transfer of international funds and the provision of humanitarian assistance.

At the transnational level, one of the most widely used strategies is represented by economic support programs from destination countries to countries of origin and transit of migration, aimed at incentivizing regional development and thus decrease migrant mobility. These economic incentives have been beneficial for countries of origin and transit of migration, but are far from representing a structural solution able to modify emigration rates, as dictated by the nature of their implementation (París Pombo & Díaz Carnero, 2020).

On the other hand, this funding is also intended to fortify border controls, primarily in transit countries or those bordering destination countries, such as Mexico and the United States or Morocco and Spain (Lo Coco & González Hidalgo, 2021; Torre-Cantalapiedra & Yee-Quintero, 2018). Another objective of these agreements has been to reinforce the presence of military or immigration security forces at the borders of transit countries. Surveillance measures have been tightened in these spaces, and physical containment structures have been built as part of a security strategy. These actions have pushed migrants to choose between remaining clandestinely undocumented, forced to travel routes controlled by criminal groups that profit from migrant bodies, or requesting international humanitarian protection, which supposedly guarantees safe passage.

Regarding this dilemma, another tool for the externalization of migration procedures has been linked to the processes of requesting and granting humanitarian protection. This concept refers to a practice that has historically sought the safety of migrants whose personal integrity is at risk in their countries of origin. Humanitarian protection is supported by an international institutional and political framework, made up of legal systems that encourage the development of this protection and that impact the signatory countries of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Fitzgerald & Arar, 2018).

Faced with the constant and numerous arrivals of migrants attempting to enter the United States, transnational policies have been implemented along the Mexican northern border that shift part of the responsibility for managing populations seeking international protection to Mexico, particularly through asylum, granted by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the United States immigration courts. Asylum applications are typically initiated when migrants are already in the United States or at a port of entry. In the context of southern Mexico, the most common application is refugee status, managed by the Secretariat of the Interior through the COMAR, based on the Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum. Although both terms refer to humanitarian protection mechanisms, within the framework of U.S. immigration policy, the term “asylum” prevails, while in Mexico “refuge” is used for applications within the country, although asylum applications can also be initiated through the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs. In both cases, bureaucratic procedures have established frameworks of extended waiting that, in practice, operate as deterrent mechanisms for vulnerable populations, who must endure precarious conditions, uncertainty, and forced (im)mobility (Gil-Everaert et al., 2023; Miranda & Silva Hernández, 2022).

EXTERNALIZATION PRACTICES IN MIGRATION MANAGEMENT

Contemporary migratory transit in Mexico has transcended traditional Central American flows, incorporating multinational and even extra-continental dynamics. As argued, this migration emergency is managed through externalization policies designed in the United States, which position Mexico as a *de facto* safe third country (Morales-Cardiel & Vargas, 2021), despite not acknowledging it officially. On Mexico’s southern border, the epicenter of these extraterritorial controls, administrative and security measures have been implemented, such as the slowing down of bureaucratic procedures that support migratory transit, as well as the strengthening of border surveillance through the *Guardia Nacional*, the army, and state and municipal police forces.

The origin of externalization practices can be traced to the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, as the act that positioned Mexico as a border nation (Ortega Velázquez, 2020). Concurrently, Central American migration, driven since the 1980s by political and economic crises (Castillo, 2005), activated regional strategies aligned with the neoliberal economic-political model. In 1996, the Puebla Process—a multilateral program promoted by the International Organization for Migration—introduced the term “migration management” into American political agendas, associating undocumented migration with threats to U.S. security and holding Central America accountable for its “governmental inefficiency” (Andrijasevic & Walters, 2010). Despite this, mobility continued to grow due to endemic crises in each country, and due to natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

In 2001, the South Plan—promoted by the administration of President Vicente Fox—marked a milestone by linking Mexico’s southern border to the U.S. agenda, using the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as a primary containment barrier (Vega-Macías, 2022). Following Rodolfo Casillas (2002), this Plan eroded Mexican sovereignty by regionalizing immigration control under security

criteria. Nonetheless, in addition to these programs, the consolidation of externalization came with the Mérida Initiative in 2007, aligned with the war on drugs during the presidency of Felipe Calderón. This U.S.-funded policy transferred \$86.6 million between 2008 and 2015 to militarize the southern border (París Pombo & Díaz Carnero, 2020; París Pombo, 2022). The Mérida Initiative resulted in an increase in deportations from Mexico to Central America, surpassing the figures for the United States (Martín, 2015), and in the implementation of systems for recording biometric data for immigration surveillance purposes, which was characterized by a marked lack of transparency in the handling of personal information (Neira Orjuela, 2023; Villafuerte Solís, 2017).

In 2014, the Southern Border Plan (PFS, acronym in Spanish for *Plan Frontera Sur*)—by the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto—intensified these border controls. Justified under the pretense of protecting migrants who traveled in the freight train known as The Beast (*la Bestia*), the PFS militarized strategic communication routes in southeastern Mexico (Castro Neira, 2019). In tune with this state of things, by 2015 the United States was transferring \$10 million annually to Mexico in order to contain migration flows in the south, while the PFS operated as a racist and criminalizing double-talk control policy (Nazario, 2015; Prieto Díaz, 2022). Furthermore, the Haitian migration flows that occurred after 2010, following events such as natural disasters, epidemics, and political crises on the island (Vargas Canales, 2021), as well as the Venezuelan and Cuban exoduses that increased their presence at these borders, formed large groups of people who nourished the migratory corridors from South America and the Caribbean.

Given this scenario, Donald Trump's first administration exacerbated externalization through a zero-tolerance policy, which imposed family separation and other serious human rights violations against migrants, as well as against safe third country agreements with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. It also implemented the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or Remain in Mexico (*Quédate en México*) program, which translated asylum applications to Mexican border cities. Similarly, the Mexico-United States Joint Statement agreed to militarize Mexico's southern border with 6 000 Guardia Nacional troops (París Pombo, 2022), legitimizing the strategy that gave the Armed Forces a greater participation in internal security put into practice by Andrés Manuel López Obrador during his presidential term (París Pombo, 2019), which initially operated under a humanitarian discourse open to migration in transit processes, but ultimately yielded to U.S. pressure.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these dynamics between 2020 and 2023, prompting the United States government to deploy the immigration policy known as Title 42. By this means, 442 000 migrants were expelled, preventing their asylum applications under the pretext of health exception (Pierce & Bolter, 2020). These mass deportations continued even under Joe Biden's administration, exceeding one million people in 2021 (París Pombo, 2022). Despite Biden's suspension of the MPP and safe third country agreements with Central American countries (Guimón, 2021), externalization practices continued to operate on Mexican borders, particularly through the remote management of asylum applications through the CBP One mobile application.

The purported objective of this technological tool was to facilitate the process of entering the United States in a safe, orderly, and humane manner, but in reality its main function was to systematize applications by serving as a remote selection mechanism that collected general and biometric data from applicants (García Alanís, 2024).

With Donald Trump's return to power on January 20, 2025, the CBP One mobile application was disabled as part of a stricter focus on border security. This decision left thousands of migrants stranded not only in Mexican border cities but also throughout the country and along the Andean-Central American migratory corridor. Many of these individuals had previously scheduled appointments through CBP One, so the mobile application's suspension generated uncertainty and concern among the migrant population and the organizations supporting them. Although the mobile application had discretionary overtones and limited scope, it still did away with a legal avenue for entry into the United States. The discontinuation of CBP One also led local authorities in Mexico and organizations in various fields working on mobility issues in border areas to redesign their strategies for assisting migrants stranded in Mexico, seeking alternatives to address the sudden change in the landscape posed by the vacuum left by this tool, as well as the shock caused by the extraordinary restriction measures imposed by the United States.

TAPACHULA, (IM)MOBILITY AND FORCED COEXISTENCE

The movement of people along the territorial boundaries of southern Mexico is part of everyday life and is integrated into its cross-border identity. Cultural and commercial exchanges with Guatemala have a long history, and although they have not been without tension, they are part of a common dynamic in the region. Despite these circumstances, the growing presence of migrants in transit has reshaped these patterns over the last decade, resulting in transformations in everyday dynamics in specific sites such as Tapachula, a focal point of contemporary migration in southern Mexico, where ethnographic research derived from doctoral research was conducted.

An unusual concentration of Haitians took place in Tapachula in 2016, an event that—in the opinion of local residents—marked the beginning of this new period of mobility. These foreigners sought to reach the United States after having previously resided in countries such as Brazil and Chile, from which they left due to the tightening of their immigration policies. Large groups of Haitians stayed for weeks in a temporary camp near the Siglo XXI Immigration Station of the National Institute of Migration (INM, acronym in Spanish for *Instituto Nacional de Migración*), awaiting the issuance of visitor cards for humanitarian reasons. Once they obtained these documents, many continued their journey north. According to some residents, the issuance of these cards was expedited largely due to pressure from the local population. This would be precursory to a series of events that would in turn reshape the border space in response to migrant presence, which would become increasingly visible in the city from then on.

It should be noted that daily dynamics in Tapachula are highly volatile, generally determined by the tension that arises between the implementation of migration policies and the migrant agency's ability to remain mobile. Examples of these variations are perceptible at key moments

such as the organization of migrant caravans since 2018, when the convening and gathering of numerous groups of migrants in the city became commonplace. Another instance was when international, national, and local restrictions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2020 and 2021, generated scenarios of (im)mobility in the city, turning it into a space of indefinite waiting. Another example is the return to power of Donald Trump in early 2025, whose reinforced anti-immigrant agenda has imposed extraordinary procedures that practically eliminate the possibility of entry into the United States. This has resulted in a drastic change that causes uncertainty for those in transit nodes like Tapachula. Adding to this situation is the series of deportations that the U.S. government has carried out since February 2025, Tapachula being one of the recurring destinations for these deportations (Báez, 2025).

The main transformations identified that the city has undergone can be grouped into four areas. First, the (im)mobilities resulting from the limited capacity of immigration and humanitarian protection authorities to address the applications of migrant populations, which is interpreted as a containment strategy. Second, the development of economic practices driven by the migrant presence, which involve various local actors. Third, the growing social animosity among the resident population, caused by the forced stay of migrants. And, finally, migrant resistance practices, such as the organization of caravans and the establishment of temporary camps.

Although the people arriving in the city are of diverse migrant profiles, the lack of valid official documentation is a recurring condition, leading many of them to opt for undocumented migration as the only alternative to escape the crises in their countries of origin. Even with Mexico's supposedly hospitable tradition and diplomatic and political ties with countries such as Cuba and Venezuela, the process of validating transits or granting international protection has been slowed down as a containment strategy.

From the perspective of immigration authorities, particularly the INM, this slowdown is not due to the exceptional nature of the migration situation—as they consider it a reality that will not revert—but rather to the saturation of public services and bureaucratic limitations in addressing the growing number of daily applications (M. Gómez, head of Social Communication at INM, personal communication, July 13, 2023). This discursive contradiction on the part of the institution highlights that, in the face of unprecedented migration scenarios, the response capacity, in addition to being limited, is a deliberate strategy where the inability to address the emergency has become a reality that both migrants and the local population must learn to live with.

Another contradiction in the INM's argumentation is that, if there were truly a willingness to effectively address the emergency, large numbers of people would not be stranded at this border crossing point. Bureaucratic slowdowns and immigration containment practices have led to the collapse not only of immigration services in the city, but also of other areas of daily life, such as access to basic services, food, and healthcare for the migrant population. Faced with this overflow, the official strategy was oriented toward the so-called "migrant depressurization" of the area starting in 2023, through organized transportation by land on State-funded buses (Martínez, 2024). Once they entered the country, this program transported migrants to the capital of the state of

Chiapas, to cities in Oaxaca, or even to the northern borders. However, the infrastructure and scope of these measures did not translate into a significant change in the border situation. The repeated actions of immigration authorities and their inability to address the emergency seem to suggest that there are structural guidelines aimed not only at regulating but also at containing migratory traffic, consolidating Tapachula and the southern region of Mexico as the border gateway to the United States.

A similar situation exists for the COMAR, which, like the INM, declares itself overwhelmed by the number of asylum applications in the city. The institution's so-called "operational challenges" stemming from the growing number of requests are the main reason for the impact on processing times due to limited institutional capacity, which generates delays. The head of the COMAR's Chiapas representation emphasizes that the institution is governed by a solid regulatory framework, based on the Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum, as well as on international law.

This official representative explained that the application process involves initial registration, an eligibility interview, and, if approved, the issuance of a certificate that allows the applicant to work and access basic services. However, given the number of cases received and the fact that the resolution depends on the opinion provided by the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs after contacting the embassies of the corresponding countries, response times are often lengthy. The official estimates that of the up to 1 200 to 1 300 cases that the COMAR has received in a single day, it only has the capacity to handle 200 (D. Anzueto, regional coordinator of COMAR in Chiapas, personal communication, June 9, 2023).

Although this government agency has favorably resolved a considerable number of applications, the main criticism lies in the wait times and the pronounced bureaucratization of the procedure. Moreover, populations such as Haitians, who constitute a significant group among asylum seekers in Tapachula, have a considerably low approval rate. This is because the majority do not come directly from Haiti and, in many cases, their displacement is due to natural disasters and economic crises rather than political persecution or threats to their safety. Contrastingly, applicants from El Salvador, Honduras, and Venezuela have a higher approval rate, since Mexican law considers widespread violence and the risk of suffering cruel and inhuman treatment in their countries of origin as grounds for granting asylum.

Based on testimonies recorded in interviews and informal conversations, on various reports in the local press, and on social media platforms of migrants, as well as on situations observed on-site, municipal police and INM agents are the State actors most frequently reported for illicit practices that profit from populations in transit. According to the Mexican Constitution and the Immigration Law, municipal and state police are prohibited from detaining people based on their immigration status, as only the INM holds that authority. It is however common for these local security forces to arbitrarily harass migrants, demanding money under threat of unjustified detention. The presence of the army, the *Guardia Nacional*, and state and municipal police in immigration operations is meant to be limited to supporting the INM's work, but these activities

ultimately open the door to extortion, harassment, and abuse. For their part, INM officials have been accused of acts of corruption, such as extortion at immigration checkpoints or during raids in the city, where they condition transit in exchange for money. Another form of illicit profiteering occurs through agreements in which INM officials guarantee the expediting of immigration procedures in exchange for undue payments (Orlando, Venezuelan migrant, personal communication, May 29, 2023).

The waiting and uncertainty that arise from these bureaucratic procedures become factors that challenge migrants' determination to continue their journey. The efforts involved in subsisting and staying in the city for an indefinite period are compelling reasons for choosing to continue the journey undocumented, joining the caravan gatherings, or, in some cases, deciding to return. On the other hand, those who can afford the wait form a population that temporarily cohabits in the city, occupying public spaces for various purposes, where economic activity plays a central role in social interactions. This is another of the main transformations in Tapachula linked to the emerging economic practices typical of a border, but intensified by the large migrant presence.

In this direction, Gandini et al. (2024, p. 3) highlight the urgency of studying the political economy of irregular migration in transit, which unfolds in the multiple nodes that make up the American migratory corridors. These economic practices and political dynamics identify the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of goods and services within a broad spectrum that oscillates between formality and informality, as well as between legal and illegal practices. This economy is based on the profits that various actors—State, civil, or criminal—obtain from the transit and subsistence needs of migrants.

The productive and service sectors in the city and the region, such as telephone communication, transportation, food, lodging, and rental of temporary living spaces, are the business and civil actors in this economy that have benefited from the migrant presence in the city. This situation has brought the city's daily dynamics to a critical point, either due to the high demand for goods and services or to the opportunity for profit that sometimes verges on abuse. Under these circumstances, phenomena such as the scarcity of certain products and the cost increase of some services have emerged, which directly impacts the lives of the resident population.

A particularly controversial case in the city is the increase in house, apartment, or room rental prices, which in some cases have doubled. This is due to the fact that some groups of migrants make their transit supported by family networks that cover the costs associated with the journey, this allowing them to pay rates above the fair average. Similarly, hotels and lodging establishments in the city's first district have been transformed into spaces dedicated entirely to migrants, having changed their conventional rates in local currency to U.S. dollars.

At the same time, one of the mechanisms migrants have turned to in order to support their stay during waiting periods has been formal or informal employment. Upon setting in motion the process of refugee status recognition with the COMAR, migrants are assigned a unique population registration code (CURP, acronym in Spanish for *Clave Única de Registro de Población*), which

they can apply for employment with. Due to the high migrant supply, the wages offered are often low, in some cases even lower than the minimum wage (Guillermo, Cuban migrant, personal communication, June 5, 2023). However, the need for income, even if it is scarce, has resulted in the precarization of these activities.

All the same, it is common for most restaurants, bars, and businesses in general to employ a large portion of foreigners. Government and humanitarian institutions have also taken advantage of this low-wage job supply, as evidenced by the initiatives promoted by the Secretariat of Welfare, the Tapachula Municipal Council, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which have implemented job placement programs for asylum seekers or those of refugee status. As a result, cleaning and public works activities in the city, as well as jobs in construction and service companies associated with these programs, are largely performed by the migrant population.

Another strategy to ensure economic sustenance is self-employment, a variant of the informal economy that encompasses a variety of temporary activities that migrants offer to individuals without a contract or basic benefits, but with minimal pay. One of the most common forms of self-employment is the provision of specific trades, such as hairdressing and barbering, which have become popular in the city. It is common to find establishments of this type in different parts of the city, where people of Caribbean, Central, or South American origin offer low-cost haircuts. In the case of people of African descent, Haitians, or Africans, the language barrier has fostered the development of focused economies geared toward fellow citizens. A clear example is hair care, where the particular needs of these groups have given rise to subeconomies *within* the migrant economy.

Alike, commercial activities related to gastronomy, cultural consumption, and other specific products have allowed these communities to establish their own spaces for developing these economic activities collectively. A representative case was observed in Benito Juárez square, adjacent to the central San Agustín Church, where it became common to see groups of African people, particularly Haitians; this space offered haircuts, traditional food, clothing, and mobile phone supplies, among other services, creating a hub for Afro-cultural commerce in the city center. However, this area was shut down when municipal authorities, in coordination with the Diocese of Tapachula, installed fences around its perimeter. This measure not only restricted access to a key space for self-employment and informal commerce, but also highlighted the tension between self-managed work practices and urban policies that prioritize public order over the socioeconomic needs of vulnerable populations.

Another notable self-employment activity is street vending, which primarily takes place in the city's downtown areas. A recurring phenomenon in this type of commerce is once again associated with Afro-descendant groups, who employ wheelbarrows to sell cold drinks and food. Since the city has experienced a significant influx of migrants, wheelbarrows have become a symbol of informal commerce; their proliferation has raised doubts whether these activities are truly

autonomous, or rather respond to organized schemes that employ migrants under certain conditions.

In informal discussions with those involved in this activity, responses have been mixed: some stated that both the wheelbarrow and the products were financed by themselves, while others mentioned that they pay a daily fee for both, similar to a concession system. However, these responses may have been influenced by a distrust of outside questioning. Although this type of commerce can be seen in multiple locations throughout the city and serves a diverse audience, migrant community networks play a key role in its sustainability, prioritizing the purchase of products offered by their fellow citizens as an act of ethnic and cultural solidarity.

The different practices that make up the informal economy can extend to less visible areas within the public sphere, even crossing the boundaries of legality to take place in illicit spaces. Given that these practices occur in environments conducive to their implementation, observing them requires a specific and insightful methodology accounting for their implications and risks; thus, an analysis of this type was beyond the scope of this research. Despite this, two activities were identified that, due to taking place in public spaces, were observable despite being allegedly linked to illicit or even criminal networks.

The first is sex work associated with human trafficking, the magnitude of which has sparked academic interest since Central American migration began to intensify at the end of the last century (Achayra & Salas Stevanato, 2005; Casillas, 2006; Ramírez-López et al., 2012; Ruiz, 2004; Zarco Ortiz, 2018). Commonly carried out in bars and areas of tolerance, this work is often controlled by trafficking networks, involving crimes such as kidnapping, child exploitation, and enslavement. Surrounded by various forms of irregularity, these practices are connected to other illicit, criminal, and violent practices (Álvarez Velasco, 2017), representing a latent risk for migrant women and minors traveling alone or whose precarious conditions increase their vulnerability to these exploitation networks.

The second economic activity that swings between irregularity and criminality is transportation. The need and urgency to cross Mexican territory has been exploited by groups offering transportation to different destinations: from crossing the Suchiate River in inner tubes or rafts—an activity that, although formally irregular, is part of the cross-border economy by moving people and goods in large volumes on a daily basis—to land transportation across the border in the municipality of Suchiate into Tapachula, or even to northern border cities and the nation's capital in clandestine vehicles such as trailers or cargo trucks.

These services are constantly promoted in Facebook and WhatsApp groups, where they also offer services for the irregular issuance of documents, such as voter ID cards, CURP numbers, or refugee status, suggesting the existence of a business structure surrounding these services. However, in the same interactions in these groups and in collected testimonies, many of these supposed companies were stated to have a fraudulent or criminal background, and to have even engaged in kidnapping and human trafficking.

During field observations, the most visible mode of transportation in the city consisted of private vehicles or taxis that transported migrants from Suchiate to strategic points in Tapachula, such as the corner of 5th Street East and 1st Avenue North, or the vicinity of the COMAR. A strategic circuit of activities was identified at these entry points, structured based on the priorities of new arrivals to the city. These priorities center on processing their asylum application to determine their next step: settling in the city temporarily if the application has been granted, or continuing their journey without documentation if not (Bertino, Angolan migrant, personal communication, June 23, 2023). Moreover, a particular routine was observed in this mode of transportation: when the four or six passengers get off the vehicle, the driver—usually a man—takes a photo of them at the arrival site, apparently as proof of completion of the transportation, to send to a higher-ranking contractor.

Although this dynamic might seem harmless and merely irregular, testimonies circulate among migrant and resident populations about how criminal groups have expanded their control over these transportation networks, linking them to other illicit activities, such as human trafficking or drug and arms trafficking. An incident illustrating this concern took place on October 30, 2024, when at the observation point on 5th Street East, a driver who had just dropped off six migrant passengers was murdered with long weapons in broad daylight. This event not only contributed to the perception of insecurity that prevails among the local population, but also reinforced the narrative that associates violence with the migrant presence, triggering xenophobic and racist expressions, as expressed by this resident:

Unfortunately, outside my house, in the early hours, you can hear cars arriving, even emigrants getting out of their trunks. Private cars and taxis. You see, if 20 or 30 cars arrive, it's... carrying migrants. What's going on? Where are the authorities? Are they colluding to take their money? What's going on? Why isn't there any control? Don't they know that these people can bring serious diseases? Seriously, society will deeply regret it. I'm not against them; I repeat, I'm not intolerant of Black people; I don't care about their color. But it's hard to stand being around Haitian people; they have a stench that you would think someone unclogged the toilet, and they haven't flush it for ten days (Mónica, resident of Tapachula, personal communication, June 13, 2023).

The growing sense of insecurity and the rejection of migrants that is expanding among the resident population constitute another of the most significant transformations. Although the area has historically shown openness and flexibility in the face of migration flows, the forced concentration of people in Tapachula in recent years has altered this dynamic. Since the late 20th century, the Soconusco region—and Tapachula in particular—has faced contexts of violence and insecurity due to its border location and its importance for various illicit activities. And still, those who cross this territory toward northern latitudes are often the most vulnerable to these practices (Álvarez Velasco, 2017; Fuentes Alcalá et al., 2022; París Pombo, 2021; Porraz Gómez, 2017).

Added to this is the notable presence of foreigners with racial and linguistic characteristics different from those in the region, a circumstance that heightens the perception of otherness. The

notion of the migrant threat, constructed from the fear of difference, materializes with the proliferation of discourses that emphasize the supposedly negative effects of migration, fueling evident and manifest social resentment among various sectors of the local population.

In the third quarter of 2024, the National Survey of Urban Public Security (ENSU, acronym in Spanish for *Encuesta Nacional de Seguridad Pública Urbana*) conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, acronym in Spanish for *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía*) ranked Tapachula the city with the highest perception of insecurity in the country, as 91.9% of those surveyed considered living there to be dangerous (INEGI, 2024). Although the survey does not establish a direct relationship between this perception and migration, local media outlets such as *El Orbe*, the second most-read newspaper in the region, have linked these data to what they perceive as a local migration crisis. This newspaper maintains an editorial line openly opposed to the presence of migrants, and frequently publishes articles emphasizing alleged harm to the city and society of Tapachula, highlighting stigmas about how insanitary are the spaces temporarily occupied by migrants and their alleged connection to illicit activities.

In conversations with local residents, many of these unfavorable notions seem to stem from the belief that foreigners are displacing the local population from their social spaces and economic opportunities (Carmen, resident of Tapachula, personal communication, June 14, 2023). Furthermore, the visibility of Haitian, Angolan, Congolese, or Cuban communities—whose performativity evidences a distinctive cultural difference—has triggered mechanisms of racism and discrimination in some sectors. In this context, the appropriation of public spaces by migrant populations as an alternative means of subsistence is perceived as an invasion of places understood as their own by the locals.

In critical times, when shelters and humanitarian organizations exceed their capacity to provide care, a situation has arisen where people without sufficient income must resolve their stay through emergency means, such as setting up camps in public spaces. Examples of this are the city's main parks, where temporary settlements have taken place while people regularize their immigration status. These high concentrations of migrants, along with the lack of basic services in these areas and complaints from local merchants, have led authorities to in turn dismantle these camps (Sánchez, 2023), forcing migrants to seek new strategies to stay in the city. Likewise, temporary INM and COMAR units have been set up in places such as stadiums, sports parks, and markets to address overcrowding at the main offices of these institutions. However, the presence of these facilities has generated discontent among the nearby resident population, which in turn has fueled xenophobic discourse replicated both in the media and in the broader public opinion (Blanco, 2022).

This dynamic has generated an information circuit in which it is difficult to determine whether social perception is influenced by official and media discourses, or whether these discourses reflect pre-existing citizen discontent that is then transferred to institutional and communication spheres.

CLOSING REMARKS

Beyond a simple border control strategy, externalization operates as a filtering mechanism for human mobility, allowing countries like the United States to remotely define which people can be considered “desirable migrants” and which should be categorized as “undesirable.” Far from being a sovereign protection measure, this model structures a regime of unequal mobility that intervenes in the migration journey at every stage: from the moment a person considers emigrating, through the broad period of transit and waiting, until their arrival in the destination or return country. In this sense, the border ceases to be a fixed territorial boundary and becomes a rather diffuse and omnipresent technology of control, with local implications that disrupt everyday dynamics.

One aspect this article seeks to highlight pertains the reactions surrounding the perceived economic and social reconfigurations in the city of Tapachula. The massive migrant populations in transit, temporarily settled in the city, are generating unprecedented interactions and social processes in the public space. Migrant presence has driven the creation of an economy largely sustained by support networks and migrant work activities, but it has also fostered the emergence of businesses that take advantage of the migrants’ needs and vulnerabilities for exploitation, stepping into illicit and criminal territory.

In addition to the predominant risk of various kinds of violence in the region, the forced coexistence between the local and migrant populations has generated tensions between both sectors, a circumstance that needs to be studied in depth if we are to understand the true scope of this phenomenon. Summarizing, the externalization of migration management in southern Mexico has manifest effects in various dimensions that have reinforced its paradigmatic status as a migration laboratory, a space where identities converge, and of constant transformation due to its historically unstable, nodal, and transitory nature.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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