Migratory Flows from Central America and United States Border Control

Fluxos Migratórios da América Central e o Controle Fronteiriço dos Estados Unidos

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Abstract

This article examines forced migration from Central America and criticises the US response, questioning the effectiveness of border control methods, particularly biometrics. It explores two US programmes in Mexico, *Frontera Sur* and Remain in Mexico. The review analysed the literature on critical security studies and migration, with a focus on Mexican productions. The results indicate diverse measures employed by the US to deter unwanted migrants, including the use of biometric borders to enhance border security and the implementation of racial and social criteria to allow or prevent the passage of certain individuals. The examination of *Frontera Sur* and Remain in Mexico reveals a US border externalization by making Mexico a buffer state, which hinders migratory flows and creates a vertical border that impedes migrants' journey northward. The article concludes that these measures infringe upon migrants' human rights, limiting their mobility and their pursuit of refuge in the United States.

Keywords: border control; forced migration; United States; Mexico; border externalization.

Resumo

Este artigo examina a migração forçada da América Central e critica a resposta dos Estados Unidos, questionando a eficácia dos métodos de controle fronteiriço, especialmente os biométricos. Ele explora dois programas dos EUA no México, Frontera Sur e Remain in Mexico. A revisão analisou a literatura sobre estudos críticos de segurança e migração, com foco em produções mexicanas. Os resultados indicam diversas medidas empregadas pelos EUA para dissuadir migrantes indesejados, incluindo o uso de fronteiras biométricas para reforçar a segurança e a implementação de critérios raciais e sociais para permitir ou impedir a passagem de determinados indivíduos. A análise dos programas Frontera Sur e Remain in Mexico revela uma externalização das fronteiras dos EUA ao transformar o México em um estado tampão, o que dificulta os fluxos migratórios e cria uma fronteira vertical que impede a jornada dos migrantes em direção ao norte. O artigo conclui que essas medidas violam os direitos humanos dos migrantes, limitando sua mobilidade e sua busca por refúgio nos Estados Unidos.

Palavras-chave: controle fronteiriço; migração forçada; Estados Unidos; México; externalização de fronteiras.

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Introduction

Migration is inherent to humanity. People move from one city, state, country, or continent to another to fall in love, to study, to work, to enjoy retirement, to seek new life experiences, or even to flee an imminent danger. In this sense, we can say that migration is planned, with the proper documentation required by states, or forced, sometimes clandestine. Forced mobility, motivated by economic, political, and social crises; by the violence of armed conflicts within and between states; by environmental disasters; and by other forms which drive people to leave their homes searching for protection elsewhere, are pillars of this research. However, this article does not focus on the causes of these flows, but rather on the responses of states to these mobilities.

This article examines the several ways in which borders can restrict international migration. Specifically, it analyses the ways in which the United States impedes or prevents unwanted migrants from entering its territory. The research question is: to what extent are US border control practices effective in preventing Latin American migration? The aim of this study is to analyse border control policies and their effectiveness in preventing people from crossing territorial limits into other countries. Specifically, we will discuss border security practices adopted by the United States, analyse specific migration control programs, and assess their success in containing migration flows.

For this article, we take a critical perspective on security studies, identifying practices and their impacts on human beings, particularly vulnerable migrants. We aim to demonstrate the benefits and harms of certain measures. This fragment discusses the controversies surrounding the border practices adopted by the United States, including its border with Mexico and the externalization of its borders. The concept of border externalization, introduced by Amarela Varela (2019), is a key topic. The United States is requesting changes to Mexico's migration and border policies, which the author believes could result in Mexico becoming a 'buffer state' for the US. This would prevent Central Americans from moving north. The text also references Ole Wæver's (1995) concept of securitization, which highlights how borders have become a space of security and militarization for the US, particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

In methodological terms, we conducted a literature review on the sovereignty and border security debate, as well as on the use of biometrics as a surveillance tool to control mobility. To this end, we turned to books and scientific articles on the subject. Furthermore, to exemplify a debate that may have remained theoretical in the first section of the discussion on security and borders, in the second we chose to analyse specific programmes to better exemplify our argument and try to answer the research questions.

Our focus is on two prominent programs from the 2010s: *Frontera Sur* and Remain in Mexico, both of which were government responses to changes in migration flows at the time of their inception. To achieve this goal, we consulted Mexican scientific publications to gather the perspectives and opinions of those who have direct experience with our research subject. We also reviewed reports published in newspapers and technical reports from universities and international organizations that focus on migration in the region that includes Mexico and the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras). The results of this analysis indicate that the migration policies in question are ineffective in controlling migration. Rather than preventing it, they make it more precarious, increasing the risk to migrants and potentially violating their human rights.

Security and Borders: the Relationship with Biometrics

On September 11, 2001, the United States suffered several terrorist attacks that marked the beginning of the 21st century. The Al-Qaeda's attack in New York and Washington D.C shocked a considerable portion of humanity and made security an increasingly present concern in the daily lives of civilians. The US government and its military allies' response to the attacks initiated various conflicts around the world, leading to the displacement of millions of people from the clashes in the Middle East. The surveillance of European and US borders was intensified to prevent further attacks and control migration, reflecting the xenophobic and racist attitudes that were increasingly present in local politics.

After the attacks in the US, the country implemented security reforms, including the declaration of a state of exception and the establishment of the USA Patriot Act and the Military Order. These measures led to the withdrawal of certain rights, mass surveillance, and the targeting of foreigners deemed suspicious, as noted by Junqueira and Moreira (2021). In 2002, the Smart Border Accord was established by the presidents of the United States and Mexico, George W. Bush and Vicente Fox. The accord aimed to increase border security, screen goods and people, and obtain better data on flows. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created in this context to centralize the country's security policies, including those on borders and migration. Neves, Rocha, and Silva (2016) reported on technological advances in mobility management that favoured the (DHS). They discussed the strengthening of the US-Mexico border to prevent the entry of individuals who may pose a threat, and the implementation of biometric control, which will be further discussed below.

Border security practices, analysed in this section, have become part of ways of thinking about national security, no longer restricted to the state, due to its dependence on regional and international dynamics, according to Wæver's (1995) interpretation of Buzan's writings. Wæver believed that the state will try to remain sovereign by resorting to security to make threats, challenge other actors, impose limits, will, and independence. This leads to a process of understanding security as something ever broader, overflowing the more classical state and military conceptions, as it includes new actors and sectors, even if the state remains the focus.

The state often relies on the us/them dichotomy to bolster a sense of security, even if the perceived threat is not necessarily a real security problem. This can involve identifying a possible enemy to be fought or seeking means to protect oneself. According to Wæver (1995), the field of security studies has undergone a reconceptualization in the 20th century, revealing a duality between state security and social security. Sovereignty is linked to the security of the state, while identity is linked to the security of society. This dualism is asymmetrical, as the state defends itself against threats to its sovereignty, and society defends itself against threats to its identity.

Racism and xenophobia can lead to the securitization of migration and irregular border crossings from society to the state. Political actors argue that migration poses a threat to national identity and territorial sovereignty due to cultural diversity and irregular border crossings. For those who view migration as an issue, strengthening state control of borders and managing mobility may be considered as potential solutions to ensure the survival of the state and society. This perspective aligns with the Copenhagen School's view of societal security.

The Copenhagen approach, which seeks to analyse migration as a component of national security, seems better suited to observing the behaviour of the United States regarding the admission of Latin American migrants to its territory, especially in this century. The terrorist attacks have affected the United States' response to irregular mobility on its borders, particularly with Mexico, a significant migrant-producing country and transit point for hundreds of thousands of Latin American migrants. Over the last two decades, both the Democratic and Republican Parties have attempted to criminalize migration and link it to terrorism, particularly irregular migration that does not follow conventional bureaucratic procedures.

This article discusses migration using the migration-asylum nexus terminology introduced by Stephen Castles (2007). The discussion includes economic migrants, undocumented migrants (those not following bureaucratic procedures), and asylum/refugee seekers (those migrating due to a well-founded fear of persecution). Migratory flows are treated together in this text, rather than separately according to the demarcation of international law dealing with migrants and refugees, to allow for a more fluid discussion of how the US deals with these issues.

In the 2000s, borders have become more heavily monitored and controlled. Treating migration solely from a security perspective can put migrants at risk of being targeted by hate speech and discriminatory practices. It can also lead to criminalization of their mobility due to the perceived insecurity of the state and society of destination or passage. The situation becomes more complex when considering state security and border agents. They are responsible for implementing public policies and can, depending on their training, use violence to repress perceived threats. This makes them the enforcers of biopolitics.

Stuart Elden (2007, 2017) offers a Foucaultian interpretation of the sovereign, proposing that the sovereign functions as an architect of a disciplinary space. This involves defining the limits, means, and circulation of subjects, with a focus on sovereignty, discipline, and security. His politics prioritize the government and security of the population. The management of a population within a given territory is referred to as biopolitics. The generation of knowledge and the structuring of government techniques in liberalism rely on rationality and calculation. Therefore, to data is crucial for effective governance of the sovereign's territory and population, as well as for projecting power and controlling borders and territories. This is reflected in the state's political economy. Territory is defined by its mapping, ordering, measurement, and demarcation, which determine the movement of people and goods. According to Elden, territory is a political category governed through calculation and rationality, making it a rendition of the concept of 'space'.

The geographer's discussion emphasizes that a state's governance encompasses not only its population but also its territory. Although this concept may appear superfluous in the field of International Relations, it allows us to examine the idea of biopolitics within borders. With this understanding, we can analyse the generation of data and knowledge through a rationality applied to a state's border regions. State policies impact not only the physicality of this area but also the movement of the individuals who inhabit or cross it during their international migration. The physicality of the border is determined by laws and international agreements. Borders can be natural, such as those created by rivers, mountains, oceans, deserts, and glaciers. Territorial boundaries of one or more states can be demarcated by human action, such as using fences, walls, ditches, checkpoints, and other means.

The border, regardless of its material, can be paradoxical because it separates the 'us' from the 'them' while also providing an opportunity for cultural integration and experiencing the daily life of people from different nationalities. Migrants who cross the border may encounter both facilitation of mobility and practices of control, as the state seeks to manage this movement and its direction. Tazzioli (2020) argues that the state aims to manage the mobility of individuals by stipulating routes and reducing their autonomy, rather than simply containing it. Mobility is self-governing, with individuals forced to move due to state policies that attempt to control their means and organizations. Irregular migrants have their movements managed by the state through containment and detention measures. The author argues that governments use measures to alter the movements of migrants so that they can cross borders, which weakens the group by making them split up to enter a country. Although Tazzioli's article focuses on Europe, her argument can be applied to US efforts to control the means and organizations of migrants attempting to cross the border with Mexico. This makes it more difficult for Latin Americans to enter the US territory.

Biometrics as a Boundary

In the mid-2000s, biometrics was an innovative technology that the US used to force other nations to add biometrics to passport chips to verify entrants' origins. When applying for a visa to the United States, individuals have their biometrics collected at US consulates and embassies (United States of America, 2024b). This is their first contact with the border, but it occurs outside of US territory or its physical boundaries.

Amoore (2006) anticipated that biometrics would be used to manage people's migration, potentially facilitating some individuals while disadvantaging others based on factors such as gender, nationality, race, and income. Biometrics could function as a social screening system for migrants, excluding marginalized individuals based on state interests. It serves as a surveillance technology by storing data in online border and security agency information banks. This enables the recognition of individuals outside the border area, cross-checking their criminal data, and identifying whether they are in an irregular situation. This allows for the expansion of state governance, as surveillance is amplified by the databases that use technology to produce this data. This approach enables the management of borders and migrant bodies by tracking their movements using biometrics.

The biometric border serves as a means of control over both the borders and the bodies that cross them. According to the Department of Homeland Security (United States of America, 2024a), the United States uses biometrics as a tool to prevent irregular entry into the country. Data on individual physical characteristics is stored and shared with the State Department, Department of Defense and Department of Justice. According to the agency, there are beyond 300 million identities collected, with a system capable of processing more than 400,000 identities a day. The CBP (2024) indicates that biometrics increases the security potential of the United States. The agency describes the collection process as the capture of a traveler's image by a camera, which combines different images of that person's documents that are stored in the cloud database, with secure and encrypted. If the search results find no negative reports, the person can be cleared to enter or leave the United States.

Rygiel (2010) contributes to the discussion of biometric borders by arguing that they are part of a logic of neoliberal efficiency that aims not only to manage movement, but to facilitate it, particularly for groups or subjects demanding more resources and rights. Despite this, Rygiel considers these borders as regulating a biological mobile body, which would have no connection with the political body and the geopolitics of mobility. Rygiel's feminist writing is significant for observing the biopolitics that control the mobility of certain bodies. Factors such as gender and race condition their mobility, particularly on the US-Mexico border. There are cases where the management of the migrant body involves both biological and political aspects in migration.

In addition to biometrics, other technologies can be used to manage the mobility of migrants at a border. But some of this technology, like violence, cannot be accepted as a means of controlling undocumented migration. There have been reports of security and CBP agents using excessive force, such as chasing migrants with cars, motorbikes, and even horses in areas with large crossing flows. Physical and psychological attacks, and even murders, are common among irregular migrants. Additionally, the recent intensification of border surveillance has forced many to attempt to cross through the desert or more distant rivers to avoid detection at main border detention points. This facilitates the exposure of people who are already in a vulnerable situation to new risks, such as contact with drug trafficker gangs who transport their goods through poorly guarded points on the border. This is especially true in the outskirts and peripheral areas of Mexican border towns, where cases of robbery, kidnapping, sexual violence, and death, depending on the aggressiveness of the traffickers. Furthermore, there have even been reports of forced prostitution (Acharya; Martinez Sanchez, 2018).

If migrants do not encounter traffickers, they may also face hunger, thirst, and the risk of getting lost in the desert when abandoned by their private intermediaries (Ellis; Hicken, 2024). Migrants remain at risk due to state border surveillance. Thirst and hunger are weapons used by the United States against Latin American migrants. De León (2015) shows different migrants' testimonies about their journeys and the difficulties at the US-Mexico border, indicating that these people are exposed to constant risks to their lives. Hunger and thirst can be triggers and constant presences in the lives of migrants, who encounter multiple forms of violence against themselves on their difficult journeys in pursuit of survival and safety.

Border control at international borders has increasingly relied on biometric technology due to the heightened security measures in place. Biometrics enables border agents to collect data on individuals' physical and biological characteristics, facilitating identification and government control over their mobility (Amoore, 2006). This data can be stored in databases and used as tools to manage people's movements, making mobility more difficult or easier for certain groups based on factors such as nationality, income, race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Individuals who are financially comfortable or wealthy, regardless of their country of origin or gender, may have an advantage in navigating the international arena. However, individuals of non-dominant ethnic groups, from underdeveloped countries, and of any age, regardless of gender, may be subject to mobility control policies in developed countries and migration destinations. This is due to their classification as irregular or unwanted migrants. Biometrics can be used as a social sorting technology that may exclude marginalized individuals to the benefit of those with more favourable physical and/or social characteristics. This raises concerns about potential racist and xenophobic practices in the use of biometrics by state agents.

Radziwinowiczówna's (2022) analysis of the US-Mexico border shows that collecting migrants' biometrics is like a biopolitical tattoo that lasts a lifetime once fingerprints are taken. Once collected, fingerprints can be used to identify individuals and their data, indicating whether they are irregular migrants, their border crossings, legal issues, etc., facilitating arrest and deportation processes for those who cross illegally. The author argues that expanding state surveillance through databases allows for transnational governance: information can be used for reconnaissance at any time, not just at border crossings and encounters. This is possible because biometric data is linked with police systems. Those who are apprehended by border agents for entering or attempting to enter the US irregularly are considered lawbreakers and are liable to arrest and deportation.

Amoore (2006) argues that the authorities aim to control ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty in favour of security. This suggests the co-optation of science and technology, using the idea of risk as a form of government to segregate 'positive' mobilities (business, leisure) from 'negative' or 'illegitimate' ones (terrorism, trafficking, and immigration). According to her, border biopolitics is not limited to physical border spaces, but rather extends to wherever migrants go. This supports Elden's (2007) perspective.

The body's characteristics, translated into data, facilitate its identification as a member of a risk group. This information can be acquired when crossing the border or through visas obtained at embassies and consulates. Migrants' digital footprints are created through the connection between the databases of security forces in the US and other countries. The biological body cannot be separated from the political body. Including political bodies in the discussion of border policies highlights that these policies affect all bodies differently, regardless of citizenship rights.

As mentioned, biometric borders not only collect data on individuals crossing them, but also enable prior control of mobility. This can result in an increase in the number of people who are deemed inadmissible or detained, particularly if the data systems flag them as dangerous after digitization. In this way, biometric borders as a biopolitical technology can be carried with the migrant, as we discussed in Elden, becoming increasingly diffuse by controlling individual biological bodies, in what Rygiel (2010) sees as their depoliticization. In practice, identifying someone purely by their fingerprints, irises, and hand geometries, whether through public-private databases or the chips in ID cards, facilitates the surveillance of that body purely by biological data online.

In this sense, Radziwinowiczówna (2022) argues that even if the state's border sovereignty is extended using biometrics and its databases, this is not directly reflected in the migrant's decision not to follow their route. According to the author, there is a potential for migrants to alter their identities due to self-inflicted damage or damage caused by third parties, as well as using gelatinous fingerprints to make biometric identification difficult or impossible. It is difficult, however, for irregular migrants who are likely to be fleeing poverty, hunger, violence, and disasters to adopt these strategies, meaning that, according to her, technological surveillance intercepts most subjects.

Bonacker (2022) points out that the process of governing people has undergone various changes throughout history, one of the moments she explores in depth in her article being that of territorial and population management by the United Nations Trusteeship Councils in the post-World War II period. The author's vision reinforces

one of our main arguments: the production of knowledge to manage migrants biopolitically. For her, subjects became part of government reports and objects, bureaucratized and their relationships transformed into symbols of development and (in)security. The system strengthened colonial governmentality and the behaviour of populations, defining from the international sphere the policies that the executive powers should apply locally and classifying populations, often from a racial bias, whether they were developed or not.

According to Amoore, Elden, and Rygel, the classification of subjects based on factors such as nationality, race, and gender can inform a state's decisions on which individuals to allow residing within its borders legally. This classification can also determine which groups or individuals are more likely to be rejected for entry or deported, as seen in the US's rejection of certain Latin American nationalities. Capturing data on migrants facilitates the integration and improve security and surveillance practices on them, articulating the social and technical work of this device, in what Pallister-Wilkins (2016) considers to be barriers that build spaces and form networks with other security devices, regardless of whether the origin is military. The author argues that the security barriers created by the state, in which biometric borders are inserted, are forms of mobile population governance, inserted in socio-political objectives of pacifying insurgent populations and creating population databases. Knowledge allows the control of bodies and their political capacities through security practices, as it may not focus on the unrestricted control of the subject's mobility, but it does open margins for the management of their circulation. The various barriers she lists, such as electronic registers, databases, and biometrics, are technologically productive for governmentality because they categorize subjects, manage irregular migration, and facilitate identity checks and the analysis of subjects by border agents and security forces.

When technologies demarcate a boundary, whether it is within or beyond a state's territorial limits, they can create a space by impeding movement and determining which individuals are permitted to move and under what conditions. This leaves the state responsible for determining where these migrants will reside and for how long. Barriers work through social relations by interrupting and capturing data. The strengthening of security is linked to biometrics, placing the migrant body at the center. They are sociotechnical devices used to govern populations and environments. This reiterates the discussion on the biopolitical control of border spaces and the bodies within them.

Barriers to migration for the state can also arise in other ways, such as the involvement of security companies conducting border controls for the US. Epstein (2007) argues that this is a symptom of neoliberalism and the reduction of the state, which decentralizes its security and defense functions to the private market. This is also representative of the increased demand for more security and efficient technologies due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In practice, the allocation of funds towards biometric technologies and the outsourcing of security operations to private companies is viewed as a reinforcement of the state's actions and deployment of new mechanisms and agents of power. Biometrics serves as a tool for the state to deepen its knowledge about the body and manage its borders, thereby reinforcing its territorial sovereignty and the US' border control policy.

According to Epstein, the biometric border fixes an individual's identity and enables surveillance of their body. The biometric data becomes their main document, serving as a passport that guarantees their movement, if it is measured as an object of knowledge and administration by the state. This means that the state is no longer the visible security agent that manages mobility, as companies now perform this role on its behalf. For example, airline companies check visas before boarding. These companies externalize US borders, not simply because of bureaucracy or caution, but because they are operational agents.

In 2002, in response to the terrorist attacks of the previous year, George W. Bush, formalized the use of biometrics at US borders as a security mechanism. From that moment on, biometrics became the centerpiece of the country's border policy. Digital copies of people's photographs and their fingerprints on passport chips are ed by various databases to build the US-VISIT program. The program aimed to collect biometric data to identify individuals who posed a risk to US security. It utilized databases from national and foreign public agencies, particularly those with a criminal focus. Migrants and tourists from countries requiring visas are photographed and have their fingerprints taken at embassies, consulates, or specialized centers. This data is used to identify individuals in criminal record searches. If a positive match is found, the visa is denied. Registering more individuals with their biometrics improves the system and helps the state eliminate potential threats.

The use of biometrics enables the identification of migrants, resulting in the acquisition of personal and genetic data and the generation of knowledge about them. We believe that, if these technologies were to be applied at different border crossings or points of migratory flow surveillance in Mexico, they could be used to map the movements of migrants, identifying their routes and profiles of those who use them. In this context, the United States can develop policies aimed at profiling these individuals, complementing it with other surveillance tools, such as the use of drones and heat tracing. This would enable the identification of the locations where efforts to control mobility should be concentrated.

Outside the border, deportation can mean a return to a situation of extreme socio-economic vulnerability, or even imminent danger to life. In the case of Latin America, migrating to the US is neither cheap nor easy, whether through state bureaucracy or the clandestine route, resulting in excessive costs for the migrant or high risks along the way. For those who are fleeing poverty and violence and see the US as a solution for rebuilding their lives, deportation will result in years of delay, legal problems and exposure to new factors that motivated their forced migration. In addition, the lack of information and the spread of fake news make it difficult for migrants to know their rights, especially those who can request refuge due to a well-founded fear of persecution and who do not.

The United States did not ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention, but did ratify the 1967 Additional Protocol, which expanded the geographical and temporal criteria for refugees. Occasionally, depending on political and ideological interests, there may be a certain sympathy for approving residency and refugee applications from certain nationalities to demonstrate the supposed superiority of capitalism, as during the Trump administration and its facilitation of Venezuelans, Cubans and Nicaraguans, aimed at the discourse that the left is incapable of protecting its people. However, even with intense migratory flows from countries once governed by the right, such as Colombia, El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala and Honduras, the former president did not show the same appreciation.

In the following section, we will provide a better illustration of other forms and practices of border controls practised by the United States. We will discuss important programmes that emerged during the administrations of Barack Obama (2009-2017) and Donald Trump (2017-2021), indicating that, despite being rival political parties and having different government platforms, they were similar in their operationalization of border and migratory control policies aimed at preventing Latin Americans from entering US territory.

Border Control Programmes: *Frontera Sur* and Remain in Mexico

As we showed in the previous section, the US has an interest in controlling the security of its borders and the mobility of migrants across them. Making use of innovative technologies and obtaining biometrics from subjects may be one surveillance measure employed, but there are others, including outsourcing responsibility for border control and migrants to other states. In this section, we will briefly look at the history of two programmes that have emerged in the past ten years, *Frontera Sur*, and Remain in Mexico, which are important for understanding US moves to control Latin American migratory mobility.

Frontera Sur Programme

Mexico's southern border delimits its territorial boundaries in relation to Guatemala and Belize and is the target of policies to control the mobility that passes through it. In 2014, during the administrations of Presidents Enrique Peña Nieto (Mexico) and Barack Obama (United States), the Southern Border (*Frontera Sur*) Programme was created. The aim of this programme was to control the migration of people from Central America and prevent them from entering Mexico towards the US border. One of the pillars of Remain in Mexico was the "Regional Shared Responsibility", in which Mexico was to work together with other countries to create and share a biometric database on migrants, especially those crossing the Guatemalan and Mexican borders (Wilson; Valenzuela, 2014).

The programme also aimed to control the movement of illicit goods, such as weapons and drugs, and established a regional visa system focused on tourism and business for Belizean and Guatemalan nationals to southern Mexico. Castillo Ramírez (2020) argues that this programme was created to curb the mobility of Latin Americans, especially after the increase in unaccompanied minors crossing Mexico to reach the US in 2014, drawing the attention of governments previously accustomed to the demographic profile of young men of working age. In fiscal year 2014 (from 1 October 2013 to 30 September 2014), more than 68,000 unaccompanied minors crossed the US-Mexico border, compared to less than 39,000 in the previous fiscal year, representing an increase of 77%, according to CBP data reported by the G1 news portal (Cresce […], 2014).

Jones (2016) and Walker (2018) argue that other important nationalities were not included in the visa system, precisely because their nationals occupy the main nationality positions of migrants and detainees at the US border, such as El Salvador and Honduras, which together with Guatemala and Mexico make up the quartet of those most detained and deported by the CBP. This regional visa has led to diplomatic and mobility problems, as El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua had free

mobility agreements, including exemption from presenting identification documents at the border. *Frontera Sur* led to a breach of this agreement, this time not in Mexico, where it was supposed to operate initially, but on the border between Guatemala and Honduras, in January 2020. At the time, US CBP agents conducted border control missions without authorization from the government of Alejandro Giammattei, deporting almost 1600 undocumented, Hondurans on irregular buses and on foot without following the proper legal procedures (Cabral, 2020).

The US is in the process of expanding its vertical border into Guatemala to control migration and is no longer satisfied with Mexico and all the interventions it has already made in its neighbouring country (Varela, 2019). The ostentatious policing encouraged by the US and practised by both Peña Nieto and the current Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, prevents the movement of agricultural workers, trade flows and exchanges that have historically taken place in the region because the southern Mexican state of Chiapas once belonged to Guatemala until the mid-19th century. The impediment of free transit interrupts historical processes of trade, seasonal coffee labour and culture in the name of US migration control.

In addition to the militarization of the southern border, the programme also established three mobile mobility control lanes, starting from the Mexico-Guatemala international border, entering Mexican territory, and located in strategic areas. The first strip is around 50 kilometres from the international border; the second, around 160 kilometres; and the third and last, along the length of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the smallest area of Mexican territory, which separates the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by 300 kilometres. The aim of these lanes is to control the flow of people and goods with police posts, surveillance booths, the use of drones and motion sensors, interviews with migrants, as well as the collection of their biometric data to identify their journeys through the country, controlled by US technologies and with targets to be met (Cabral, 2021; Walker, 2018). Diplomatic, economic, and political pressures are used as geopolitical pressure for migratory control by using another country to obtain the expected results of its foreign and security policies. By agreeing to have its border and migration policies changed and creating a controversy with its neighbours, Mexico is doing so to avoid imbroglios with the US, especially at the risk of suffering economic setbacks. López Obrador has been pressured by Trump to tighten border controls at the risk of having his exports to the US taxed, which could lead to an economic crisis, since free trade between the two nations allows most Mexican products to go to the US market (Rampton; Oré, 2019).

This border control aimed to reduce migration, but it had the opposite effect, as it continued clandestinely and dangerously, and the risk of arrest by border agents leads groups of migrants, with or without the assistance of coyotes (migrant smugglers), to use alternative routes to maintain the flow of migration and avoid detection by authorities. However, migrants who take this route are at a higher risk of encountering arms and drug trafficking controlled by criminals. They also face new dangers, such as kidnappings and other forms of violence. Unfortunately, their human rights are not protected due to state violence, which restricts their free movement and right to migrate (Velasco Ortiz; Hernández López, 2021; Walker, 2018).

With the aim of circumventing the risks of migrating in small groups and taking alternative routes that could lead to encounters with drug traffickers, migrant caravans were formed in 2018 to reverse this scenario. The attempt to bring more security to

mobility was accompanied by the mediatization of the flows, so that the press was mobilized to cover the flows, showing the actions of the security forces, which avoided episodes of violence that could be caught on camera and by reporters. So that it was possible to reduce the aggressions that these subjects suffered from receiving journalistic coverage to document the flows with thousands of people in them.

Escaping the clandestine through caravans reduces the risk of migrants being exposed to drug, arms and people trafficking networks, as these are organized and managed by their members and civil organizations. Because the caravans leave Central America and cross Mexico, the country has become a space for externalizing the border control imposed by the United States, becoming a US border crossing, as if it were a "vertical border", such is the surveillance and foreign interference in the country. This process is spreading to Mexico's southern border, to control drug trafficking and to contain undocumented migrants (Jones, 2016; Velasco Ortiz; Hernández López, 2021).

The transformation of Mexico into a vertical US border became more pronounced with the migrant caravans that began in October 2018. Before the caravans, migration took place individually or in small groups, with Central Americans bearing the cost of transport, using routes dominated by *coyotes*. Payment was not always a guarantee of transport, as families could be abandoned on the way, or fall victim to scams that even involved the risk of being trafficked. Originally publicized in social media groups and on community radio stations, the caravans became a source of hope for Central Americans to migrate more safely, at less cost because they did not have to pay professionals to cross each family in need, and in better conditions to defend themselves against the migration policies they might encounter.

To Velasco Ortiz and Hernández López (2021), these migrants began to see a movement of transnational migration and self-defence as they formed a unit, full of cultural exchanges and mutual aid on the journey to the US. Even though many of these migrants do not have the necessary documentation to be allowed to migrate north, their presence in a massive group has redefined the process of clandestinity they had faced until then. Before the caravans, it was necessary to cross the border unnoticed, whether through the jungle, the desert or other routes, and depend on support and reception networks along the way, while with the caravans, clandestinity is no longer so necessary, as there was political pressure for these thousands of migrants to cross in groups.

The authors argue that media attention to the caravans was influenced by then US President, Republican Donald Trump, who spoke out against them on social media and demanded action from the states of origin and transit to contain the flow. The first caravan started with 2,000 people and grew to almost 7,000 by the time it arrived in Tijuana, a border city in northern Mexico, in October 2018. Mexico has implemented various measures to control the migrant caravans. These measures include extended deadlines for analysing asylum applications, arresting migrants in vulnerable situations, closing shelters, increasing policing at the southern border with Guatemala, and establishing barriers to discourage caravan travel due to the challenges they would face. The United States has consistently refused to receive them.

Part of this process conducted by the Mexican government led by López Obrador was not autonomous, as we said earlier. This was a process forced by Trump's threats to tax Mexican imports, which would make products pricier and reduce Mexican profits, directly affecting the economy which, at that time before the pandemic,

was stagnant (Cabral, 2019). The historic migratory corridor formed by Central America and Mexico would now find a bottleneck so that as few people as possible could reach the northern border, a bottleneck that was transformed into a vertical US border.

Mexico's perception of migration shifted from a humanitarian phenomenon to a security threat due to pressure from the US. As a result, the country began to prioritize border control and combatting migration through the securitization of borders, including the use of military force and surveillance technologies. These measures were implemented to meet external demands and align with the northern border's security measures. Walker (2018) argues that Mexico has transformed its territory with porous borders into an object of external geopolitical control, passing the US security test. The US and Mexican foreign policy prioritize migratory control, which is disguised in Trump's discourse as control of smuggling and terrorism. However, reducing the causes and improving living conditions that lead to the migration of Central Americans should be the humanitarian interest in this geopolitical movement.

The effectiveness of the Southern Border Programme is reflected in the increased number of Central American migrants detained and deported in southern Mexico. This is evidenced by the search for alternative and more dangerous routes, as well as the increasing amounts paid to coyotes to reach the United States, as noted by Rodríguez Chávez (2016) and Rojas Wiesner and Winton (2018). However, Araiza *et al*. (2019) demonstrate that they were unable to control the mobility of Central Americans. In 2016, the number of nationals from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras detained by CBP agents exceeded the total number of Mexicans detained, which was unprecedented until then, according to Araiza. The authors state that the measure implemented by the United States with Mexico has increased the cost of crossing for migrants and exposed them to alternative routes and the abuses of coyotes. However, it has also had the opposite effect, strengthening migrant caravans as a mechanism for safe migration.

Remain in Mexico Programme

The US created another program, Remain in Mexico, to control the mobility of migrants. This program, along with the *Frontera Sur* Program, falls under what Rosière (2015) calls theicopolitics. This refers to the state's movement to manage, limit, or even eliminate migratory flows without the need for physical barriers, using bureaucracy and legislation instead.

Remain in Mexico was a response to the migrant caravans that began in 2018. The dramatic images of thousands of Central Americans and Mexicans migrating in groups along public roads towards the United States appalled then US President Donald Trump, a known anti-immigrant with xenophobic and racist speeches. Trump promised to block the arrival of these people in his country, either by reinforcing and speeding up the construction of the wall on the border with Mexico, or with other measures. In January 2019, his government launched the "Migrants Protection Protocols", known as Remain in Mexico. The aim of the programme was to turn Mexico into a safe third country, going beyond being a "producer" of migrants and a pathway for Central Americans, but waiting while their requests for refuge and residency were being analysed.

For París Pombo, Ortiz e Delgado (2021), the US made Mexico responsible for migrants and asylum seekers that Washington did not want to receive and process. This measure made Mexico, a historic country of migrants to the US, become a major waiting centre for that country, having to bear the costs and responsibilities for its nationals and foreigners, as long as the US immigration court did not make decisions on these subjects. Gramajo Bauer (2020) points out that Mexico began to grant humanitarian visas to migrants who were there, as well as having to offer them security and stability.

Mexico has also started to receive migrants detained and deported by CBP border agents, and has needed to reinforce support networks, camps, and transitional waiting centres in its northern border towns. It should be noted that northern Mexico is not considered one of the safest areas in the country, precisely because it has numerous drug and arms trafficking routes to the United States and is a strategic region for drug traffickers. Furthermore, as it is a border area of an emigrant country, the north of Mexico concentrates intense flows of people passing through to the United States, and its cities and especially its outskirts are overwhelmed by the arrival of even more Mexicans and Central Americans waiting to cross into the neighbouring country.

For París Pombo, Ortiz e Delgado (2021), in the first year of Remain in Mexico, in 2019, the country received more than 60,000 official returnees, with around 37 per cent Hondurans, 25 per cent Guatemalans and 13 per cent Salvadorans and Cubans. This allows us to argue that the objective of preventing nationals from these countries from encountering obstacles in their migration may have been achieved. The United Nations (2022) points out that Remain in Mexico has had a considerable impact on the Mexican humanitarian and migratory visa system, since in 2014 the country received just over 2,000 refugee applications from Central Americans, with the number reaching 70,000 in 2019, at the start of the programme, and doubling in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching 123,000 refugee applications. Mexico is not considered a destination country for Latin American migrants, but the United States is, reinforcing the programme's idea of turning the country into a transit nation for residence, even if only temporarily.

Remain in Mexico and *Frontera Sur* are programmes that violate the human rights of migrants and their guarantees established by the United Nations, since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes that we can all migrate, internally or externally, from our countries of habitual residence. By forcing Mexico to implement its anti-migrant foreign policy, the United States is acting in a process of externalization of its borders, as well as intervening in the sovereignty of an autonomous and independent state, in which we agree with the concept of externalization of borders worked on by Varela (2019). The pandemic and the election of Joe Biden in 2020 did not easily change the scenario for Latin American migrants. From March 2020 to May 2023, Title 42 was in force, a health measure that facilitated the expulsion and deportation of people who crossed the border under the argument of controlling the spread of COVID-19 in the states. Migratory flows were intensified by the socio-economic impacts of the health crisis, with 2019 totalling around 977,000 migrants of all nationalities at the border, 2020 with a drop due to border closures with 468,000, 2021 with more than 1,734,000 people and, in 2022, 2,378,000 migrants, according to CBP (2023). In other words, all these measures have been ineffective, and the flows are getting stronger every day, and the situation could worsen in the short and medium term, due to the emergence of a new humanitarian and migratory crisis hotspot, the Dárien Jungle, on the Colombian-Panamanian border, with migrations bound for the United States.

Final Considerations

Migration has taken many forms throughout history, originating from various causes, and leading to different parts of the world. It is an intrinsic part of the formation of societies and the national identities of states. Every country has experienced migration, whether it be inward or outward flows, or even internal displacement. As demonstrated in this article, governments often view migration as a problem to be solved or contained, despite its undeniable existence. International migratory flows are not commonly perceived as social phenomena that fall under the umbrella of human security, but rather of national security.

The security aspect of migration is easily observable at borders. Borders can limit a state's power of action by demarcating where a territory begins and ends, where one country can exert its influence, and where its neighbour, sovereign of its territory, already is. Crossing borders without proper authorization is a violation of a country's national sovereignty. This is especially true when it comes to forced migration and seeking refuge, as crossing international borders searching for humanitarian protection is often necessary to obtain the protection of international law.

According to the 1951 Geneva Convention, refugees must cross international borders out of a well-founded fear of persecution to be protected. But what happens when states disregard this basic understanding and treat as criminals those who cross borders without having had the time, opportunity, or knowledge of the need for an authorization paper to do so? The treatment ends up being the criminalization of the subject, the securitization and often militarization of these borders, creating problems and setbacks for those seeking support to survive and rebuild their lives (UNHCR, 1951). This article looks at these actions from different perspectives, but with the same actor at play: the United States and its conflictual relationship with Latin American migrants, especially Mexicans and Central Americans, and the use of various border control mechanisms to block their migratory mobility.

In the 21st century, biometrics has been adopted as one of the United States' border security technologies. We point out that biometrics can be used as a border control tool because it allows subjects to be identified and verified by analysing their physical and behavioural characteristics, such as fingerprints, irises, facial recognition, and other means that can be stored digitally. We argue that biometrics can increase border security by identifying potential subjects who threaten national security when they try to enter the US and can be ed remotely and with greater precision.

Our analysis has indicated that biometrics can be used with a racial bias, promoting segregation of non-white subjects, and establishing barriers to the mobility of undesirable subjects to the US. This is particularly focused on preventing Latin Americans from migrating to the country. Furthermore, it should be noted that biometrics may be used as a border control measure, determining which individuals are permitted to cross borders. Biometric technologies can be used with mobility control programs, either to identify hotspots or to target surveillance and policing against specific groups.

We have examined two US programs that aim to externalize their border to other countries. The first program, Frontera Sur, was created in 2014 by the US and Mexican governments to reduce the migratory flow of Central Americans through Mexico. The program aimed to police the Mexico-Guatemala border, which is the main point of entry, to reduce the mobility of individuals and make it more difficult for them to cross

into northern Mexico and enter the US. It is argued that the program created difficulties for migrants, who were forced to resort to even more clandestine methods of travel. This eventually led to the formation of migrant caravans, which exposed the violence experienced by these individuals during their journey through Mexico.

The Donald Trump administration (2017-2021) responded to the caravans with enthusiasm, attempting to halt the influx and implementing the Remain in Mexico program. This program aimed to transform Mexico into a waiting nation, where migrants would remain until their refugee and residency applications were approved. The Mexican government was responsible for these matters.

We argue that both programmes violate the human rights of migrants, as they impede their mobility and their right to seek refuge, leaving them unprotected and vulnerable to new risks, and potentially sustaining situations of violence like those in which they fled their countries of origin. Finally, although we have not discussed the Covid-19 pandemic or the current humanitarian crisis in the Dárien Jungle in this article, we must mention that restrictive practices continue under Joe Biden's administration, keeping migrants from obtaining their due protections under international law.

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