

Those who stay. Processes of individuation and settlement in contemporary migrant trajectories

Los que se quedan. Procesos de individuación y asentamiento en trayectorias migrantes contemporáneas

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the individuation trajectories of Central American migrants residing in the Metropolitan Area of Monterrey, Mexico. The study bridges the tradition of life trajectory analysis in migration studies with theoretical approaches from the sociology of individuation. It employs the principle of narrative anchoring to examine contemporary settlement experiences, reflecting on the specific processes involved in producing individuals within the context of irregular migration. Based on life stories collected between 2017 and 2022, the research identifies and articulates three key trials that shape the trajectories and the individuation of (in)migrant subjects in this socio-historical context: the migratory journey in an irregular situation, the labor trial and the process of obtaining papers in a context of institutional withdrawal, are sustained from exceptional and precarious supports, producing highly agentic individuals.

Keywords: trajectories, processes of individuation, international migration, settlement, Monterrey metropolitan area.

Resumen

En este trabajo se analizan las trayectorias de individuación de personas centroamericanas que residen en el área metropolitana de Monterrey, México. El estudio busca entrelazar la tradición de las trayectorias vitales en el estudio de la migración con los planteamientos teóricos de la sociología de la individuación, partiendo del principio del anclaje narrativo de los relatos en una situación contemporánea de asentamiento y, con ello, reflexionar en las particularidades

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de los procesos de producción de individuos en el contexto de la migración irregularizada. A partir de los relatos de vida recolectados entre 2017 y 2022 se entrelazan las pruebas enfrentadas y soportes articulados en las trayectorias. Se distinguen tres pruebas cruciales en la individuación de los sujetos (in)migrantes en este contexto sociohistórico: el periplo migratorio en situación irregular, la prueba del trabajo y la obtención de papeles, en un contexto de retraimiento institucional, son sostenidas desde soportes excepcionales y precarios que producen individuos altamente agénticos.

Palabras clave: trayectorias, procesos de individuación, migración internacional, asentamiento, área metropolitana de Monterrey.

Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the trajectories of individuation based on the contemporary settlement experiences of migrants from northern Central America in the metropolitan area of Monterrey, Mexico. The historical framework in which this phenomenon occurs is marked by so-called transit migration and the erosion of the rights of migrants.

Transit and trajectory do not refer only to a change in space, as if what is intended to be narrated and analyzed were the displacement itself. Although transit is central to the experience of the present, for the people included in this study, that experience is part of the past. Transit is the primary element that narrates a migration experience, and the trajectory is the reconstruction of the past from a contemporary experience of settlement.

Nevertheless, transit and trajectory are not assumed here in the universality of any migration experience. On the contrary, these itineraries are a historical part of the material experience of what it means to migrate in the Mesoamerican reality of the 21st century. On the one hand, they occur in the phenomenon of a migration conceived mainly as a transit to a destination other than their country of residence and, on the other hand, in conditions of personal experiences of impossibility of subject (Ngai, 2004), in which the lack of recognition of the minimum rights that constitute individuals as subjects of rights in modern times predominates.

The analysis is part of the theoretical framework of trajectories, understood as people's lives amid structural constraints and individual aspirations, which, for this study, impel their migration project.

Research on life trajectories is not a new concept in the field of migration studies. This study is based on the same location as one of the pioneering works that employed life histories alongside quantitative methodologies in the field of migration (Balán et al., 1973). The work of Balán et al. (1973, 1977) highlighted the importance of residential and occupational mobility in rapidly growing cities.

Similarly, Muñoz et al. (1977) attempted to determine the economic and social consequences of population growth in Mexico City using the tool of labor trajectories through questionnaires and structured interviews. The study revealed changes and continuities at the occupational level and the intersectoral mobility of workers in a

period corresponding to a process of accelerated industrialization (Rivera Sánchez, 2012). The studies of this period are based on perspectives centered on the receiving societies that explore the degrees of integration according to the time of residence, with occupational mobility as a central indicator.

Since the 1980s, research on the trajectories of migrants has been based mainly on qualitative methodologies to highlight practices and the creation of spaces and processes that assume a transnational dimension. This shift in the social sciences represented a true renaissance of the biographical approach (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984). The studies found from this perspective are based mainly on the theoretical-methodological postulates of Elder's (1985) life course, which allow analytical segments to be made in the biographies studied by ordering, systematizing and interpreting the individual experience and interweaving it with the sociohistorical conditions (Blanco & Pacheco, 2003; Caballero & García Guevara, 2007; Rivera Sánchez, 2012).

Pries innovated in the methodological analysis of trajectories by examining an emerging social reality that he calls transnational social spaces, which unfold between and beyond the contexts of origin and destination (Pries, 2000). Based on a wide range of information collected, the author constructs biographical-labor trajectories that prospectively link the occupational mobility of migrants with their aspirations (Pries, 1997).

In addressing this transnational perspective, studies on return to Mexico were found that focus on school and migration trajectories of children and adolescents who have previous school experiences in the United States (Román González & Carrillo Cantú, 2017; Sánchez & Zúñiga, 2010; Zúñiga et al., 2008). Subjective itineraries of the so-called 1.5 generation young people are also explored (Hirai & Sandoval, 2016). Similarly, Liliana Aquino Moreschi's (2012) multisite ethnographic work in Chiapas, California, and Mississippi with young migrants from a Zapatista community in the Lacandon Jungle points to the emergence of new forms of subjectivity within the Zapatista movement.

As can be seen, the field of study of migrant trajectories is rich and varied in its themes and methodologies. Although trajectories underlie narratives and analysis of life experiences, they are not explicitly addressed as processes of individuation. The intention is to attempt a crossover between the tradition of trajectories and the sociology of individuation by venturing into contemporary migration processes to construct trajectories threaded with the evidence and the supports collected through narratives.

To this end, the article focuses on particular challenges experienced by the individuals considered here: the trials. Supported by the literature that develops this concept, it is of interest to analyze the trials as milestones in the process of individuation that is founded on fundamental shortcomings concerning what it means to be an individual in the promise of democratic, liberal and rule of law societies, that is, individuality, a phenomenon characteristic of Western modernity, closely linked to institutional individualism (Martuccelli, 2010) in which individuals are recognized by a series of civil, political and social attributes that define them as individual subjects.

For Hernández (2017), this process has been dissimilar or discontinuous among different societies, producing differentiated trajectories given the historical, social, political and cultural particularities. As a descriptive-normative model, individualism establishes the ability to constitute themselves as individuals for some actors, while denying it to others.

Three significant trials are identified in the migrant trajectories: the experience of transit or migration journey, facilitated by the shelters during this itinerary; the work experience marked by the conditions of foreignness and irregular immigration; and the interactions with the administrative bodies responsible for the legal recognition of the subject, that is, obtaining identification documents to regularize their residence status.

In other words, the experience of living in a regime of assistance that configures the condition of being a migrant is the first of these trials: the one that materializes the (re)production of life in the migrant project of contemporary capitalism, labor as a daily practice and as a life project. It also relates individuals to the bureaucracies of identification, which coercively mark foreignness and institutionally constitute the (im)migrant subject.

The first part of the study provides a theoretical overview of the notions of trials and supports, allowing the methodological approach to be developed. The text follows the path of the three main trials in migrant trajectories. Finally, it discusses how individuals are constructed in contemporary migration processes in northeastern Mexico.

Trial and support in individuation trajectories in contexts of migration

The proposed approach is based mainly on two concepts that can explain the trajectories of individuation on the scale of the subjects: trial and support.

Within the framework of this theoretical problematization, the trajectory is constructed based on the actors' actions in a social framework that tends to constrict. In this way, the trajectories based on the sociology of individuation, far from being understood as a transition (Elder, 1985), are assumed as a vital path traversed by trials or challenges faced by individuals due to the fact of living in a society with different structural conditioning factors, in varying degrees and circumstances. Trials are instances in which the conditions for the realization of individual aspirations are decided, as a result of which trajectories take shape and are defined (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010).

Trials are socially produced, culturally represented and unequally distributed, and individuals are impelled to face them within their structural process of individuation (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010; Martuccelli, 2006). They do not imply a homogeneous conditioning for all individuals, so it may be assumed that it is possible to deduce micro-social consequences from a macro-sociological perspective. On the contrary, it gives a malleable consistency to social life, which makes it possible to "analyze the

non-uniform diffraction of phenomena and practices in social life”; this means that “not all actors are equally exposed to these structural trials” (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010, p. 85).

For the sociology of individuation, trials have four essential characteristics: they comprise a narrative dimension from which individuals explain their own life as “a permanent succession of trials” (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010, p. 84); they have a coercive nature since they assume a type of individual who is forced, for structural reasons, to face certain challenges; they imprint a selective process according to the characteristics of individuals; in each sociohistorical context there are certain trials that are crucial in the trajectories of individuation (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010).

In the face of any trial, the supports of individuals are wielded, that is, the material, symbolic and social resources used in a particular and contingent manner. The notion of support refers to the basis of the autonomy of the modern individual. Liberal society is constituted by private property, which acts as an “anthropological enabler” for the individual/citizen (Castel, 2009, p. 310). The process of industrialization and urbanization gave way to the wage and the set of associated social protections that became the main supports of individuation; so the wage is the equivalent of private property as a support for citizenship (Castel, 2009; Nardin, 2017).

Other authors are critical of this state-centric and Western notion of the individual and of supports. Martuccelli points out that the supports cannot be solely equivalent to capital or resources, nor can they be contained exclusively in the State and in the instituted social protections. The individual is held from a diversity of points of support of diverse nature: material, affective, relational and symbolic. The supports, then, are not definable a priori, but are the “existential environment” that links the individual to their social and institutional environments (Martuccelli, 2007b, p. 61).

This critical redefinition is crucial to understand the situation of deinstitutionalization and precariousness related to the shift from a policy of integration to a policy of individuals (Merklen, 2013), in which these are assisted by supports considered illegitimate from the point of view of those who do not need them. Some stigmatized forms of individuation are constructed because of the association with this “illegitimacy” (Martuccelli, 2007b, p. 77).

Those supports that make up migrant trajectories can also be considered illegitimate, even *illegal*, especially when marked by a process of migratory irregular immigration (De Genova, 2005). Migration, even in a regular situation, destabilizes the *normal* conditions of production of individuals within the nation-state. It is even possible to critique methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) in the theory of individuation. By their very nature, the presence and absence in the societies of origin and destination (Sayad, 2010) of the institutions of production of individuals make the study of migration theoretically problematic. Accordingly, Durand (2020) has resorted to the notion of uprootedness to point out the disruptive nature of migration concerning classical approaches that incur in such methodological nationalism.

Nevertheless, there are individuals and individuation beyond or despite the nation state. Here, the approach is not intended to disavow the theory on which it is based. On the contrary, it aims to fertilize the field by investigating the trajectories of migrants

who are not recognized as subjects of law, either by the institutions of their countries of origin or by those of residence: How do these trajectories take shape? What trials do migrants face? On what supports? In short, how is the individual constituted in conditions of irregular immigration?

Methodology

The methodology of the study is based on two principles. The first refers to the settlement situation of the people who are the object of this study. The concept of immigration is qualified to use the category of (im)migrant to capture the intermediate situations between prolonged transit migration or a precarious or fragmentary settlement in places originally of transit. Settlement is not only the residential condition, but the position of enunciation that makes the subject and the sense: it *makes the sense be*, at the same time that the sense *makes the subject be* (Filinich, 2018; Landowski, 1993). The spatial present of the subject is the position from which the meaning of existence is constructed and, therefore, the subject who discourses, hence the subject becomes the object of their own knowledge (Cornejo et al., 2008).

The second pillar of the methodological approach is the narrative anchoring of the trajectory, the place and position from which it is reconstructed: the space from which the trials are identified and the supports are unveiled. Methodologically, it is crucial since the trajectories, trials and supports arise from the narrative dimension from which individuals understand and make sense of their own lives as a series of trials (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2010).

To select the participants, homogeneous sampling (Robinson, 2014) was used, formulated using demographic, geographic and life experience criteria, specifically the migration journey in an irregular situation. The observation universe was limited to migrants from northern Central America who had at least one year of residence in the Monterrey metropolitan area (MMA). In total, 11 people were interviewed, with 2 to 13 years of residence in the MMA at the time of the interview. Regarding the immigration status, six people already had a permanent residence card in the country, four were applying for refugee status and, with their proof of refugee processing issued by the Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid (Comar, Spanish acronym for Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados), received the Visitor Card for Humanitarian Reasons (TVRH, Spanish acronym for Tarjeta de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias), granted by the National Institute of Migration, and only one declared not to have initiated regularization procedures (see Table 1). Fieldwork was conducted between 2017 and 2022. The interviews were transcribed *verbatim*, and the selected participants used pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Table 1. Characterization of the sample of participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Country	Age	Schooling	Years of residence in MMA	Condition of entry	Immigration status	Housing and coexistence	Family situation	Employment
Emma	LGBTI	Honduras	32	2	2 years	Irregular	TVRH	Rents a room, lives with partner and son	1 Honduran child in Mexico	Gardener in public squares
Elías	M	Honduras	35	9	2 years	Irregular	TVRH	Rents shared room	No children	Works per day
Eduardo	M	Honduras	30	9	4 years	Irregular	Irregular	Home of bride's parents	1 Mexican child	Gardener in public squares
Andrés	M	Honduras	32	6	6 years	Irregular	Permanent residence	Rents a room	3 children at origin	Bricklayer and volunteer in a civil society organization
Dalia	F	Honduras	31	6	2 years	Irregular	TVRH	Rents a house with children and partner	2 Honduran sons and 1 Honduran daughter in Mexico; 1 daughter in the USA	Waitress
Saúl	M	Honduras	37	4	10 years	Irregular	Permanent residence	Lives in the shelter temporarily	1 Honduran child at origin	Bricklayer
Julia	F	Honduras	25	6	9 years	Irregular	Permanent residence	Rents a house with children and husband	2 Mexican sons, 1 Mexican daughter	Domestic worker
Omar	M	El Salvador	29	6	8 years	Irregular	Permanent residence	Rents a house with children	2 Mexican children	Painter
Josué	M	Honduras	34	4	5 years	Irregular	TVRH	Rents a house with nephews and nieces	No children	Lathe workshop
Mayela	F	El Salvador	30	12	9 years	Irregular	Permanent residence	Own house	1 Mexican child	College student
Sabino	M	El Salvador	32	13	11 years	Irregular	Permanent residence	Own house	1 Mexican child	Production technician

Source: created by the authors

The trials

From the life stories collected, three trials associated with the configuration of the individuation process emerge, recurrently evoked from people's experiences. They are the trial of the trip or migration journey in an irregular situation, the work trial and the trial of obtaining documents.

The migration journey

This trial is based on the conditions of departure, where the origin that caused the decision to migrate is located and where the transit toward that imagined and not always reached destination takes place. This trial can be broken down sequentially: the starting point, where the migrant experience begins; the journey itself, that is, the migration journey, and finally, the settlement, from where the trajectory is narrated. Thus, at the beginning, where the “dream” is gestated, that ‘agentic’ individual (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2020, p. 11), typical of the Latin American neoliberal project operates, an entrepreneurial subject, self-made outside institutions and who reads their environment and their development possibilities by projecting themselves outward:

As long as I can remember, I watched television from the United States and Mexico, and I began to form an idea in my head (...) I saw people, neighbors and acquaintances who said “He went to the United States for five years” and after that they arrived with a car, they had enough money for a house, they brought money for a business, and I thought: oh, I am going to the United States! Because here I’ve never achieved anything, and I’ve been working since I can remember. (Saúl)

In this context, marked by multiple forms of violence, exit is not conceived solely in individual terms. On the contrary, it is a matter negotiated by the family nucleus, which even includes some transnational members:

We came from there [when I was 16] precisely because the gangs were trying to recruit a cousin and me. (...) My grandmother and a relative I have in the United States decided that we should come, and that’s how we came. (...) They preferred that we should come rather than be killed. (Omar)

Since childhood, the family is presented as the nucleus that determines how to become involved in social life. The stories analyze the complex nature of kinship relationships, not only as supports established during the migration process, but also as elements combined in different ways in this experience: they act as triggers for migration or as care mechanisms arising from distancing, expressing permanence through absence. In general terms, these social bonds emerge as *agentic* responses to the recognition of institutional hollowing.

In addition, migration transit is understood as a form of family emancipation, providing one’s own rules to develop economic independence and, as a whole, to achieve personal autonomy. Sabino approaches his subjective process of gestation of transit as a “dream” or an “aspiration” to co-produce himself through this trial:

I lived with my mother, you know. I was a minor, and I was under her care, under her command, and I couldn’t do what I wanted. So, I just waited to turn 18, my age of majority, and that was the first thing I did. My dream was to turn 18 and leave the country to look for better opportunities. (Sabino)

In any case, the conditions experienced in the context of departure configure this trial as obligatory or forced. This implies that the trials do not refer to any type of difficulty but are inseparable from a set of significant structural challenges to which individuals must respond, depending on the society and historical period in which they find themselves. Among the reasons given by the people interviewed, the role played by criminal groups stands out, as well as the lack of means or resources to live or survive in a dignified manner.

In summary, these reasons point to institutional hollowing, characterized by the loss of the State as an entity that provides meaning and social cohesion, based on individuals recognized as citizens. This phenomenon refers to weakening the institutional capacity to construct individuals (Lewkowicz, 2004, p. 225). From this institutional hollowing, the conditions of irregular immigration that mark the entry into Mexican territory are generated.

The journey itself is another phase of this trial. It can be represented as “escape” or departure (Mezzadra, 2005) to celebrate the freedom of movement that, as a *right*, goes back to its semantic field: desertion, the figure of the fugitive, and the journey, which in this context is experienced furtively and persistently, walking day by day, traveling by train, or hitchhiking. According to De Certeau (2000), these practices are comprehended as tactics, as they adhere to the contingencies presented in the journey, and move away from strategies, which start from a place recognized as one’s own and make possible a variety of forms of domination:

What we did was to go into the bush, into the mountains, and there in the bush we spent two, three days, sleeping in the bush just like that, with nothing (...) what we did, if we went out of the mountains, Migration or the federal agents would send the border patrol and we would go all over the bush walking. (Dalia)

The trial of the migration journey is characterized by the scarcity of supports. Faced with this situation, “cunning” is valued and developed, that is, the ability to seize opportunities or produce them, even transgressing the rules (Martuccelli, 2019, p. 28):

I met him on the train. I ran into my brother-in-law and a friend, and I said: “Well, they are acquaintances, I’m going to go on with them” and it turned out that further on they wanted to sell me, they wanted to sell me for a couple of pesos, because they were hungry and wanted to eat, and they were selling me. (Julia)

Julia’s story suggests that running away or undertaking the migration journey as a form of individuation implies a tension in which different highly contradictory principles of action converge. She undertakes the journey amid urgency, extreme violence and precariousness, which reaffirms an irreducible individuality, expressed through the exercise of personal choice. In this scenario, tenacious, cunning and daily tactics and practices come together: walking through different places, hitchhiking, sneaking into train cars, and taking advantage of the opportunities that arise every day:

I just took any train, wherever it took me, (...) We spent almost a year traveling, only by train. After a year traveling only by train, he and I went to Tijuana. In Tijuana, we crossed the border, they deported us, and we got back on together. (Julia)

Although suffering and dispossession are reflected in the experiences undergone during their journeys, they are seen as an integral part of life and of the dream, which in the migration of other times was called “the magic of freedom” (Mezzadra, 2005, pp. 61-64). To this end, they exercise their freedom despite the high costs involved: dehydration, hunger and sleeping in the open. The supports woven during the transit are scarce and unconventional: the family is moral support, assistance or what triggers emancipation or escape. In addition, work is conceived as an instrumental resource to continue on the route, far from what is considered a job in formal terms. As Saúl mentions: “I started washing cars to pay for the ticket to get to the Mexican border”.

On the other hand, another type of support could be more clearly related to traditional society, rooted in the long tradition of the sanctuary of the Catholic Church. These are the supports for humanitarian assistance during transit given through the so-called *migrant houses*. By their arrangement throughout Mexican territory, the migrant houses materialize a form of “transit migration”. They offer shelter, rest, food and care to those approaching them. The infrastructure of shelters, soup kitchens and other migrant assistance services is enormous and constantly growing. For a migrant, access to one of these establishments is not only assistance but also submission to an “exceptional” control and surveillance system (Gatti et al., 2020).

In this context, a hyper-regulation is observed, evident through a set of internal regulations aimed at defining functions such as entries and exits, length of stay, required hygiene standards, participation in household chores, restrictions on communication with the outside world and conditions for receiving food. All this constitutes a complex web of rules that temporarily institutionalizes the migrant subject (Doncel de la Colina & Lara Ramírez, 2021) in an exceptional (Gatti et al., 2020) and, above all, pre-modern way, since it places the sphere of protection outside the institutions of law and within religious ones.

Under this regime of exception, migrants are transferred from the status of subjects of law to the logic of “subjects of favor” (Suárez-Navaz et al., 2007). That exercise of freedom found in the escape, which frames the beginning of the migration project, is constricted in this dense mesh of extra-legal regulations that characterizes assistance. The migration journey is a constant tension between freedom and constraint, but always outside the framework of the law. It is extensively assisted, but the passage through such assistance, voluntary and well-intentioned, is given on ostensibly visible supports, considered by those who do not require them as illegitimate (Martuccelli, 2007b), resulting in the subjects of such assistance being perceived in a stigmatized manner (Lara, 2021).

Eduardo captures a common situation among those who settle before arriving in the United States and give up on the *American dream*. Not only because of the extreme difficulty of crossing the northern border into the United States, but also because of the impossibility of returning to Honduras (his country of origin) and reuniting with his family: “You can’t come from the United States to Honduras, why? Because you have to pay again. I started to think about all that and I said, I’d better stay here, I’ll settle down” (Eduardo).

The American dream is portrayed as a “mirage” (Omar), either because irregularity imprisons and leads to immobility, or because the settlement does not become permanent. The settlement in Mexico is conceived as an intermediate place, an (im)migration not foreseen in the migration project of departure, and, although already rooted in years of residence, one is on the lookout for future decisions to resume the journey, *the dream*. This indefinite elongation in the migration project shapes a precarious settlement as it is not conceived as permanent: “If I had a chance to cross, I would cross and I would no longer stay here” stated Omar, who, despite his more than eight years in the city and permanent residence, continued to live in a precarious situation.

Work

Work is conceived as a significant test in the life paths of (im)migrant individuals. This trial makes it possible to understand the various ways in which subjects co-produce in contexts marked by the dispossession of rights. It is identified as a platform for generating income and “getting by”, even in the context of the ordeal of the journey, which does not necessarily lead to professional consolidation, resulting in constant mobility and search for opportunities.

Furthermore, there is a subjective imperative that drives the self-assignment of responsibilities, expressed in phrases such as: “we must produce”, “we must grow”. From this, narratives emerge that disqualify their compatriots, considering them “lazy” or that “they want everything easy”, which also reveals the different levels of legitimacy associated with the search for welfare support, as discussed in the previous section.

Accordingly, the migration project is conceived as inextricably linked to work, guided by the aspiration to be independent, as in the case of Eduardo, who sought to “improve himself” and not depend on the support of migrant shelters: “My mentality was always to rent a room or work. Because that’s the reason why one comes”. Work stands as a constitutive test of his trajectory, guiding him toward autonomy and self-fulfillment. The search for job opportunities becomes an imperative, configuring a close link between work and the life trajectory of the (im)migrant subjects.

Likewise, from this imperative, productive time is multiplied to make the most of it and perform various tasks to increase the possibilities of employability:

I worked at a recycling plant and at night I would go to a paint and body shop, and I started to teach myself how to paint cars, how to put paste on them, how to sand paint, and I started to like that job. That man rented at the same place where we rented. He worked in a workshop, but they gave him jobs on the side, and I used to go and help him (...) Yes, yes, I already had a lot of work. (Omar)

This multiplication of work is not only manifested in the use of time for the performance of different tasks; it also makes evident the precariousness and heterogeneity of contemporary work of migrant subjects that results in a coupling and indistinction of the limits between “living work, including those between productive, ‘unproductive’ and reproductive work; free and ‘unfree’, formal and informal work” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2017, p. 158).

The priority to work is what stands out and is considered essential in the trajectories. Some civil society organizations that offer courses and workshops mention the lack of response from this population, since educational training is seen as an impediment in the face of the urgency and haste to carry out their “migration project”: working is “what they have come for”, as Omar points out.

Work is central in the migration project, even as a self-assigned imperative to fulfill family and social expectations. In addition, it is conceived as a way of legitimizing their presence in the receiving societies (Carrasco Carpio & Riesco Sanz, 2008), given the importance of work as the foundation of order and social ties. This allows access to a kind of *labor citizenship* (Alonso, 2007). Being endowed as a subject with recognition of a regular immigration status is especially evident in the accounts of all the people interviewed. Therefore, having the necessary documents is considered a support to “feel stronger” and “more confident to be able to compete”, as Sabino considers.

Faced with the scarcity of institutional supports about work, sociability, as reciprocal action between peers (Gurvitch, 1946), is a key support that is woven to face the work trial in the city. In Omar’s narrations, the support provided by fleeting encounters and people who cross his path, who become allies in the search for new opportunities, is often glimpsed:

Another guy [who I washed cars with in a shopping mall] got me a job in a company loading refrigerators onto trailers. I lasted about two years there. It was the only option I had, I didn’t know any better, until the work there ended (...) They realized that the agency that was there had many irregular workers: people without insurance or anything else, and they took the work away from them. From there, I started to work wherever I could, on construction sites or wherever. Since I was working with others, they got me into a recycling company. (Omar)

These links, although fleeting, prove to be important supports in their trajectory, opening doors and paving the way to unsuspected work opportunities:

We went to rent somewhere else. And the lady renting to us was going to do domestic work in a house. She said, “There’s a house, I don’t know if you want to work there” (...) Then I thought, “My partner hardly earns anything”, so I said, “Yes, I’ll go to work”. Then, the lady took me to two houses. (Julia)

It is indisputable that the supports based on collectivity and sociability are of considerable importance. The precariousness that characterizes the trajectories of (im) migrant subjects leads them, when faced with challenges and when formulating their narratives on how they sustain themselves in this world, to turn to the existential supports of solidarity and community. These ties, forged in shared experiences, become the social fabric that allows them to overcome adversity.

Likewise, when resources and support are scarce, cunning emerges as a valuable tool to take advantage of opportunities, even if it means transgressing established norms. Such is the case of Sabino's experience, who, when faced with the guards' refusal to let him enter a company, boldly stepped into the human resources offices: "I was too abusive (...) they called me, I didn't want to stop", he confesses, revealing the defiance and determination that drives him in the face of what he considered unfair treatment.

The particularity of this type of *agentic* individuation lies in the legitimization and social recognition that these skills receive, as the abilities to successfully circumvent the complexities of life, through actions that are perceived as abusive or that do not respect the rules (Martuccelli, 2019). This phenomenon is evident in the following excerpt, when Sabino manages to strike up a conversation with the head recruiter:

"My colleague told me that she liked it very much" (...) he said. "Yes, I freaked out", "but she said that she liked the reaction you had to have gotten into that way. Not everybody does that... you're quite abusive", he said, "be very careful, but it was good". (Sabino)

The individuation revealed in this particular context, as opposed to the institutional one, where state institutions are in charge of producing empirical agents as individual-subjects (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2020), is structured around the figure of the "impossible subject" (Ngai, 2004), who, despite having documents, goes through a series of exceptional instances that encourage *agentic*, transgressive and anti-institutional actions. In this framework, people are pressed toward self-sustainability, in search of opportunities that they must constantly generate (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2020), as if they were entrepreneurial entities with the image of the *dream* as a horizon and the subjectivation of progress guiding their efforts.

This constant of desire and exception, a life of aspirations that unfolds on the reverse side of the law, is what engenders the conditions of vulnerability of the subjects and gives rise to the phenomenon defined as differential inclusion: incorporation into the world of employment through what institutions (dis)regard, given the social illegalization of individuals (De Genova, 2005; Mezzadra & Nielson, 2017).

Work, a central trial in the trajectories of (im)migrants, far from approaching modern assumptions as a referent of meaning and social cohesion (Gorz, 1995; Meda, 1998; Santamaría López, 2011) in the context of their dispossession of rights, is by no means the key to their integration and settlement. Vulnerability is interwoven with the determination that forges their *agentic* individuation. On this reverse side of the law, the desire for a better life confronts the reality of a society that denies them full access to their rights.

Documents

Obtaining documents is a key objective and milestone in the migration project of people in the context of (im)migration. It is crucial in more than one sense. Firstly, it implies legal recognition and therefore the possibility of *being*, of coming into existence as a subject of law in the society to which one migrates. Secondly, and precisely because of this, the possibility of achieving this recognition becomes the central pre-occupation of the daily lives of those who migrate.

The arduous path toward the obtention of these documents demands immense effort, which manifests itself in musings, aspirations or religious supplications. Therefore, what their obtainment entails, both in terms of effort and longed-for results, elevates the attainment of documents to a critical trial of individuation in this intricate context.

In its materiality as a trial, the provision of identification documents is a waiting period (Jacobsen et al., 2021) that contains the hope that the documents will be the key to different vital tasks that turn regularization into existence in social life.

From access to work and improved financial situation, to health, education and housing, each aspect is intertwined with the longed-for acquisition of documents. As such, waiting is transformed into expectation, a dream that pulses with the promise of a fuller future:

Once I have the documents, I can do many things, even have my own business, my own work. I'd love to have a business in what I do, work at it myself, and succeed by my own efforts. There are many things I'd like to do. (Eduardo)

In addition to being a waiting period, this period also constitutes a space where the subordination of the subjects is produced and reproduced. The trial to obtain documents places people in front of the bureaucratic authorities of the State in which they are (im)migrants. These bodies are the ones that impose the wait and require them to comply patiently, as Auyero (2021, p. 28) points out, with requirements that are often arbitrary or even extortive.

It was very difficult because when I started to get my documents, they asked me for a lot of money. I was going to pay about 10 000 Mexican pesos and, well, I had to sign at Migration (...) and many institutions. I had to wait a long time here (...) And no, time went by on and on, and they never gave the papers to me. (Andrés)

At the same time, this waiting time becomes a “bureaucratic education”, a relatively unfamiliar experience for national citizens, but one that manifests itself as a common thread in every migrant experience. For those who face this trial, it implies entering a labyrinth of laws and procedures, a regulatory framework that is foreign to them, but which they must learn to manage skillfully.

Such was the case of Sabino, who, through a meticulous study of the laws, was able to defend himself from the harassment of immigration agents: “With what I was able to read in the laws, with what I had studied, I was able to defend myself very well”. On the arduous road to obtaining documents, deftly navigating the bureaucratic twists and turns becomes a prerequisite for those seeking to make their way through a system that often seems intended to discourage them.

The bureaucracy before the documents' trial takes place is materialized in the National Institute of Migration (INM, Spanish acronym for Instituto Nacional de Migración) and the Comar in the representation of the subjects. For the protagonists of this trial circuit, in practice, they embody the phenomenon of "Migration" as a bureaucratic experience. Migration is the institution that houses the promise of the right to identity; responsible for determining the legality and *illegality* of foreign persons. Between these extremes, and in various intermediate and intermittent shades, (im)migrant subjects carry this precarious legal status (Goldring & Landolt, 2022) with which they live for prolonged periods.

As an organism of identity and registration of immigration status, Migration has a dual nature for migrant subjects: it is the possibility of obtaining documents and, therefore, of their legal existence; but at the same time, it represents the risk of making them legible or visible to these bureaucracies that seek to expel them (Horton & Heyman, 2020). The documents are tangible evidence of a state power that shows itself with its two faces: the one that offers rights and inclusion, and the one that exercises control and coercion.

Nonetheless, in the expectations of the participants in this study, the representation of the latter prevails, which is deduced from the vicissitudes they have faced in dealing with this bureaucracy and their efforts to pass this trial. In the face of it, the supports they wield are scarce, informal and casual. As in the previous trials, cunning and *agentic* tactics predominate in their struggle for regularization.

Some time after settling in Chiapas, Sabino had a chance encounter with a person he describes as a little old man who, he believes, "was someone important in the city", to whom he spoke about his disagreements with the authorities. This encouraged him to try his paperwork again, but not as a refugee applicant, as he had tried on two previous occasions, but through Migration. In this chance encounter, Sabino found unexpected support: "They asked me for the letter from people, witnesses, and all, and he signed it... he gave me the courage to go to the station, to the Migration office in Tapachula, and I went through the process, fulfilled the requirements, and paid the fines I had to pay".

Omar and Julia share something similar from their own experience. Their support is also woven from chance encounters in the transit assistance infrastructure, in shelters and migrants' houses. "We met a lady at the migrants' house (...) the lady helped us a lot, she went into everything, she was the one who stood up for us". says Omar. Julia, for her part, explains:

If we didn't manage to make the payments, they were going to terminate our residency. And as always [name of a volunteer from an MMA shelter], helped me with almost the 4 000 (...), and if I didn't pay that money that day, if I didn't deposit it in the bank, I was going to start again from scratch.

Both testimonies reveal how, amid uncertainty, these fortuitous connections become fundamental pillars for the trial.

The support for this bureaucratic trial is so scarce and informal that even one of the researchers who signed this research paper has taken on this role, participating

as a witness in the civil union and marriage of one of the participants with whom she has collaborated over the years. This gesture, which could be one of involvement with the community, reveals the precariousness of the support available to those facing this arduous regularization process.

Faced with the demands of the trial and the scarcity of available support, people often employ ingenious and clever tactics to regularize their immigration status. Yolanda lived near a shelter where she met Eduardo, who had arrived from Honduras. Eventually, they tried to marry but were met with discriminatory refusals from Civil Registry officials and disdain from Migration officials in their search for channels of regularization. After years of unsuccessful efforts, they decided to give up their attempts.

With a baby on the way and considering that the process of regularization through family ties was haphazard and uncertain, Eduardo hired a lawyer to arrange, for a fee, legal identity documents recognizing him as Mexican, registering his birth in the State of Veracruz, keeping his name intact on the birth certificate, and providing him with official identification. This cunning demonstrates a form of *agentic* individuation present in Latin American societies: “individuals thus have to learn to protect themselves from institutions, from their errors or inadequacies, from their impossible or contradictory regulations” (Martuccelli, 2019, p. 27).

Although documents are a product of state implementation, they are also a resource of resistance. Documents can be subverted or falsified. From there, migrants appropriate a part of state power by instrumentalizing them: they obtain them in non-legitimate ways or use them for purposes other than those officially established (Horton & Heyman, 2020). They even distort their objective, such as resorting to the *Comar* to regularize their status. Thus, the subordination imposed by bureaucratic waiting enables the emergence of resistances that confront the power devices. Not only as practices that subvert domination, but that intrinsically possess disruptive, foundational, and affirmative characteristics (Abal Medina, 2007), which contribute significantly to this singular form of individuation.

Given the centrality of obtaining the documents, life after obtaining them does not seem to be what they promised. They neither mitigate the stigma of foreignness, bring about the expected inclusion nor stabilize the settlement.

Josué recounts his life in the neighborhood where he lived with his nephews and nieces after the hard work of obtaining housing for himself and his family. In his explanation, it is evident that, despite having obtained documents, the discrimination and stigma continue to affect his daily life and hinder his inclusion: “With the neighbors we have almost no communication (...) I’ve also told my nephews and nieces. Because... they’ll always see us as undocumented”.

Moreover, there is a lack of knowledge of immigration regulations and documents on the part of the human resources personnel of local companies, which further complicates job integration in formal jobs that provide social benefits. This is illustrated in the case of Julia, who could only find work as an informal domestic worker, despite having a permanent residence card:

And they started to look at the card, they looked at it again and again, and they kept looking at the card to see if the card was valid and original, and said, “We can’t let you work with this card, it has to be the voter’s credential”.

These stories convey a deep anxiety about the limited impact that the documents have in mitigating the precariousness of their working conditions. “I had to carry all the right documents”, “They wouldn’t accept my residency”, “I had to have an INE¹”. They recognize that “the only advantage is that with the residency, I was able to obtain the insurance number and the RFC²”. Likewise, when Sabino asked for a salary increase, the same frustration was perceived: “They made me think that they were doing me a favor by having me there”.

In other words, documents do not necessarily stabilize settlement. One does not cease to be an (im)migrant by having documents as mentioned above. In addition, the documents are sometimes sought to continue transit to the United States safely. Obtaining temporary documents for transit is common with caravans and humanitarian visas, but there are also migration cases prior to these situations.

In short, from the point of view of (im)migrant trajectories, the documents do not fulfill the expectations, nor do they lead to permanent settlement. As other research has shown, there is a certain “fetishization of the documents” (Suárez-Navaz et al., 2007), since once obtained, they do not imply social recognition of the *illegalized* subjects.

The precarious legal status (Goldring & Landolt, 2022) that obtaining documents fails to transcend materializes what some authors refer to as “differential inclusion”, that is, an inscription of “differentiated subjective positions within legal, political and economic spaces” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2017, p. 173).

From a structural perspective, there is a recognition mediated by the productive value of the labor force and the potential for utilization of these (im)migrant working bodies beyond what constitutes them as individuals in the promise of liberal and rule of law societies.

(Im)migrant trajectories and precarious settlements

Based on the analysis of trajectories from the perspective of the sociology of individuation, three fundamental trials have been revealed that shape the individuation process of (im)migrant subjects residing in the MMA: the trial of the migration journey that takes place in conditions of irregularity; the work trial under conditions of foreignness; and, finally, the trial of the documents, in pursuit of regularization and legal recognition as subjects of law.

One of the most remarkable findings is that these trials form an intertwined circuit. Transit, generally represented as the fruit of an isolated individual decision, is

¹ Credencial of the Instituto Nacional Electoral.

² Registro Federal de Contribuyentes.

driven by a system that activates the subjective spring of migration (the dream, social mobility, consumption) as ways of confronting a context of institutional hollowness or denial of rights. In turn, this system feeds on the precarious labor and legal vulnerability faced by (im)migrant subjects once they have arrived at their destination, revealing the heterogeneous ways capital imprints itself on migrant bodies through differentiated inclusion.

Transit is not a trajectory. Its culmination does not exhaust the trials of individuation, nor does it fully complete the settlement, leading to institutionalized forms of being. Far from it, regarding the individuation process, what follows is an (im)migrant life marked by a precarious settlement. Precarious because they do not have full access to rights, even after having passed the trials of work and documents. Precarious as well because it is constantly back-and-forth, pondering and looking for new opportunities to try to reach the United States.

None of the three trials establishes settlement definitively, and individuals cannot call themselves immigrants entirely, even after years of residence, nor can they cease to think of themselves as migrants.

The (im)migrant individual inhabits what the sociology of individuation calls the “zone of dereliction”: a banishment from reality, but at the same time an imperative of it that leads them to face constant trials of access to what is expected as “true reality” or “true life” (Martuccelli, 2007a, p. 108). In the experiences analyzed, there is a constant escape latency given the segmented or differentiated inclusion (Mezzadra & Nielson, 2014), resulting in an unstable settlement. The (im)migrant trajectories develop in an environment of institutional withdrawal that inclines people to resort to exceptional supports, such as migrant shelters that are prone to produce subjects of favor rather than of right and that postpone settlement due to their exceptionality.

The sociology of individuation has observed an *agentic* specificity for Latin American forms of individuation. Furthermore, research advances are showing the different national forms of these *agentic* modes that expose, in most cases, processes of individuation detached from both state institutions and traditional communities (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2020; Di Leo & Camarotti, 2017; Hernández, 2017). In migration contexts, this self-responsibilization of the subjects to constitute themselves as individuals outside national institutions is observed more acutely and in contrast to institutional individualism, where social institutions mediate life (Martuccelli, 2019).

This paper has attempted a first approach to the processes of individuation in the context of international migration in the region. There is still pending research that, from other contexts and situations, calls into question what it means to be an individual in the context of (im)migration, outside the state-national framework for the production of subjects, and what they are, in these times of protracted transit migration, precarious settlements and denial of rights.

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